

features the "Bio-signals Dance Generator." Each attendee is asked to wear a wireless bio-signal sensor that reads brainwave, pulse, perspiration, blood chemistry, and portable PET scan technology, all matched against standard databases of brain area activity during dancing of various types. The music/video generator bases its media composition on the averaged signals from all the people in the club. In the shop near the checkout, a number of gifts are available. The "Pill Camera" allows you to broadcast from inside your gastro-intestinal tract and comes boxed with a DVD of broadcasts from inside various celebrities.<sup>7</sup> Nikon's Coolscope 8 automated microscope for real-time inspection of your body's micro-organisms and the educational "Array-Pro Desktop Gene Analyzer and Recombinant Experiment Set" get your children started in bioengineering.<sup>8</sup>

AMELIA JONES

## decorporealization

*[E]ven the most ordinary images find their value, their substance, their impetus, in the agency and investments of our flesh.* —Vivian Sobchack<sup>1</sup>

Look at this. It is an image, an image dated the 18th of October, 1840, an image ascribed to Hippolyte Bayard, a "self-portrait in the guise of a drowned man."<sup>2</sup> On the back of the photo-

its corporeal flesh, only to put the lie to that corporeality in a decorporeal transubstantiation into image. A "self-portrait as a drowned man"? At this very beginning of photography, the image lies. For, if Bayard had truly been drowned, how could he have fabricated this self-portrait? His body could not have been both places

development of photographic technologies: the desire for the image to render up the body and thereby the self in its fullness and truth.<sup>4</sup>

As "index," the photograph conveys its objects through chemical traces that mimic the way in which light bounced off of or was absorbed by their contours when photographed. Being an indexical trace of the body before the camera, then, the photograph promised to return the represented body to some kind of authentic state. Because the photographic portrait embodies a trace of the self (with the mind made visible-only through its body-sign), it highlights both the inextricability of body and mind and the fact that we often access the self via its visible form, a form we want to serve as corporeal guarantor of the body. The photographic portrait seems to reaffirm the body's never-ending "thereness," its refusal to disappear, its infinite capacity to render up the self in some incontrovertibly "real" way.

Bayard's image plays on another aspect of our attachment to bodies and images, and thus points to the continuities between the two insofar as we want both body and image to "read" clearly as a "sign" for something else—for the person or thing itself. We tend to interpret and experience others through their appearance (the time-honored basis of racism and the stereotype). Cartesian or high-tech fantasies of transcending the body through pure thought—or, more recently, via free-floating Internet subjectivities—are extensions of this logic of the body as a kind of detachable image or sign for the self. (The online avatar "is" the self, because an image of a virtual body.) However, as Bayard's facetious performance makes clear, the body may *appear* to be simply a discardable shell—but is also what we are compelled to turn to as the physical enactment and guarantor of the self.

A hundred years of habituation to various modes of photographic decorporealization, themselves building on centuries of pictorial bodies and "selves," have taught us only to desire such images. We have barely begun to understand their subject-producing power. As Laura Marks has observed:

*Urban, postindustrial, mediated society is dominated by symbolic signs, signs of Thirdness. This is because corporate capitalism needs meanings to be abstract, exchangeable, and easily consumable. Capitalism relies on symbolic signs. Capitalism seeks to disembody meaning in order to make it generalizable, marketable, and consumable (not a potato chip but a Pringle; not real fear but the "smell of fear").*<sup>5</sup>

The promise (or threat?) of digital convergence brings decorporealization as both disembodiment and "realization" (of the mediated subject).

The best new media work can exist in a confluence of image, screen, space, sound, and body. It heightens the tension between subject and object (by the invocation of desire); it puts into play the new relations of signification produced by the emergence of digital representation—wherein the signifier is no longer a stable (or semi-stable) mark that refers to something in the real world and wherein what we see on the screen may have no relation to anything outside of its own constituent components (pixels). Pipilotti Rist's *Sip My Ocean*, 1996, for example, is about immersion, literal and figurative. It is about a woman's (the artist's) body floating through the commodity space of the gallery, dangling provocatively before my desiring body. It is about how I "am" Pipilotti Rist (who is both the commodity object of the artwork and the ethereal origin of the work). The piece is my "*petit objet a*" (per Lacan). It instantiates my displacement, over there, as a subject (who is the object she desires). Rist seems to offer herself to me, floating amniotically in a wash of blue, even as her voice surrounds me in an aural bath of misbegotten love.

Like Renaissance painting, like photography, yet also radically different, such new media images are not things and yet they are "of" things (including people), which they project onto other things. As such, I experience through them the thingness of myself, and yet at the same time my inescapable mindfulness. (For how else, other than through my embodied senses, which transmit meaning through the circuits that ultimately comprise my thought processes, could I comprehend them?)

The questions we now need to ask have to do with what new kinds of subjects/objects are produced by global capitalist image culture

(to which artists, advertisers, viewers, and critics all belong)? But such questions require us to engage with earlier moments in the dialectical rhythm established between imaging technologies, aesthetics, and conceptions of the self (moments such as 1840, with Bayard's destroying self-portrait). Bayard seems to have intuited very early on the annihilating power of the photographic image—the way in which, through its very drive to sustain the presence of the body/self, it kills it (as Christian Metz notes, the photographic take is "immediate and definitive, like death. . . . [It] is a cut inside the referent").<sup>6</sup> Artists such as Rist, working in a vastly different moment, embrace the death of imaging in order to body forth the life of the subject through desire. It is only through embodied desire, after all, that our relation with the world (of people and things) is sustained.

If I could have Pipilotti Rist, if I could be Pipilotti Rist, I would simultaneously be completely free (as an object made of light) and completely situated as the phantasmagorical origin of that object's meaning and value. It is only through my "aesthetic distance" (learned through years of painful over-thinking about visual images, objects, and projects) that I extricate myself from the scene. I create that bridge Kant calls for, disentangling myself from the image (which is the artist, which I want to be me). But my desire precludes my full extrication. My desire causes me to linger within the image/body/voice (the subject [object]) that is Rist "herself."

Artists tend to push at the seams of these apparent contradictions, getting inside the image in order to keep these various tensions (the image versus the

thing itself; the subject constituted by culture versus the subject constituting culture) in place. The image of the artist tells us precisely that while we now (in our late capitalist postmodern era) "know" that everything is a simulacrum, an image, a representation, we also "know" that this simulacral world always leaks. Something always escapes the image. In *Sip My Ocean*, it is the voice of Rist, jarring but hypnotic, vaguely soprano, shrieking a short loop from a Chris Isaak pop song, "Wicked Love." Rist's siren song wafts through the spaces of the gallery to remind us that subjects continue to take up space, to suffer, to think, to desire, to experience even the visual register in a synaesthetic way (I hear Rist's saturated colors even as I see her screeching voice; I smell the whir of the projector, as well as the body of the spectator standing next to me). Decorporalization is still not yet disembodiment. Subjects continue to be objects. Of desire.

## NOTES

1. Vivian Sobchack, "'Is Any Body Home?': Embodied Imagination and Visible Evictions," unpublished ms, January 1997. Shorter version in Hamid Naficy, ed., *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* (London: Routledge, 1998), 25.

2. The following analysis of this photograph appeared in an earlier form in my "Body," *Critical Terms in Art History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

3. Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, *Bayard* (1943; New York: Arno Press, 1979), 19, 22–23.

4. While I focus in this essay on the two-dimensional picture, most of these points could be made equally strongly (though with different emphases) with other kinds of visual culture, including video, sculpture, installation, etc., especially as our relationship to the latter, three-dimensional media, is conditioned by our movement in space in relation to their parts (which become surrogate "bodies," as the Minimalist artists and theorists understood). In the late 1990s, Alex Potts and I each pointed out that the sculptural installation literalizes the understanding of the work as a kind of body (engaged by viewers via their embodied experience in relation to it).

5. Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 116.

6. Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34 (Fall 1985), 84.

## ether

Ether is the invisible "quintessence" (or "fifth element," as Aristotle called it), the substanceless substance between bodies, the supraluminary sphere. Polemically: ether instantiates the disembodied, it is the place where we are not. That polemic is not a limiting definition; there are many places we are not. But "ether" is the concept people turn to when they want to describe *special* cases of disembodiment—*special* gaps, absences, carriers of forces at a distance, inaccessibilities and invisibilities that range from the interpersonal (in Spirit photography) to the intergalactic (in relativistic cosmology).

Aristotle's precision notwithstanding, the

ancient Greeks were surprisingly inconsistent in their references to "aether," using it to designate a place (the inaccessible seat of the gods, in Hesiod's usage), a personification (Aether, guardian of "upper sky"), and a substance (last in Aristotle's list of Earth, Air, Fire, Water, *Aether*). The Greeks themselves may have adopted the concept and its name from the Sanskrit Vedas, where "Akasha" (the Hindu element "Space") contributed its root form, "*aith-*" (meaning burn or shine) to the word "aether." The sensual component of the concept is buried in this etymology, which



William Hope (Crewe, England, 1863–1933), brown-toned silver print, 3 1/2 x 3 in., inscribed on verso: "The Rev. Charles L. Tweedale and Mrs. Tweedale with the spirit-form of the late F. Burnett who died in 1913. Taken under good test conditions Sept. 5th 1919."