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MEAT

Meat: flesh that was male or female, now consumed as food; a derogatory term for objects of sexual desire; the core, or essence, of a subject; here presented as the 'new body' in the form of photographs, video and installation. Jose Carlos Casado's "Meat" is both human and android: bodies are hyperconnected, two and three-dimensional, fused and disjointed. Ranging from the implicitly to overtly sexual, they blend ideas around gender with those of reproduction and replication, related uses/misuses of technology, and the changing role of the body within networked societies.

At the entrance to the show is *Networking.v01*, a photograph of two naked male torsos connected by a blue computer cable. Written on the cables are words of love that—before the advent of the Internet might have been said in person, or by mail—but are now posted in on-line chat rooms, spaces for intimate, but electronically transmitted, human interaction:

*"You rule my world.
Without you I am nothing.
Your heart drives mine.
You are my blood.
I love you so much.
Don't ever disconnect.
I am giving you all I got.
If you ever leave me I will kill myself."*

The contrast between the cable, the simulated blood it adheres to, and the incredibly stark photograph of skin and hair presents a strange intimacy that combines electronic (virtual) and human ("real") in one image. This characteristic runs through much of Casado's work in images that range from "low" to "high" tech in content: plants or humans are "networked" by computer cables in *Networking.v02-06*, while *La Caja de Pandora (revisitada)*¹ comprises two intricate, digitally manipulated video projections side by side. From their positions in each projection screen, the human protagonists seamlessly interact with each other and with digital animations/forms that swirl around them, or pass between them through a connecting tube that physically links the screens. Next to this, *Networking.v01* seems almost like its more "human" version where real bodies, not projections, stand side by side, connected by a similar cabling device.

Works such as these that deal with human communication and intimacy via technology—rather than through physical contact—signal a future that is more emotionally complex than many scenarios we might witness in science fiction movies. As

¹ *Pandora's Box (revisited)*. (Translator's note)

Casado and writer Harkaitz Cano state in their recent article "Reality, Artificial Reproduction, and Sexuality": "*The cordless body will soon be teledirected. But far from being a body without memory or feelings, it will be a political and ethical body, full of conflicts and contradictions.*"² Whether human interaction is physical or "virtual", questions of appearance, identity, and trust all come to the surface. With whom are we interacting? What is their gender/sexual preference/age/ physical makeup? How "natural" or "manufactured" are these identifying characteristics? Implicit in this discussion is a critique of man's search for perfection, or the "ideal". Artists—who since classical times have been asked to improve on, or idealize, the imperfect features of a human face or body—can now do this with the aid of digital technologies, but they also work in a context in which science has caught up. New surgical procedures and advances in genetics research enable physical and genetic modifications to human form that were previously impossible, bringing with them a host of ethical (and socially-loaded) questions about our identities, choices, and relationship to technology. As the artist and writer G. H. Hovagimyan states:

*'...one could postulate that we, as humans, are entertaining the idea of sexual reproduction via scientific manipulation and of survival through preserving our identities within computer networks. Art in the age of spiritual machines needs to address these ideas.'*³

Casado's *El Nuevo Cuerpo*⁴ series presents intriguing formal and conceptual commentaries on what this might mean. Interestingly, while created with the aid of current digital technologies, some of these pieces hark back to—and at the same time subvert—particular forms of classical art. In *El Nuevo Cuerpo.v01*, for example, limbs extend from the flatness of the image much in the way that classical relief sculpture suggested three-dimensional forms within an essentially two-dimensional format. Casado then pushes this aesthetic into the digital age: fingers poke through legs, and smooth, android-like male bodies merge in fluid but physically impossible combinations. He also inserts characteristics of his own body into their make-up: whether a mouth, small goatee or birthmark. What makes this already elegant piece more remarkable, and a little unnerving, is that behind the still image is a moving one of the same figures. From the perspective of the viewer, who cannot see the edges of the video screen, *El Nuevo Cuerpo.v01a* fuses with its counterpart to create a beautiful, floating sensation of life-size bodies moving in a darkened space. In *El Nuevo Cuerpo.v02*, the figures become more "abstract" or perhaps even "gender neutral"—existing as digital fluorescent impressions in ivory, green and pink—while in *El Nuevo Cuerpo.v03*, female forms take center stage. Both violent and playful, these have the strange, smooth beauty of tailors' dummies, science fiction androids, or video game heroines. With *El Nuevo Cuerpo.v05*, (interactive installation), Casado almost crosses into the world of Leonardo da Vinci, combining contemporary technologies with more commonly used materials in large sculptural forms. Tall cocoon-shaped vessels increase in diameter as they rise vertically from one floor of the museum to another; in both form and texture, these have the appearance of Caucasian flesh. Depending on your own position, you see very different perspectives of five seconds video loops of two intertwined, x-ray like, bodies that Casado has positioned at one end. From the floor above, these figures move within two suspended, delicate, discs; from below, on pulling these cocoons over your head, you stand within an intimate viewing chamber that—for something that seems so phallic—you strangely penetrate with your own body.

² "Reality", *Artificial Reproduction, and Sexuality*, Jose Carlos Casado and Harkaitz Cano, *Leonardo*, Vol. 33, No. 5, The MIT Press, 2000, pp. 381-385

³ *Art in the Age of Spiritual Machines*, G.H. Hovigimyan, *Leonardo*, Vol. 34, No. 5, The MIT Press, 2001, p. 456

⁴ *The New Body*. (Translator's note)

In her recent book, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, Elizabeth Grosz suggests that the body is "the primary sociocultural product..." For Grosz, such a position means "exploring subjectivity and the inevitably related question of sexual difference, in terms of the complexities, specificities, and materiality of bodies alone...where all the effects of consciousness (and the unconscious) can be thought in terms of corporeal surfaces, in terms of the rotations, convolutions, inflections, and torsions of the body itself...(particularly) in terms of the rotation of impossible shapes in illegible spaces..."⁵ Casado's exploration of such impossible shapes is marked by his intense interest in the social ramifications of research in the areas of artificial reproduction and cloning. The physical similarity of the figures in *El Nuevo Cuerpo.v01-3* is suggestive of a "conveyor belt" of reproductions from original beings—a violent and erotic "orgy" of clones. These images are sexually disconcerting: seductive and repellent at the same time, they spark slightly uncomfortable questions about how sexuality, and sexual behavior, might be reproduced through a process of cloning. Might the consequences of unsuccessful cloning be a sexual "warping" or "excess" of sorts?

Closely tied to the age-old but ever-present drive for physical perfection, the *El Nuevo Cuerpo* series raises complex questions about opportunities and threats that will increasingly face us on both personal and cultural fronts. Who has access to new choices presented by genetic research? Who makes a "suitable" candidate for artificial reproduction, and for what reasons in the future might we desire ourselves or loved ones to be "cloned"? At what point will our willingness to eliminate undesirable traits or physical features undermine our humanity? In relation to this, *El Nuevo Cuerpo.v04* is almost a mockery of the goal for the "perfect" body, presenting a "Do-it-Yourself" kit where you match the artist's own face with the hands, feet, torsos, genitalia, teeth, eyes and eyeglasses of your choice: a strange combination of "human" skin and hair textures and the more "perfect" ones of smooth android bodies. In contrast, *El Nuevo Cuerpo.v07* (micro/macro) presents us with a ready-made "composite" of individual photographs of male and female body parts, rising up through the gallery space, measuring 27 feet high and 12 feet at its widest point—but the proportions of the piece belie its intimate content. With every macro photograph, we see an almost painstakingly detailed view of a body—that we might see during acts of intimacy or love—but here presented in gigantic, and very public, scale. In its form, this segmentation also relates to broader artistic practices of "breaking up" the body, whether this is achieved through collage-like installations, the pixelation of forms, or an array of video monitors that separate out parts of a "single" image. British artist Lei Cox, for example, merged a male self-portrait with female body parts through a seven channel, seven monitors piece entitled *Sufferance* in 1993 to create a total amorphous form. For Casado, in the context of this series on the "new body", *El Nuevo Cuerpo.v07* also poses the question of why we should stick to the features of our own gender while the menu of possibilities continues to grow?

Casado tackles the subject of sexual identity and choice in an apparently lighthearted way in *Beesexuality*, where images of a 3D bee having sex with a bee, roach, butterfly, and jellyfish are shown in such high quality "macro" photographic form that we still question whether they are real. Whereas the topic of bisexuality may be humorous in relation to a bee, Casado is acutely aware that human sexual self-identification is not only a more intimate and loaded topic, but also one that is intricately tied up with notions of censorship—whether this is personally or socially enforced. The series *Censura.v01*⁶,

⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Lived Spatiality (The Spaces of Corporeal Desire)* in: *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, The MIT Press, 2001, pp. 31 and 32.

⁶ *Censura.v01*. (Translator's note)

presents what look like home-made, intimate and/or sexy photographs that might be sent through the Internet to give a potential lover an idea of your body type and/or personality. Casado plays on social and media stereotypes of what is deemed attractive by allowing two kinds of censorship to exist in the photographs—that done by the models, and by himself as the artist—but we remain unclear as to which of these has determines the outcome of any given image.

The notion of potential new forms, clones, and artificially produced offspring is touched on in several works in the show. In *Inside.v01*, the artist and his partner embrace the idea of intimacy by literally looking “inside” one another, faces and upper torsos fusing into one new form. The subject receives more delicate, but nonetheless, powerful expression in two six-part drawings, *Puntosdevista.v02 (siameses)*⁷ and *Puntosdevista.v02 (pareja homosexual)*⁸. In the first of these, soap bubble babies float around in an embryonic, almost psychedelic state, heads and bodies enmeshed, fused together like a beautiful experiment gone wrong, whereas *Puntosdevista.v02 (pareja homosexual)* presents partial, but graphic, views of two men making love in impossible positions. In both cases, the images are set against illogical and highly colorful combinations of human cells that seem to be multiplying, mutating, and growing as they might on the bottom of a petri dish. These images touch on the sensitive subject of the initiation, and termination, of life. If it is known in advance that twins would be siamese, should their life be terminated? Contrarily, how willing are we to risk such eventualities within the broader context of scientific research? The second piece in particular acts as a commentary on the tendency for most people to believe that homosexual couples should not raise children. Casado’s work, however, seems to posit a new angle on the subject: in terms of what the future holds, would it be more, or less, acceptable for homosexual couples to find a female donor to enable artificial reproduction, or create a clone? How might the possibility of cloning change established “social orders” of male/female relationships, and the power structures that support them—particularly if male/female biological identity becomes less important than economic and scientific means?

In terms of the future of the “biological body”, Casado’s interests have a clear connection with those of the collaborative group Critical Art Ensemble, who continue to address the complex issues around genetic research, cloning and recombinant DNA. As writer Rebecca Schneider points out: “For CAE the biological body, or more precisely, the privatization, manipulation, and commodification of the *organic*, is the “new frontier” that capital is “penetrating”⁹. Critical Art Ensemble’s *Flesh Machine* 1997-98, for example, explored the complex ethical questions surrounding biotech research, presenting both lecture and “laboratory” activities that looked at aspects of artificial reproduction. By offering audiences the opportunity to take a donor-screening test, CAE “tested” participants’ emotional and ethical positions on the subject. Importantly, Critical Art Ensemble stated in their article ‘Recombinant Theatre and Digital Resistance’: “Recombination and digitality are not so specialized. As we shall see, they are the foundations of a new cosmology—a new way of understanding, ordering, valuing, and performing in the world.”

Casado’s “meat” is driven by similar concerns, in terms of both his interest in biotechnology, and the way in which broader visual culture dissects, manipulates, and reproduces contemporary images. By fusing “real” footage, animation, and digitally manipulated photographs and videos, Casado’s process draws on the kind of techniques we see—and often so readily absorb—in other spheres of our lives, particularly in relation

⁷ *Pointsofview.v02 (siamese twins)*. (Translator’s note)

⁸ *Pointsofview.v02 (homosexual couple)*. (Translator’s note)

⁹ Rebecca Schneider, Nomadmedia: *Critical Art Ensemble*, p.128.

to the worlds of entertainment and mass media. How easily we may assimilate these images—without pausing to consider how they represent profound perceptual shifts in our understanding of form, space, the body, or types of narrative—is, for Casado, an indication of a general apathy and failure to engage with such debates in our daily lives. The works in this exhibition present timely, beautiful, and perturbing insights into the complexity of our present and future “human states”.

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