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The Spectacle of the Invisible: Re-inhabiting Vulnerability

Cara Judea Alhadeff

Abstract

As a sex activist, photographer, and yoga teacher, my work is about making the private public, the invisible visible, drawing the mysterious into the explicit. The ever-fertile uncanny becomes my political strategy – an erotic ethic that is a commitment to aesthetics and vulnerability. My photographs explore eroticism as a strategy for cultural resistance. Eroticism is any intensely satisfying sensation of connectedness to oneself, to others, and to our environment in which creativity and work enhance our own and others' sense of vitality. Eroticism resists homogenized social relations and self-censorship and offers a key to examine the unconscious mind by interweaving the very interactions that are often prohibited or suppressed under social norms. This connection to repression illuminates Freud's definition of the uncanny and what I am identifying as its emancipatory possibilities—"something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open".¹

In cultural production as in reception, vulnerability becomes a vital intervention in public-private discourse. Since the private is construed and constructed as vulnerable and ambiguous, it "requires" unquestioned taxonomies of regulation and normalization. The sanctity of normalcy constitutes a hegemony of representation that colonizes our relationships with our own bodies. In contrast, erotic politics reorients our cultural constructs of pleasure and vulnerability in order to ultimately regain power and imagination over our bodies.

My intention is to open up spaces for viewers to re-inhabit their bodies' potential for presence and pleasure. Using queer politics as deconstructive and non-normative, I engage multiple discourses in order to disrupt taken-for-granted binaries and challenge the hegemonic categories of self/other, certainty, gender, desire, and political action/personal empowerment. This is a practice of dissolving and re-arranging the artificial boundaries between art, daily life, and radical democracy.

Key Words: Body, art, politics, eroticism, vulnerability, gender, photography, representation, nudity, emancipation.

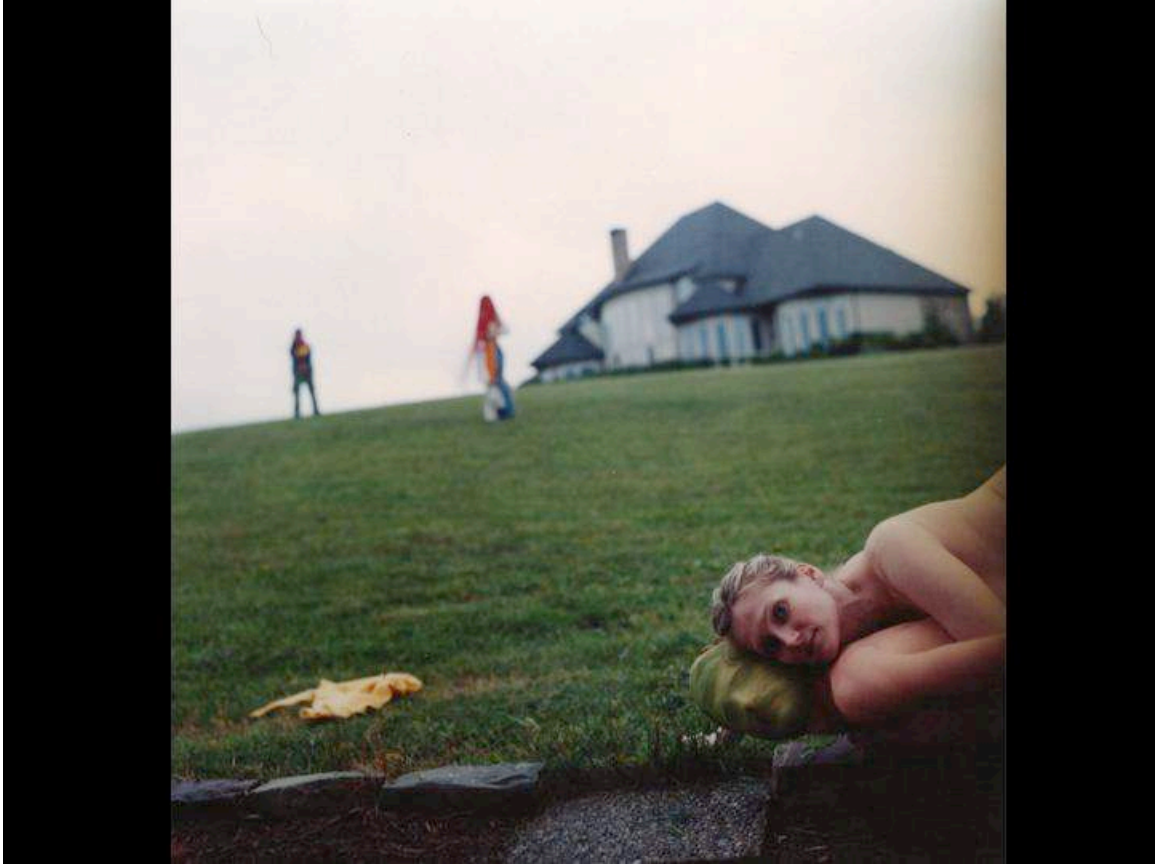
1. Inceptions

1991. Just months before the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, I join La Commune du Monde, Wilderdorp, the commune of the world, servicing a tiny, lavishly wealthy village near Ghent, Belgium. This macrobiotic commune is a sanctuary for itinerant poets/story-tellers, philosophers, recovering drug-addicts, sexual freedom fighters. During this time I write incessantly about the manipulative extreme psycho-sexual relationships I witness and experience on the communes and farms, not just in Belgium, but in Tunisia and then in the South of France with a lover who had just been released from a psychiatric hospital. Returning to the States and to my first year of college, a school renowned for its creative writing program, I find I can no longer write—stifled by the tyranny of reductive language that I find in both academia and popular culture.

2. The Spectacle of the Invisible

I begin instead to take color photographs—images that directly mirror my written language and my commitment to erotic politics. I incorporate these symbols of transformation, along with bats' heads, glass laboratory vials, latex gloves, preserved pigs' ears, molded gourds, hair wax strips, my fingernail clippings, bird claws and skulls, patinaed metal, bloody menstrual pads, and multiple mirrors as if crawling into and emerging from my models' orifices.





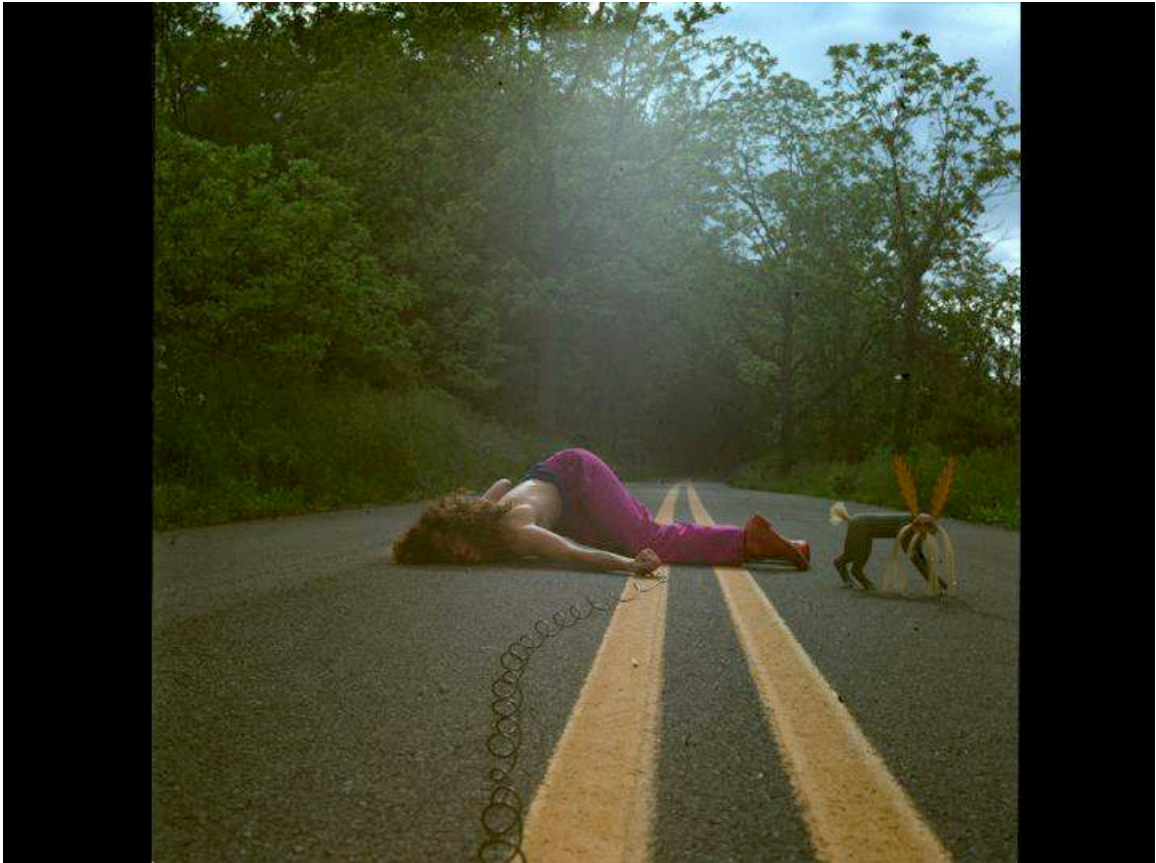
What I choose to photograph and how I exhibit the images is one strategy to encourage people to question their habitual, taken-for-granted comfort zone that they may not even realize exists because it is so automatic. Too often, anything outside of the zone of the familiar is seen as socially inappropriate, and therefore deviant. More and more, we use the lowest common denominator as a justification for how we make our decisions for what can and must not go on in the public realm.



3. Inside the Visible

Paradoxically, the body has become *a spectacle of the invisible*—an alienated, mythified, commodified site of colonization. Globally our world has become more and more fearful and restrictive in its fundamentalist response to the human body. During a recent photo shoot, I photographed naked friends in a field outside Stockholm on the west coast of Sweden. A man on a bicycle passing by became enraged when he realized that my models were naked. Out of supposed respect for the passer-by, we had to stop shooting what would have been a very productive photo-session. In Sweden, nudity had never been taboo! Amazingly, this is no longer the case. The illusion of respecting others' boundaries, what I identify as a masquerade of morality, counters the democratic imperatives of critical pedagogy. I am reminded that in 1994, Dr. Jocelyn Elders, the then Surgeon General, was forced to resign because she wanted to include masturbation into sex education curriculums. Across continents and centuries, the body is perceived as an object separate from the mind. The unclothed body is perceived as provocative—a euphemism for threatening and dangerous—when exposed and viewed in the public arena. This “provocation” is seen as a threat to our society's moral foundation. Our imaginations have been sacrificed to this global Puritanism and the kudzu-like growth of the lowest common denominator. Throughout the history of art, naked bodies of men, women, and children were synonymous with beauty and perfection; but now, to paint or photograph nudity is considered problematic and subversive—we are taught we need to protect our children and ourselves from the uncontrollable wantonness of the human body and its potential infestation of desire.

Like Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneeman, Valie Export, and Annie Sprinkle, I revel in bringing the private space of my body into the public realm. But, the comfort and pleasure of one's own nakedness walking on a back country road in the heat of the day, breast-feeding on a park bench, going topless at the beach is unacceptable. The implications of repressive social disease reach into larger cultural domains that threaten the very foundations of a radical democracy in which citizens should make choices about their own bodies.





Within normative representation, the public is institutionalized and sensationalized as the real, while the private is institutionalized and sensationalized as the Other. Otherness, represented as the unfamiliar or unexpected, is visually constructed as deficient and pathological. Vulnerability that is not regulated by the authority is forbidden in the public sphere. Status quo defines the public sphere through order and familiarity. In contrast, the private is construed and constructed as vulnerable and ambiguous so it requires unquestioned taxonomies of regulation and normalization. Institutionalized constructions of vulnerability bind the psychological to the physical: everyday of our lives we learn that to be accepted we must mistrust and contain our bodily functions.

Normative definitions of what is obscene, deviant, vulnerable, and different shape the violence of “everyday” representations: Abigail Solomon-Godeau emphasizes, "The most insidious and instrumental forms of domination, subjection, and objectification are produced by mainstream images of women rather than by juridically criminal or obscene ones".² Daily violence can be characterized by the ways in which we embody constructed desires and fears of our own bodies and fears of difference. When the so-called normal dictates what is real and what can be legitimately expressed in public (i.e. self-censorship), the voice of the authority remains uncontested. The illusion that we have creative and intellectual freedom is based on the prevailing notion that a “neutral” territory exists. The idea that there is a morally safe, non-threatening ground that must not offend anyone actually neutralizes, thus eradicating difference. “Corporate art” satisfies this anti-intellectual, repressive position.



There is no neutral ground! My first major incident with censorship occurred in 1994 at the Penn State University library, named after William Pattee, who ironically was known for his defense of freedom of speech. Censorship of my photographs was rooted in peoples' fear of their own imagination and interpretations calling the works 'degrading to the human body,' 'immoral,' and 'inappropriate for a university library.'. Their justification for removing my photographs from their exhibition space was based on their belief that they owned the public arena in which content must be inoffensive and (certainly) not challenging. This fiction that neutrality exists, especially in an educational institution, feeds into a fear of ambiguity and the unfamiliar.

By challenging internalized assumptions about the body, my photographs explore and insist upon those very *aspects/phenomena* that are too often perceived as pornographic, obscene, objectifying. Did those who found my photographs 'offensive' feel threatened by what they "actually saw" or by what they imagined they were seeing, or by how and what I was actually photographing?



In the 1990s, because my images explored the unfamiliar or immediately unrecognizable, they were reduced by viewers to the category of Abstraction. Today, viewers assume that my images are digitally manipulated. Because photo shop is now the norm in both commercial and fine art photography, most viewers have a hard time believing that what I am photographing is “real.” What I see through the camera lens *is* my reality.

The photograph shows the viewer what is happening in front of the camera; nothing is manipulated during the analogue developing or printing process which I do myself and which these days is extremely rare among contemporary color photographers. These assumptions go hand in hand with our learned compulsion to know the right answer. Order, rationality, and the familiar are commonly sanctioned as "the real" within the domain of the public and the everyday. The construction of sight predetermines the status of reality. When people make assumptions, they are too often absolutely convinced that the assumption was correct and that it represents fact.

I feel compelled to address what I see as a dangerous power of digital photography as a reflection of the tyranny of certainty. I don't see myself as a neo-luddite and I'm not making a case against digital manipulation itself as an art form. But, I am reluctant to identify digital imagery as the next frontier, the edge of progress in a vertical hierarchy of imagination. When we believe that our everyday world rotates around a calcified central root of an unambiguous neutrality, we diminish the possibilities of our creative potential and our willingness to be fully engaged. We feed directly into the machine of self-censorship and its tyrannical laws of

normalcy. We don't necessarily recognize or use what we intuitively know. As physicist Stephen Hawking claims, "Everything we need is already with us just waiting to be realized."³





Erotic politics, on the other hand, disrupts and reorients our cultural concepts of pleasure and vulnerability, and ultimately who has power and control over our bodies. If we began to view the public realm as a common ground rather than as a space in which the private should be denied, fear and anxiety could play a less pervasive role in how we conduct ourselves within the public arena.

I want to unsettle commonplace conventions of vulnerability by re-appropriating how our society orders the inside and the outside. This intervention is not about exposure or access to what is normally "hidden," but about questioning and re-conceptualizing the ways in which the real is constructed in relation to how it is embodied as the private. Solomon-Godeau elaborates on the complexities of interpreting imagery: "[I]ts meaning will be determined by the viewer's reading of it; a reading as much determined by the viewer's subjectivity as by the manifest and latent contents of the image".⁴ I want my images to provoke this move from a privatized aesthetic to a political intimacy, an erotic agency: "[W]hat exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may *itself* become the artwork".⁵ Suzanne Lacy's observation is characteristic of both post-colonial and post-modern art made in the last 30 years.

4. Beyond Binaries

Because the relationships among the "objects" (including myself) within my photographs play out a process of continual de-centering and excess, I hope this language of critical imagination becomes an erogenous life-affirming power; breaking up predetermined taxonomies

of knowledge, and suspending what we think we know. How can we challenge, personally and collectively, our socialized fear and distrust of self-doubt, what comes out of our bodies, and what goes on inside them? This question compels me to collaborate with artists from other disciplines, such as architects, dancers, sculptors, poets, and composers. Collaboration undermines binary, reductive thinking because it demands that we both give up ownership and explore unfamiliar territory--entering into the space of the other through promiscuous crossings.



What I find socially, politically, aesthetically, and even spiritually significant is for us to witness our own process of looking for absolute, sanitized answers and to question how attached we are in our culture to binary thinking: what is vulnerable versus what is powerful; what is male/female, old/young, aggressor/receiver; chaos/order. Through my images and collaborative performances, I want the body to continually defy the assumption that it is easily categorized by blurring its own constructed boundaries of difference/sameness, pleasure/pain, expectation/unfamiliarity. Perhaps because I am a child of a holocaust survivor, multiple, contradictory perspectives feel inherent to the way I function both personally and politically. Interpretations of difference have always been central to my work. Instead of automatically defining difference and vulnerability as threatening, I hope to construct environments in which we can actually discover how we are connected to what we think is unfamiliar. During my lecture at the Contemporary Museum of Art in Lyon, France, one of the curators from the Lyon Biennial told me how much he liked my photo of an old woman. I responded by telling him that “the old woman” is actually a young man. What interests me is not his interpretation of the age or gender of the character in

the photograph, but more importantly, how does he react when he discovers that his taken-for-granted interpretation is actually the opposite of his analysis?



Another example of how mystified and commodified hegemonic practices distort our self-perceptions and how difference is institutionally neutralized is when my photographs were censored in San Francisco's City Hall. As I installed my three month long exhibition, one of the city supervisors warned me that Mayor Willie Brown could not be expected to walk past an image of a vagina everyday on the way to his office. The "vagina" in question was actually a close-up of my armpit with chicken claws.

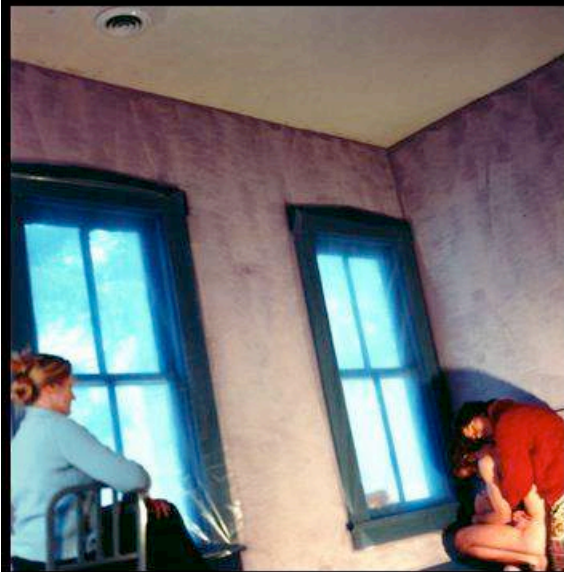


During my opening of the exhibition “The Gestation Project” in France, a male viewer asked me if the naked pregnant women in The Red Room photographs were in a brothel. He was one of many people to make this assumption. I told him that they were not in a brothel, but in a nightclub in San Francisco and asked him what his associations would have been if the models in the photograph had been men, naked and posed in a similar way? His immediate response was that clearly the naked men would have been seen as patrons waiting for their prostitutes. The more discussions I have with viewers about my work, the more I witness the infinite complexities of how difference is regulated—in particular, rigid gender distinctions and how we are all so entrenched in the invisibility of sexism.



5. **The Beauty of Disorder**

Because the word monster shares its root with the verb to demonstrate, I find that creating a spectacle actually establishes a space where we can reflect on our differences and similarities. “Extreme” individuals and groups are on display—re-appropriating the spectacle of the real. Within my images, the grotesque or disarrayed body of the "monster"/the other/the unfamiliar/the immigrant is intended to dislocate predetermined categories of identification. I explore this web as a process of multi-layered storytelling in which ambiguity is not a lack of clarity, but a multiplicity of clarities.





I intend for my photographs to move beyond the question of who is disfigured by whose power, and challenge how that disfigurement can be re-conceptualized as a vibrant and affirmative collaborative social movement.

Buddha, a quintessential post-modernist, once brilliantly suggested: "May we live like the lotus, at home in the muddy water".



Cara Judea Alhadeff (PhD candidate, European Graduate Studies, Artist/Scholar, New York City) has exhibited and won awards internationally for her body-based essays, color photographs, and video installations. Her photographs, including those in the collection at the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art**, have been publicly defended by Freedom of Speech organizations such as **artsave/People for the American Way**. Internationally, Alhadeff regularly lectures on corporeal politics and teaches body consciousness workshops.

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Notes

¹ Freud, Sigmund, *The Uncanny*. (1919). in *Pelican Freud Library*, 14, trans. James Strachey, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

² Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 237.

⁴ *ibid.* p. 229.

⁵ Lacy, Suzanne, "Introduction: Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys," *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Suzanne Lacy, (ed), Seattle Bay State Press, Seattle, 1995, p. 20.