They want it
Emmanuelle Chérel

“The epistemology of domination leaves a bitter taste with us..., but it prompts us to think that there is no purity of resistance. It obliges us not to take closed and anhistorical entities — discrete units — to be political modes of subjectivization, which invent themselves and experiment with themselves, issuing from upset material conditions of existence and imposed dominant semioologies. It forces us to adopt novel viewpoints, and hone worthy concepts for understanding new mythologies. Fragility and ambiguity, perceptible on an almost gestural scale, counter-praxes, dissident lives, collectives and coalitions in present time, all these remove nothing from the power of the conflictualities which they open up, displace and upturn; and, whatever the effectiveness of these antagonisms, if nothing is ever promised to history, everything bears the trace of historicity.”

Beyond the Painting (2011) is a 24-minute video for which thirty women reinterpreted postures of female nudes in French painting. One after the other, they enter the frame, position their bodies, freeze in the pose for almost a minute, then leave the stage-like space to make room for the next woman. The presentation is sober. One or two lengths of dark blue velvet highlight the physical and carnal presence of the models. This video passes through the pictorial history of the female nude from the 17th century to the 19th, and invites us to question representations of women’s bodies and the way they have contributed to a fantasized construction of the Other. It actually pays special attention to representations of the “indigenous” or “native” woman (like the odalisque — that virgin slave in harems), while at the same time establishing links with representations of the female nude in a more general manner.

Slowly, in a sort of blueprint, there emerge, turn by turn, the attitudes of the bodies in the Triomphe de Neptune ou la Naissance de Vénus (1635-1636) by Nicolas Poussin, La Toilette (1717-1718) by Jean-Antoine Watteau, L’Odalisque à l’Esclave (1842) by François Boucher, the Sacrifice de la rose (1765-1770) and the Jeune Fille jouant avec un chien (1752) by Jean-Honoré Fragonard, La Grande Odalisque (1814) and Le Bain turc (1862) by Jean-Auguste Ingres,
Phryné devant l’aréopage (1861) and Vente d’esclaves (1866) by Jean-Léon Gérôme, Les Jeunes Filles au bain (1879) by Henri-Pierre Picou and Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe (1862-1863) and L’Olympia (1863) by Édouard Manet, and Manao Tupapau (l’esprit des morts veille, 1892) by Paul Gauguin, etc. These masterpieces are incarnated while revealing other bodies. The decontextualization of the poses, taken from the pictures and the scenes to which they belong, make us take a better look at them. La Grande Odalisque by Ingres has lost the oriental props [peacock feather fan, water-pipe (narghile), incense burner and silk turban]. The incongruousness of certain postures is accentuated, revealing their erotic function which, at times, flirts with pornographic burner and silk turban]. The incongruousness of certain postures is accentuated, revealing their erotic function which, at times, flirts with pornographic imagery. The video is part of the work of deconstructing the gaze, of representations, and of the history of art undertaken by feminists (Luce Irigaray, Griselda Pollock, Lucy Lippard, Jacqueline Rose, Linda Nochlin, Lisa Tickner, Freida High, Belinda Edmondson…)

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The point of departure of this work by Maria-Theeresa Alves is the observation of a picture from the collection of the Château des Ducs de Bretagne-Musée d’histoire in Nantes: Jeune Femme perçant l’oreille de son serviteur noir (Young Woman Piercing the Ear of her Black Servant). This oil on canvas, painter unknown, was painted in circa 1735. In it we see a young woman bending over the head of a black child—a “piccaninny”—whose face is contorted by a scared grimace. The scene as a whole contains a sensation of intimacy brought on by the physical proximity of the woman and her (bogus) slave, but rendered tense by this latter’s anxious submission. In the suspended gesture of this hand wielding a needle—an erotic metaphor of the sex act—issues of gender and race are interwoven.

How are the relations which link the history of sexuality with the history of politics to be presented?

In La Volonté de Savoir (The Will to Knowledge)—previously An Introduction—, the first volume of his History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault introduces “the daring thesis whereby sexuality, which had been thought to come from an intimate, natural and private question, was constructed by culture in accordance with the political interests of the ruling class.” The philosopher thus laid the first milestones of what would be a significant development in research into sexualities and the concept of gender. Another fundamental text on these matters was the introduction to the issue titled “Queer Theory” of the magazine Différences, where Teresa de Lauretis laid the foundations for the said theory. In it, she stressed the importance of Black Feminism, and the thinking of chicanas and lesbians of colour in the emerging reflection on sexualities. "In the end it is because sexuality is so unavoidably personal, because in such an inextricable way it entangles self with others, fantasy and representation, subjective and social, that differences of race and gender (as well as related differences, differences of class, ethnic difference, generational and geographical difference, socio-political position) are a crucial subject of concern, and that critical dialogue alone can obtain a better understanding of the specificity and partiality of our respective histories as well as some of our shared struggles". It is actually undeniable that Black Feminism has indicated the intricacy of power relations during the period of slavery in the Americas, followed by segregationist powers in the United States and the construction of sexual and racial identities, which post-colonial contemporary societies are direct heirs to (see the writings of Angela Davis, Hilary Beckles, Hazel Carby, Kathleen Brown, Jennifer Morgan and Roxann Wheeler).

Working on French history, in her book La Matrice de la race (The Matrix of Race), the philosopher Elsa Dorlin shows that, from the 18th century on, the nation was no longer thought of as the gathering of heterogeneous subjects under the authority of one and the same king, but the reunion of brothers, sons of one and the same mother. From that moment on, the issue of the nation refers constantly to its corporeity. And the sexual imagination, used for the representation of the nation, was also used for the construction of the racist ideologies which legitimized imperial conquest. By associating the bodies of women with racial thinking (see Buffon’s theses), the importance of the white (and procreative) female body for national health and prosperity was forever being proclaimed and keenly defended. It thus had to be controlled (and tended) with vigilance, but also respected for the labour whereby it contributed to the construction and maintenance of social order. Sexual politics was a politics of the nation, and vice versa. So “the Nation literally takes shape in the feminine model of the white ‘mother’, healthy and maternal, as opposed to the figures of a ‘degenerate’ femininity—the witch, the vapourous woman (given to fits), the mannish sutler, the nymphomaniac, the tribade, and the African slave”. In another text, Dorlin points out that sexism and racism are not so much theoretically comparable as inextricably connected from a historical viewpoint: “‘Sex’ and ‘race’ designate at once ‘old’ ideological (and allegedly natural) categories, ‘new’ categories of critical analysis (critiques of historical systems of domination, such as sexism and racism), and, lastly, political categories (categories of identification, or rather of subjectivization-objectness, of self and the other). These three meanings are inextricably linked and make the term ‘race’, as well as
The representation of nude women is one of the features of western art. And this even if the church regularly condemned art’s glorification of voluptuousness and carnal desire. The continuity of this unveiling from the 17th to the 19th centuries is a complex thing; it is based on the re-interpretation of ancient myths, marks the criteria of ideal beauty of the Renaissance, then, subsequently, to say it expeditiously, the desires of libertinage, and, last of all, their projections and their distortions on the “exotic” woman. This work invites us to reassess, reconsider and reinvest representations without seeking to simplify history. The choice of varied references (three centuries of painting and of extremely diverse painters are quoted) reveals the need to show the complexity of this history of ideas to do with women, sex, and race.

From the 17th century to the 19th, pictures with un- or scantily clad naked women did, to be sure, exist in large numbers (Fragonard, Boucher...), but no mention thereof was made in the theoretical treatises which governed and organized the subjects of painting, where the male academy held sway. According to the art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau, the female nude, be it pictorial or photographic, is a cultural construct of the 19th century, dating more precisely from the Restoration in France. Ingres’s La Grande Odalisque would be the first life-size female nude “presented as a nude”, before any orientally-inclined connotation. The installation of the power of the bourgeoisie and its triumph in the 19th century brought contradictory values. While moralism, not to say prudishness, was rife, the display of the female nude was asserted as an ideological construct. The orientalist themes of the myth of things Moorish and the harem (based in particular on writings like The Thousand and One Nights) were imposed. The multiplication of the female nude in an enclosed place—where languid, undressed women, stretching, adjusting their hair, seated or prone, intimately alone or in groups, are at the disposal of the painter’s eye—created a tradition in 19th century France, with Ingres, Delacroix, Gérôme and Fromentin, indicating, fairly and squarely, a relationship between male domination and the discourse about colonization. Images of the “Arab woman” and her attributes were a sources of fantasy and laden with an erotic, not to say pornographic charge (see the photographs of Pierre Louÿs, and all those editions of post cards). At the end of the 19th century, L’Art d’aimer aux colonies (The Art of Loving in the Colonies) was presented as a pseudo-scientific work, signed by an imaginary Doctor Jacobus, and put out by the Georges-Anquette publishing house. Reissued many times.
They want it over, until the late 1930s, this book offered a way of looking at the “indigenous” or “native woman” that was unusually pornographic. It was overtly racist, describing, page after page, image after image, the most private morphology of the “indigenous body” offered to colonials. The manipulation of bodies, their unveiling and their display, were tools in the colonization process. The primitive “other” as an object of spectacle became a commercial object, one of the earliest victims being the Hottentot Venus.

The eroticism of the odalisque, for its part, was carried on among certain Fauve painters like Vlaminck and Van Dongen.

Beyond the Painting deals with these issues: what is the nature of the pleasure procured by Gérôme’s Phryné devant l’aéropage (Phryne Revealed before the Areopagus) and Vente d’esclaves (The Slave for Sale), or Gauguin’s Manaō Tupapau? The video grasps fantasy and summons the construct of desire. Fantasy is the psychic mechanism which structures subjectivity by reworking or translating subjective representations and self-representations. Our capacity to fantasize, no matter how unusual it may seem to us, nevertheless still draws the materials of its fantasies from the imaginary productions of our day and age. Classical painting and sculpture, for example, have often presented male violence, making it aesthetic/erotic, in the form of rape and abduction associated with fantasies of possession, submission and servitude. And, as Teresa de Lauretis says, if it is extremely hard to break with the cultural fantasies which form the weft of personal fantasies, what is all the same involved is subverting them, shifting them, and creating between them the (ironical?) remove, based on which it becomes possible to assume what one is, at the intersection of personal history and History, with all its contradictions and conflicts.

Beyond the Painting also sets forth the question of the model. If female models were used by private academies and artists, the live female model was nevertheless not authorized until 1850. One of the earliest depictions which broach this subject in all its complexity is probably Edouard Manet’s L’Olympia, a work which caused a scandal at the 1865 Salon. Stripped of all idealization, L’Olympia reveals a body which does not tally with the aesthetic canons of the day. The model, Victorine Meurent, who was herself a painter, posed for eight other canvases by Manet, including Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe. The self-assurance of Victorine Meurent’s gaze, penetrating and confident, has been much commented upon.

According to Elisabeth Lebovici, Manet bore in mind the young woman’s identity as a painter herself, and he duly endowed her with a painter’s eye: “Perhaps this is the first naked woman depicted in painting who looks at the artist as an equal”. It is also worth noting that the opening of the Beaux-Arts de Paris took place in 1881,
just when women were gaining access both to the tools of creation and to the institution symbolizing them, and were at last able to lay claim to a professional artistic career, which meant that they could escape from their home and decorative household tasks. The shift from nude model to clothed artist, from the object represented to the subject representing, had certain repercussions both on the posture of the artist posing and on the eye cast by the artist upon his subjects [see Suzanne Valandon’s nudes in the early 20th century, and Jacqueline Marval’s Les Cinq Odalisques (1903)]. But this new possibility for women did not prevent certain artists from subscribing to the colonial ideology. In choosing L’Olympia, Alves rides herself of a dogmatic conception of heterosexuality regarded by some feminists as a major form of the oppression of women, where the man imposes his one-sided and unambiguously aggressive desire. She moves away from that explanatory paradigm of all heterosexual sexualities, which favours one—and only one—hegemonic and trans-historical representation of heterosexuality, as if this latter had been fixed for all eternity, unaware of the variations introduced by the education and emancipation of women, by their access to autonomy.

The women in Beyond the Painting are concentrated (and this despite the “immodesty” of certain poses and the sense of discomfort that they might have given rise to). Their serious, silent, self-assured presences (their eyes are central and directed towards the camera, their gestures are precise) are imposing. Looked at overall, the video gives off a meditative atmosphere somewhere between tension and gentleness, in which the slightest feature, detail, quiver, and micro-gesture is significant. Each woman seems to be presenting herself, in the sense of being present, and being there, in front of the onlooker’s gaze. Because what is indeed involved here is a face-to-face encounter. These bodies and their gazes challenge the power of images. They interrupt the fetish-image status which these masterpieces have obtained, which is to say the status of charming screen substitute. They upset their status of freeze frames which leads to a denial of reality, and the eye’s standstill. In the declension of this corpus of gestures, and in this fragmentary inventory, confusion and discrepancy are intermingled. Otherwise put, the system put forward by Maria Thereza Alves disturbs these historical paintings which function like the screen-memories described by Sigmund Freud, conveying a point of repression where the substitute covers, and is incapable of touching, the horror of domination and colonization. These inanimate images have become monuments and trophies, attesting to a certain necrosis and a sort of fantasy of immobilization. And it is this inertia, this stability, this impassiveness of the images, that Beyond the Painting manages to shake.

This video releases expressions of sensuality, dignity and self-determination which pass by way of the beauty and differences of the bodies. Each one tells its story and asserts a singularity. The artist did not hold any auditions. All corporeities were accepted, and they challenge the normative controls of our day and age. Far from the restrictions of advertising and pornographic imagery—subject of the photomontage Body Beautiful or Beauty Knows no Pain: Hot House, or Harem by Martha Rosler (1966-72)—, the proposal awakens (re-) appropriation and affirmation, as is illustrated by the pleasure and satisfaction expressed by the women who contributed to this video. It is in fact a matter of self-affirmation as a free subject and as an actor of one’s desire, and thus bringing to life the complexity of sexuality. Alves does not deny the games of seduction necessary for the manifestation of desire. Why were only white women (“Caucasian-type women”) chosen for this video? In doing it this way, Maria Thereza Alves forces these women, not without ambiguity, to recognize the historical and current representations of women, “exotic” and otherwise. In so doing, she invites a form of solidarity which might lead to getting away from the ethnocentrism of western feminism. This is a stance which links up with various critiques, for example those of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, speaking out against the fact that the works of western feminists about other women in the world tend to establish male domination in a universal and trans-cultural way. The question must be broached more subtly. “The application to Third World women of this conception of women forming a homogeneous category, colonizes and hides the fact that different groups of women belong simultaneously to different social classes and ethnic groups, and consequently denies these women any status as political and historical agents”. Beyond the Painting exposes the fact that sexuality, like the many different fantastic configurations of desire, is a stage on which power is incarnated, circulates and is wielded in a precarious manner, redefining power plays, and territories of sexuality, re-signifying fantasies (hetero-racial sexuality offering another version of the domination/submission fantasy) and re-inventing identities as identifications. This work offers no answers to the questions it raises, but it keeps its confusing elements in a dynamic tension. This unresolved tension gives rise to openness and contradiction. It helps to intervene between what we are and what we are not, what we have in common or not, and what we might be able to do together.

Translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods
There are, needless to say major differences between orientalist and colonial power is wielded. The collusion between the photographer and the subject, but also, and at the same time, invents an exotic eroticism and colonialism shatters the economic and cultural identity of the colonized populations. This implies that any proposition about “what a man is”, and “what a woman is” can henceforth be deciphered as an act of language, a performative and dialogic act which alters the position of those talking, and what they are talking about.

1880), significantly shows a woman without affectation, or distance. She looks at the camera with a submissive gaze, in which can be read an obscure melancholy (consent associated with a contract made with the cameraman, but a sad resignation of a subject who has become an object?)

There are, needless to say major differences between orientalist photographs where the Orient is present as motif and décor, in which the woman photographed keeps her share of identity, and the crude and pornographic photographs of Pierre Louÿs, who, between 1896-1897, photographed oriental prostitutes based on the manner of the Catalogue raisonné.

De Lauretis T., Théorie queer et Cultures populaires, Paris: La Découverte, 2004, p. 99. “In introducing the fetish concept, S. Freud signified that it forms a totalitarian image, through the conjunction of its nature as a ‘substitute’ (Ersatz) and its nature as a screen, a cover (Decke).” The fetish-image is a totalitarian and “attractive substitute” for a fetishization.

Jacques Lacan wrote that the screen-image is a veil: “Why is the veil more precious to man than reality? Why does the order of this illusory relationship become an essential and necessary component of its own object? This is the question raised by fetishism”, in Le Séminaire, I.V., La Relation d’objet (1956-1957), op.cit, p. 158.


Deleuze G., Guattari F., Mille Plateaux, capitalisme et schizophrénie 2, Paris: Minuit, 1980, chap. 7. “Fascism never detects the particles of the other, it spreads the waves of the same until the extinction of what cannot be identified.”

See the videos of Ursula Biemann about the world economy of sex.