

Cyborgs, Avatars, Laa-Laa and Po: Exhibitions of Mariko Mori
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RACHEL SCHREIBER

Occasionally an artist emerges whose rise to prominence is so meteoric that there is immediate doubt regarding the seriousness of the artist's work. Thirty-two-year-old Mariko Mori had four major solo exhibitions in 1998: at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; the Serpentine Gallery, London; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and *Mariko Mori*, a catalog accompanying these exhibitions, includes essays by curators from these four venues.¹ Mori worked as a fashion model and fashion designer in Tokyo before studying art in London and New York City and maintains studios in both New York and Tokyo. She is from a wealthy Japanese family and her work is slick, created using the newest technologies and obviously expensive to produce. She has garnered an enormous amount of attention, with reviews and articles in various publications from *Artforum* and *Art News* to *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. However, most of the writing about her in these publications runs less than 250 words, and is no more critical of the work itself than this paragraph.

One of Mori's early works, *Birth of a Star* (1995), is a prediction of her own imminent fame. It is as if Mori is saying, "this is what I will become." Mori appears in this self-portrait, as in all of her works, in a costume of her own design. She is outfitted in a vinyl, schoolgirl-like short plaid skirt and her legs have the smooth plastic surface quality of a blow-up doll. She is wearing oversized headphones and holding some kind of remote control device. The work is a life-size Duratrans print (whereby the photograph is mounted in a lightbox and illuminated from behind) that emanates eerie, technopop music. Around her float brightly colored balloons. Her playful gesture coupled with her curious activity question the relationship of young girls and popular culture, fashion and the art world.

The first time I saw *The Birth of a Star* I thought of Donna Haraway's cyborg as described in her seminal essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century."² Haraway's essay is truly a manifesto: it is a declaration of her desire for women to begin to take responsible pleasure in the mixing of boundaries between human and machine, human and animal, natural and artificial. Haraway defines the cyborg

as a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.³

Mori blurs the line between science fiction and contemporary notions of femininity as represented in popular culture, particularly Japanese pop culture. Her gaze is somehow vacant while coquettish as she peers at the viewer through her icy blue contact lenses. Her playful stance indicates her sense of fun in her own participation in this culture and yet her own agency does not seem to be completely present. Her attitude is simple, uncomplicated and vacuous, much like the Teletubbies.

For the uninitiated, *Teletubbies* is a BBC-produced children's television program. Its innovation is its target market—it is the first television program created specifically for toddlers. At the outset of each show, viewers enter Teletubbyland and are introduced to the four main characters: Tinky Winky, Dipsy, Laa-Laa and Po. They speak in a kind of mumbled baby language of English, although Po also speaks Cantonese. Each teletubby is a different, bright color and has a distinguishing antenna-like shape above its head. The most remarkable feature of the teletubbies is the television monitor each has in its belly. Occasionally, the monitor comes on and we watch, along with the tubbies, a

"come and see" episode that involves live action video of a real-life child engaged in an activity such as rollerblading, ice skating or horseback riding.

Teletubbyland is a surreal landscape, where large bunnies hop around amiably and flowers voice their delight or dismay. In the center of the ever-present sun is the face of an infant, always smiling, squealing in glee. The landscape consists of gently rolling hills and patches of flowers. The color palette of the landscape tends toward pastels outside, and more primary colors in the interior of their underground home, where the teletubbies might go to make tubby custard or to play with a vacuum cleaner named Noo-noo. Perhaps it is no more impossible than other drawn cartoon landscapes, but the computer-generated environment creates a supernatural quality that is eerie and otherworldly.

There is something fascinating about the way that *Teletubbies* molds science fiction into such a benign, safe haven for toddlers. From its computer animation to the idea of biological television implants, *Teletubbies* is high-tech all the way. The tubbies themselves are perhaps the youngest cyborgs in circulation and their life is filled with technology. One of the most intriguing aspects of the show is the voice trumpet, a large transmitter that can tell the tubbies stories or act as narrator for the episode. In the words of the official BBC website, "the voice trumpet represents the many 'technological' devices that are a *natural* part of a child's life." (my emphasis) This admission that technology is at the foundation of our lives ("a natural part") is shocking to some parents who find the show problematic. When might we renounce our moral conviction that natural things are superior to those technological? Or, more aptly, when might we be able to desist the constant comparison? Mori's work bypasses these outmoded oppositions.

The denigration of that which is unnatural has historically been at the heart of arguments against the increasing role of technology in our lives. Science fiction often addresses this issue, be it through utopian fantasies of a futuristic world in which

technology reigns supreme or through dystopian fears of technology gone awry. "Countdown to Ecstasy," the Mori catalog essay written by Chicago curator Dominic Molon, takes Stanley Kubrick's science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1969) as its point of departure for analyzing Mori's work. In the essay Molon situates Mori's work along a timeline from Kubrick's film, which starts and ends by questioning the effects of technology on culture. Kubrick seems to be saying that, while clearly formative, technology might also in some sense be an original sin. In the film, this is played out in a linear trajectory that follows an evolutionary model clear through to space. Molon positions Mori's work at the endpoint of this timeline. He writes, "*2001's* Nietzschean (and Darwinian) view of humankind's journey from earth-bound ape to a higher extraterrestrial state anticipates the various kinds of transcendence that pervade society today."⁵

To a devotee of Haraway, reading Mori's work in this way entirely misses the point. The image of the cyborg is evident in all of Mori's works. In *Empty Dream* (1995), she produced an enormous panorama of Japan's largest indoor man-made beach. We know that it is a constructed space because the backdrop of the virtual (always sunny) sky ends well within the frame and allows us to see the structure of the ceiling above it.⁶ Amid the bathers at the lovely palm-shaded beach, Mori appears identically four times as a cyber-mermaid, clad in blue sequins the size of compact discs with blue hair and gossamer bubbles draping her shoulders. The impossibility of her repeated appearance is an indication that we are to read this character as a cyborg. She is firmly embedded here in popular culture, positioned in this beach symbolizing the virtuality of a technological society, as if she is creating herself as a character in a futuristic novel that is set in the present.

Beginning of the End (1996) is a panoramic photograph of a Tokyo street scene with commercial buildings and a small urban park, replete with the detritus of such a space. In the center of the tableau is a pod-shaped, coffin-sized Plexiglas capsule in which

floats a human body. In the gallery in front of the image sits the capsule itself, as a sculptural piece entitled *Body Capsule* (1995). Taken in the context of the Tokyo street scene, the meaning is ambiguous: is the capsule a means of protection from the surrounding environment, a safe place from which to observe the urban landscape or simply a form of transportation? In any case, the body that inhabits this capsule is another form of cyborg in that it is positioned within a technological device—part and parcel of the daily street life of the high-tech urban environment of Tokyo.

The cyborg, as defined by Haraway, is a new formation, one that has grown out of the project of "imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end."⁷ As such, the cyborg will refuse to be located within an enlightenment paradigm:

An origin story in the "Western," humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate, the task of individual development and of history, the twin potent myths inscribed most powerfully for us in psychoanalysis and Marxism.⁸

The Darwinian model, radical enough in its time for its deviation from the Judeo-Christian tradition, has ultimately proven to be as steeped in an egoistic narrative whose ultimate conclusion is the Western man as is the creation myth in Genesis. Both propose redemption through progress, via racist and speciesist ideals. *2001* illustrates this timeline that proposes apes at one end and astronauts at the other. The film's teleological nature is quite contrary to Haraway's "world without end."

As such, Mori's cyborgs are located precisely outside this timeline. They exist as avatars, those unstable, intangible representations of someone else, who exist somewhere else—versions of a self. For Haraway, the "cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic

dualisms without end; it takes irony for granted."⁹ In *Tea Ceremony III* (1994), *Play With Me* (1995) and *Subway* (1994), Mori makes use of traditional female roles and then adds non-traditional details in order to critique the positioning of women within Japanese culture. The most acerbic of these is *Tea Ceremony III*. In the digitally manipulated Cibachrome print, Mori stands on the sidewalk, in a navy blue dress and white wig, offering tea to passing businessmen who are oblivious to her presence, in a traditional Japanese gesture of female subservience. Mori's expression is smiling yet blank, so that the gesture seems superficial. Perhaps the real irony is that the tea server is not really there (evidenced by the different lighting on her figure)—she has digitally added herself into the scene, which also suggests the ability to remove oneself from the scene.

Allucquère Rosanne (Sandy) Stone, a disciple of Haraway's, has written of technology as her prosthesis, that is, as an extension of herself. This language is reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan's ideas about media, put forth in the two books, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) and *The Medium is the Massage* (1967). McLuhan's writing shares the manifesto-like qualities of Haraway's essay, and although his books were extremely popular at the time they were published, subsequently they were tossed aside for a number of years as being too pop in their approach to sociology. However, McLuhan's prophetic sense of emerging innovations in virtual technologies is evidenced by the fact that recently *Understanding Media* has been reissued as a staple for new media and communications studies. In 1964, McLuhan wrote:

After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electr[on]ic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness,

when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media.¹⁰

While McLuhan's understanding of media as extensions was prescient, Stone's reworking of this concept into technology as prosthesis is brilliant. In the introduction to her book, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (1995), she traces the history of her love of technology. "I have a bad history," she writes, "I am a person who fell in love with her own prostheses. Not once, but twice. Then I fell in love with somebody *else's* prosthesis." The first experience was with radio waves, the second experience with sound manipulation. The third experience, the time she fell in love with "somebody *else's* prosthesis,"¹¹ was when she heard physicist Stephen Hawking delivering a lecture. Hawking navigates through a list of words on a computer with his fingertips (one of the few physical movements of which he is capable) and an artificial voice generator speaks for him. As Stone moved closer to the stage to get a better look, she wondered "Exactly where, I say to myself, is Hawking? Am I any closer to him now than I was outside? Who is it doing the talking up there on stage?"¹²

Hawking's method of speaking is exemplary of the idea that the medium is the message, a much touted phrase that could, if properly understood, end the debates about the uses of technology. McLuhan explains his phrase through a condemnation of the old argument that states that it is not the medium in and of itself that is good or bad—rather its value is determined by its use. For example, this argument would have it that it is not B-52 bombers that are inherently good or bad; it is whether they hit civilians that determines their value. McLuhan explains "there is simply nothing in [this argument] that will bear scrutiny, for it ignores the nature of the medium, of any and all

media, in the true Narcissus style of one hypnotized by the amputation and extension of his own being in a new technical form."¹³

The most obvious, and perhaps too obvious, manifestation in Mori's work of technologically extending oneself is the 3-D video *Nirvana* (1996-97). The viewer enters a darkened screening space, dons 3-D glasses and watches as Mori, dressed in a variety of traditionally-inspired elaborate costumes, floats above a lotus flower set in the sea of a surreal landscape, encased in a bubble. Around her hover several creatures, alien-like in so far as contemporary society has imaged extraterrestrials. They are clearly of the same visual language as other Japanese popular images such as Hello Kitty or characters from Japanimation and are actually quite similar to the tubbies themselves. These figures too are in their own bubbles and each plays an instrument. The Eastern-inspired techno music they play drifts around the viewer and through the three-dimensional technology the creatures, and at times Mori herself, extend off the plane of the screen right before our eyes. This piece represents a shift for Mori that catalog essayist Carol S. Eliel describes:

According to Mori, her earlier work concentrated on social criticism, addressing issues of modern-day Japan. By contrast, *Nirvana* is not about life in urban settings, nor does it address issues of identity directly. Rather, it takes the five elements of nature according to Buddhism—wind, fire, water, earth, and empty space—and creates a futuristic concept of nirvana.¹⁴

This shift is evidenced in other recent works as well, including the piece *Burning Desire* (1996-98) in which Mori appears numerous times as a Boddhisatva, and the work in progress *Kumano* (1997-98). Lisa Corrin, Serpentine gallery curator, focuses her essay on Mori's recent employment of symbols of Buddhist spirituality. She too quotes Haraway in relation to Mori,¹⁵ opening her essay with Haraway's edict that "the

machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment."¹⁶ To understand machines as emanating from ourselves provides yet another formulation of McLuhan's approach to media. Throughout her essay, Corrin attempts, with mixed success, to reconcile Mori's use of spirituality with her use of technology:

Mori uses technology to produce a state in which we leave behind exhausted, primarily Western categories of thinking in order to arrive at enlightened responses to these questions, to reach a quantum nirvana. By working with digital, virtual, and other technologies that intrinsically and dynamically contravene these categories of thinking, Mori's work hums an ambient electronic mantra that induces an unavoidable revelation: "Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert."¹⁷

The closing line of this quotation (and the essay) is another quotation from Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*. However, the idea of leaving behind "Western categories of thinking" for a state of nirvana steeped in a generalized Eastern/Buddhist tradition does not situate itself comfortably within Haraway's ethos which stands against origin myths, continued dualisms and the politics of enlightenment. I am further suspicious of the very homogenizing of Eastern spiritual discourse that Mori utilizes, as Corrin describes:

Mori is a tuning fork for ubiquity. In her spectacular work, all things—Japanese cartoon-derived characters, 1960s revival sci-fi aesthetics, meditating monks—look simultaneously trite and exotic, perhaps more exotic than they have a right to be given their omnipresence. Mori's reinvented, cyber-spirituality in *Nirvana*, *Kumano* and *Dream Temple* becomes re-exoticised by being recast through techno-wizardry.¹⁸

For Corrin, Mori's reliance on Buddhist themes provides for a kind of Zen attitude towards globalization. The interconnectedness of all things is Mori's comment on the possibilities posed by new technologies, both for art production and for life in the twenty-first century. Corrin seems to support the proposition of a new context, one in which "it is impossible to speak about her work without a language that will accommodate science, art, and spirituality."¹⁹Historically, the exoticization and generalization of Eastern culture has borne itself out to be detrimental to a realistic understanding of constructions of difference. A greater comprehension is accomplished through specificity, not through universalization. By Corrin's own account, Mori's use of Buddhist symbolism makes these images trite, exotic and generalized.

On the other hand, the presentation of multifarious landscapes and multivalent selves creates, in the exhibition as a whole, a sense of wonderment, a feeling of being in an amusement park of the artist's technoself. It is on this level that the potential to understand Mori's work as prosthetics and extensions is less obvious and more interesting. The ability to electronically create a landscape is in itself a reformulation of the question "what is natural?," particularly when these landscapes incorporate such paeans to technology as fields of California wind turbines alongside an image of a Biosphere near Tucson. In the 20 x 10 foot photo mural *Entropy of Love* (1996) Mori and her sister hover in a body capsule a few feet above the ground of the Painted Desert. The wind turbines in the background are a familiar sight to anyone who has driven outside of Los Angeles or San Francisco. In *Entropy of Love*, the same question arises as did in *Beginning of the End*. Is the capsule meant to protect its inhabitants from a post-apocalyptic landscape, or is it merely a futuristic means of travel? The titles of both pieces might suggest the former. *Beginning of the End*, set in the cityscape of Tokyo, engages issues of the relation of technology to everyday culture. In the later piece *Entropy of Love*, set in isolation in the desert, the investigation is more internal and introspective. The title of the body of work that contains the later piece is "Esoteric

Cosmos," and indeed it seems that in this period Mori has shifted her work to more ambiguous meanings. The common thread between the early work and this more recent body of work is the repeated figure of Mori herself, either identically or in slightly different costumes or poses.

The depiction, through repetition, of Mori's varied and various avatars plays out an idea that is core to Haraway's argument and explicated further in Stone's book: the desire for a non-unitary self. Western thought, from Descartes onward, is principled on the idea that, as Stone puts it, one self inhabits one body. Indeed the very concept of identity comes from a desire for sameness, to be able in Lacanian terms to delineate the edges of oneself and know that within that boundary wholeness exists. Of course, as Lacan reiterates time and again, such unification, which is really a desire to reconcile the conscious with the unconscious, is impossible.

The question this line of thinking produces, one that naturally emerges from both the now-evident limitations of identity politics as well as possibilities at the dawn of a virtual age, is what would things look like if we could give up the search for a unitary self? Identity politics was a necessary political step in understanding that a single category, for example "woman," could not begin to describe what that identity might mean to all of the individuals who define themselves as such. The next step was to add qualifiers to this name—one might end up with something like Japanese-British-American-fashion model-artist. It soon became clear that no matter how many names one added to the list, it would still never suffice as a description—inevitably there exists another individual who is also a Japanese-British-American-fashion model-artist and yet is different. Stone uses the example of multiple personality disorder to examine the real-life politics of a dispersed self, beginning with an examination of the unquestioned pathologization of such a state. Stone likens multiple personalities to how we exist on the Internet as more than one persona—is any one of these personae more "true" than

another? In fact, Stone brings to bear the entire history of information technologies on a discussion of the relation between body and self:

One way to read the history of technology is as a series of complexifications, knots and loosening of the bonds and tensions between bodies and selves, mediated by technologies of communication, within a force field of power relationships. Over time, as technology has grown increasingly complex, and in particular with the development of information technology (which addresses itself overtly rather than covertly to symbolic exchange), the role of technology in mediating the flow of communication between bodies and selves has become more ubiquitous and more indispensable.²⁰

Throughout Mori's work the repetition of self-portraits, as well as the digital insertion of the avatars and cyborgs, addresses these issues of how technology may be utilized to locate, dislocate and relocate identity.

Many of the reviews of Mori's work compare it to that of Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura.²¹ I find these comparisons reductivist at best, offensive at worst. Must every woman who makes images of herself be likened to Sherman ad infinitum and every self-portrait artist who is Japanese be compared to Morimura? Sherman's influence on the field of postmodern art, in particular photography, is beyond discussion at this point, but using photography for self-portraiture is such an obvious application of the medium that it is distressing to think that she has cornered the market. Sherman uses herself in her images in order to critique representations of women in our culture. Mori does something similar, in that through her work she examines women's roles in society, but Mori's work is less an examination of current representations than it is a presentation of something new. Morimura uses images of himself in order to examine the lack of representations of people of color in the canon of Western art history. Mori's work engages popular culture more so than high culture.

Overall, Mori uses images of herself in order to examine women's roles in relation to emerging technologies, their relation to popular culture and the potential role of Buddhist spirituality within these realms. While these descriptions of Sherman's and Morimura's work are oversimplifications, what sets Mori's work apart from theirs is that it embraces technology, in its production as well as in its content.²² Her work fuses technology with the popular cultural formations that have become its test sites, imaging the virtual environment of her imagination.

The power in the work, as in Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, lies in its assumption of technology as a potential source for pleasure and change. Perhaps the image that most represents this is *Play With Me* (1994). Mori stands at the entrance to a store that seems to be selling video games. There is a Sega arcade game next to her; the image could function as an advertisement for the corporation. Above her head, various products are advertised in Japanese along with two with names in the Roman alphabet, "Playdia" and "Wizap!" Above the arcade game is a poster for a Japanimation film. The only customers depicted are men and in contrast Mori stands, head cocked, her gaze coquettishly directed upward. Her cyan hair issues in two flowing pigtales from the top of her head. Her costume is that of a girl warrior, a techno-Xena with armor consisting of a vinyl skirt and black and aqua elbow-length gloves. But it is the title of the piece that provides the invitation to "come play with me," as a child might solicit interaction, participation in her world of pretend. Of course, the beauty of such a world is that it can wholly reflect the whims and desires of its creator. And yet, the figure seems somewhat passive, waiting for something to happen. When asked in an interview why the women in her images appear happy though they are in submissive roles, Mori replied "The women appear to be happy because they're cyborgs, not real women."²³

If, as Stone states, communications technologies address themselves overtly to symbolic exchange, then Mori's work engages important questions about identity, femininity and fiction at the dawn of the virtual age. Women might be happier as

cyborgs if this proposes an escape from determined positions available to "real women." But what if cyborgs are real women? "I'm interested in the relationship between fantasy and reality, and how they co-exist," states Mori, ". . . it's about fantasy created by technology which is turning into reality."²⁴ To play with Mori is to imagine that the lines between fiction and non-fiction are blurring through the use of technologies. Since the medium is the message, the opening of these borderlands offers enormous potential for, as Haraway has it, "what counts as women's experience."²⁵ Mori's investigation of popular culture, cyber-spirituality and techno-feminism takes initial steps into an area that will surely be at the heart of future dialogue.

RACHEL SCHREIBER is a writer and artist. She teaches photography, video and digital imaging at the Herron School of Art, Indianapolis.

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NOTES

1. Lisa Corrin, Carol S. Eliel, Margery King and Dominic Molon, *Mariko Mori* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art and London: Serpentine Gallery, 1998).
2. Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
3. Ibid., p. 129.
4. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/teletubbies/tubbies.html>
5. Dominic Molon, "Countdown to Ecstasy" in *Mariko Mori*, p. 12.
6. Interestingly, this image is much like the final scene in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), in which Truman realizes his world is fake when he sails a boat to the edge of

the world, only to find that above the horizon is a painted backdrop—his entire world is virtual.

7. Haraway, p. 150.

8. Ibid., p. 151.

9. Ibid., p.180.

10. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Sphere Books Limited, 1964), p. 11.

11. Allucquère Rosanne Stone, "Sex, Death, and Machinery, or How I Fell in Love with My Prosthesis" in *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 3.

12. Ibid., p. 5.

13. McLuhan, p. 19.

14. Carol S. Eliel, in *Mariko Mori*, p. 28.

15. To think of Mori's work in relation to Haraway is, of course, immediately evident, and I can only wonder if the other essayists' avoidance of such a comparison was a purposeful move meant to avoid repetition.

16. Lisa Corrin, in *Mariko Mori*, p. 19.

17. Ibid., p. 24.

18. Ibid., p. 20.

19. Ibid., p. 24.

20. Stone, p. 86.

21. See *The New Yorker* (April 17, 1995); *Art News, Special Issue* (1995); *New Art Examiner* (November 1998) among others.

22. Morimura does use a computer for his manipulations. In his case, the work is certainly in some sense about the ability, through technology, to perform revisionist history. It is the application of the technology to history that is different than Mori's futuristic, forward-looking themes.

23. Interview with Dike Blair, *Purple Prose* (Summer 1995), p. 98.

24. Quoted in "Techno Turns Reality," in *Asahi Evening News* (September 21, 1995).

25. Haraway, p. 129.