

People, Places, Things: Intersubject- and Interobject-ivity in Dorit Cypis's ANGEL OF HISTORIES

by Amelia Jones

PRELUDE: X-RAYED (ALTERED)

Dorit Cypis understands the conjunction between the technologized body of the twenty-first century and the politics of the "gaze" explored at such length in 1980s feminist theory, where the female body in western art and popular culture was described as being disempowered and objectified through the "male gaze" presupposed through the perspectival structures of western representation. In all of her work from the 1980s and 1990s Cypis has deployed various photographic representational technologies such as slide projection, computer-manipulated photography, and video to shatter the grip of this gaze.

In *X-Rayed (Altered)* (1989-92), for example, Cypis explores what Lucinda Furlong has called "the mechanics of slide projection [as]... metaphor for the mental activity of psychological projection, whereby complex feelings of anxiety are externalized as hostility, blame, or guilt." On the most obvious register, Cypis explores the way in which this technological projection intersects with the objectification of women in western art history (the camera eye/"I" being a literalization of the Cartesian "I," the centered and implicitly masculine subject of knowing and seeing). At the same time, as I will suggest here, Cypis examines the relationship of the body (as site of both subject- and object-ivity) to the making of social meaning and thus to history.

Deploying her own body in *X-Rayed (Altered)* afforded Cypis a more direct opportunity to explore the subjectification of the female nude, since the link between her subjectivity as artist and objectivity as image is made direct: in fact, the two are coincident in this case, as with all body art. Thus, adopting a common strategy among early 1970s feminists and body artists, Cypis enacted her own body in and as the work of art to claim active subjectivity for herself as, in her words, "a woman daring to imagine herself" and to explore the complexities of how women articulate themselves and are positioned within culture.

However, by exploring her body for her camera but then projecting it dynamically across an exhibition space in conjunction with several other projections and embedded within a complex series of frames, Cypis gives up her body/self to the painful vicissitudes of interpretive response. The piece consists of three projection sites: the first, the entrance to the installation itself, framed by red velvet drapery in front of a sheer curtain onto which is projected scenes of a girl playing with a doll, a toy theater, and other "feminine" props; the second, a baroque picture frame skewed across the corner of the room, inside of which are projected images of Cypis, nude, exploring her own body; the third, an entire wall of the gallery is covered with projected images -- from Cypis's personal history to goddesses and art historical representations. The images interconnect and overlap in a carefully choreographed sequence, one image dissolving into another.

Cypis thus projects her body (already in representation) across evocative scenes of personal and cultural history which, themselves, can include the interrupting bodies of spectators who cross in front of the projectors. Her body/self is multiply framed as it is presented -- metaphorically embedded in the social and in the complexities of interpersonal exchange. Her body/self is dispersed (both literally and figuratively) across social space and yet also continually reclaimed by her very speaking of it in the installation (we return to Cypis as author who gives the entirety of otherwise disconnected imagery its significance).

In fact, even as she attempted in this piece to claim her body through exploring its fleshy materiality while being photographed, she suffered an intense splitting in viewing the images later. In her words, at first "I felt actively in possession of my own body. This knowledge, however, did not protect me from being overwhelmed by a deep



sense of shame, guilt, and repulsion on my first viewing them." It was not being photographed that made Cypis feel the nakedness of her body (and thus the vulnerability of her self) but the "act of viewing and being viewed in her nakedness."

Ultimately, however, it is the viewing of these ephemeral images of the body, rendered environmentally as slides (the traditional mode of displaying paintings in art history classes), which provokes other viewers to acknowledge their own bodily displacement (their own "nakedness") as well. Further, the transparency and elusiveness of the imagery in the slides -- which render Cypis's body but as permeable and saturated through with the spatial structures and spectatorial bodies which they inhabit and which inhabit them -- is exacerbated by their overlay with each other, with an audio track of eerie music and a woman's and child's voices, and with the architectural components of the environment.

These gaps and convergences are most dramatically evoked in the moment of *X-Rayed (Altered)* in which a huge slide, projected across the corner of the gallery, renders Cypis from the back looking into a small mirror. Visible is the baroque framing device inside of which Cypis's own body provides another frame, her upraised arm surrounding the disorienting image of her eye reflected in the mirror (a third frame). Cypis as viewing subject is dislocated multiply (she has ordered another to photograph her; her eye is seen only in reflection and even so in representation, triply framed by picture frame, arm, and mirror, etc.). As viewers we are drawn into a productive abyss of dis-individuation. It is not the "individual" Cypis who is at stake here but, rather, a dislocated post-Cartesian subjectivity that is framed as feminine.

Cypis's pieces -- which are extended technologically into phenomenological time and space such that she herself becomes her own voyeur and we are drawn into the scene as "pictures" -- enact the fundamental limitations of the body as signifier of the self: of the body as unproblematically representing the self through recognizable signs of fixed identity (female, white, etc.). For example, Cypis's apparent "whiteness" masks a complex cross-continental amalgam of identifications and ethnic identities, which can only begin to be indicated by the hyphenate Israeli-North American. Cypis's body/self enacts what Nicholas Mirzoeff has termed "bodyscape"; he writes, "[i]n representation, the body appears not as itself, but as a sign. It cannot but represent both itself and a range of metaphorical meanings, which the artist cannot fully control, but only seeks to limit by the use of context, framing and style. This complex of signs is what I call the bodyscape."

Cypis's installations also work explicitly against the grain of the long history of imaging of women's bodies as either ideal bodies or as pornographic objects, with representation itself a mode of containing or reducing the threat of this body to the patriarchal economy (which relies on the privileging of only male subjects as able to "transcend" the body, with women insistently "immanent"). Cypis's project works in opposition to this traditional mode or representation (of the female body) as containment, producing a body that is clearly "visibly" different from the expected norms (her body, in its *zaitig* sensuality, does not conform to the Cosmopolitan ideal, and, as noted, it is not easily categorized as "white") and which thus breaks apart the framing apparatuses of western art (the literal frame of the picture, the slide or photograph as reproduction uninterrupted by the spectator's own body). Her project enacts "visibility" but only to expose the failure of the visible to ensure particular values for particular bodily cues.

ANGEL OF HISTORIES: PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS

In a sea of mirrors mounted on goosenecks, craning to accommodate the fleshy expanse of our bodies and faces yet relentlessly fragmenting them into an abyss of parts, we "see" ourselves. But our image snaps into focus only when we advance into this field of reflection; from afar, because they are concave magnifying mirrors, they show only the space around them, flipped upside down. Similarly, a number of large-scale wood panels, their grain marked with undulating waves of sheep's wool, have tiny magnifying mirrors lodged in their surface. As we move to investigate their minuscule, jewel-like shimmering surfaces we find ourselves again refracted, fragmented, distorted. On a bathroom scale we stand, thinking to register our density. As we may or may not realize, however, a small lens embedded in the face of the scale films our bodies from ground up and projects them elsewhere in the gallery -- against a billowing cloth field of representation. The projected body divides from the weighted body, representation from material; and yet each is intimately dependent on the other.

In Angel of Histories, as in Cypis's earlier works such as X-Rayed (Altered), we are made aware of the simultaneous density and ephemerality of our bodies, our flesh. We move through the space of the installation and experience ourselves both as bodies (weighty, space-taking) and as surface or representation (we are reflections, animated versions of social subjects). "People" are negotiated multiply as images, things, and fully cognizant social subjects in Cypis's project.

At the same time, in Cypis's Angel of Histories places become animated and subjectified. The gallery is "peopled" by objects that reciprocate our subjectivity as we engage them: mirrors, scales, video lenses, screen -- all surfaces that suck in and spit out some aspect of our embodiment. Thirteen wine goblets on a table, filled with red wine and their rims coated with sheep fleece, speak to the Catholic ritual of the Holy Sacrament (the baby sheep, or lamb, being a symbol of Christ and the red wine his blood in the Eucharist). They also further embody the viewing subject -- pointing to her or his capacity to ingest or take fluid or food into the body to nurture its material form -- and embody the gallery space as a site of a kind of social ingestion where ideas are "made flesh."

still from "X-Rayed (altered)" 1989

With the body spatialized and the gallery (the "place") turned into a socialized "body," what role do objects play?

Goblets, mirrors, a scale, sheep's wool, wood, screen: like spaces, things, in Cypis's project, become animated. Things are presented as always already intimately interdependent on the people and spaces that enliven them. The mirror is meaningless without the bodies/spaces that it projects; the scale pointless without the bodies to weigh it down; the video lens empty but for those people and spaces that cross its purview; the screen activated only with the representational splash of animation directed onto it via video. These are not mute things that seem to rest within themselves, holding their significance immanently within their forms. They are things that are open to the world, taking their meaning from its (and our) mutating presence. Among them, we become things. Among them, we are spatialized, made part of a world of objects.

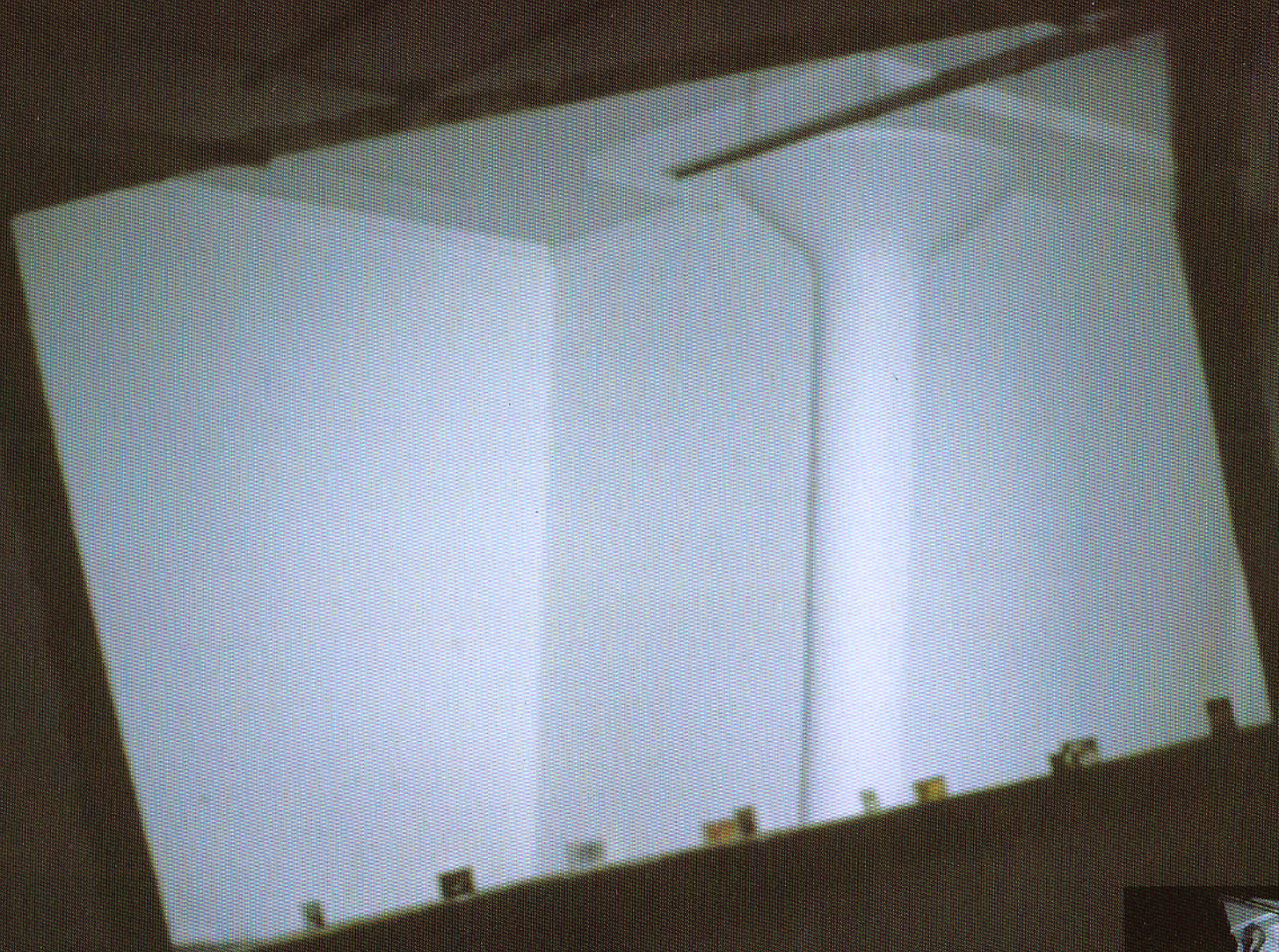
If language and thought (as well as art making and viewing) project us outward into intersubjective relations with other people in the social field, these arrays of objects engage us in an interobjective relationship with the world. As film theorist Vivian Sobchack has articulated this phenomenological conception, interobjectivity has an ethical component. We experience ourselves as viewing subjects (the privileged position allotted by the conventional art/viewer relation) but also as objects of embodied situations. As I engage with it here, Cypis's Angel of Histories parallels what Sobchack identifies as "the dual structure of passion and the subjectively-grounded reversibility of body and world" that necessarily entails politicized subjects -- subjects who acknowledge their own immanence, their own capacity for being objectified in relation to the world.

Cypis's installation thus provides the possibility of activating us as social subjects/objects in the world, making us aware of our role in determining meaning and thus in determining how we view ourselves and others within the complex fabric of what we might call history. As visiting body, I become the "angel of history" both produced and solicited by Cypis's project: the subject who completes its dance, filling in the blanks (the mirrored surfaces) to make its meaning and to mark its social significance. History, as Cypis has recently noted, exists only in and through the human body, only "as it reverberates inside us." The body -- because of the spaces and things it solicits and engenders -- is the site of all social meaning. Our pasts live in the present through our embodied relationship to the world and it is through recognizing this power that we have to "make" history that we can take responsibility to do so in the most productive possible manner: as "angels" of history.

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Notes:

1. Cited by Cypis in Dorit Cypis: X-Rayed, Altered, exhibition pamphlet (Minneapolis: Intermedia Arts Minnesota, Intermedia Arts Gallery, 1989), n.p.
2. The X-Rayed (Altered) piece is the second version of a project originally including images of another nude woman taken by Cypis: upon the display of the piece at the Whitney Museum in the late 1980s, the woman protested in spite of having agreed to the original project. Cypis then refigured the piece using her own body, which she had photographed by Lyn Hambrick. On the conflation of object and subject in body art see my extended arguments in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
3. Cypis in Dorit Cypis: X-Rayed, Altered, n.p. In this regard Cypis's work bears close parallel with that of 1970s feminist body artists such as Carolee Schneemann.
4. This description is taken almost directly from David Joselit's excellent review essay "Projected Identities," *Art in America* (November 1991), 121-22. I have not actually experienced the installation itself and so am indebted to Cypis for loaning me a videotape of it as well as giving me reviews and catalogue descriptions.
5. Cypis in Dorit Cypis: X-Rayed, Altered, n.p.
6. These are the words of Willis Hartshorn in *The Naked Nude: Dorit Cypis* (New York: International Center for Photography, 1989), n.p.
7. The audio track is described in this way by Alison Ferris, "Dorit Cypis at Intermedia Arts," *Art Paper* 8, n. 10 (May 1989), 18.
8. All of Cypis's works play bodily images across one another, projecting or displaying images in architectural spaces to interrogate the multiplicitous and multi-directional relationships among bodies/selves/others and the circuits of desire that inform them. In pieces such as *The Body in the Picture* (1991-95) and *Hungry Ghost* and the *7 Muses* (1995) Cypis expands the photographic to cross over organic bodies and bodies-in-representation. This is particularly clear in the portion of *Hungry Ghost* where Cypis uses the strategy of mirrors with photographs (here, Gary Winogrand's 1975 "Women are Beautiful" series) to play the image of the viewer across the scene of representation.
9. Nikolas Mirzoeff, *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity, and the Modern Figure* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 3.
10. Mirzoeff usefully sees the tradition of bodily representation as a project oriented towards reducing the inevitable leakage in this system through the production of ideal bodies. On the project of representing the female body as one motivated by the anxious attempt at containing its dangerous threat to masculinity see also Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).
11. Vivian Sobchack, "The Passion of the Material: Prolegomena to a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity," forthcoming in her *Carnal Thoughts: Bodies, Texts, Scenes, and Screens* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), manuscript pages 12-13; I thank Sobchack for sharing this manuscript with me. See my use of this notion in "The 1970s 'Situation' and Recent Installation: Joseph Santarromana's Intersubjective Engagements," *Space, Site, and Intervention: Issues in Installation and Site-Specific Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming [2000]).
12. Cypis in discussion with the author, December 28, 1999.



X-Rayed (altered) 1988/89

Installation view and stills

Multi image projection dissolve program, 30 minutes repeat, 10 slide projectors with towers, wardrobe mirrors, plaster wall frame, dresses, scrim and curtains, snapshot photos, 300 35mm slides, 4 AVL Dove X relay, Tascam 133 cassette deck, audio tape and speakers. Soundtrack by James Harry

