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Surveyor: The Role of the Mirror in the Work of Dominique Rey

by Steven Matijcio

...how nice it would be if we could only get through into Looking-glass House! I'm sure it's got, oh! Such beautiful things in it! Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into it, somehow...

-Alice, in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871)

From their representation in early reliefs of Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, to their optical dynamics in the jewel-like paintings of the Northern Renaissance, to their actual physical application in the work of contemporary artists Michelangelo Pistoletto and Robert Morris, mirrors have been a consistent presence through much of Western art. Along the way, the pairing of the mirror's reflective surface with the female physiognomy has become similarly conventionalized – moving from popular motif to loaded political metaphor. In this discourse, encompassing everything from narcissistic vices to the virtues of self-knowledge, the image of a female looking into a mirror has come to signify both the representation of women as visual objects, as well as societal projections regarding the female character. At the turn of the 17th century, both these readings were equally present in a collection of similarly composed paintings depicting the Roman goddess Venus peering coquettishly into

a mirror as putti and attendants stroked her hair and admired her epic beauty. In all these images – portrayed respectively by Titian, Caracci, Veronese, Rubens and Velazquez between the years 1555 and 1648 – Venus came to rekindle the genre of *Vanitas* painting: embodying the sin of vanity arbitrarily projected upon her by male artists and a predominantly male audience. At the same time, Venus was implicated in the more tacit process of transforming women into a visual commodity: looking into the mirror, and out to the audience in a redirected gaze reflecting the dichotomous motivations splitting her compromised subjectivity.

Commenting upon this shift in self-definition and its connection to broader questions regarding female representation and identity, cultural theorist John Berger argues: "A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually



Dominique Rey, *Jennifer, Parlee Beach, Shediac*, September 2001



Dominique Rey, *Joanne, Winnipeg*, July 2001

accompanied by her own image of herself.” Yet while Berger’s disapproval of this subjection is shared by writer Carol Armstrong – who suggests the mirrored female reflection perpetuates visual acts of objectification and possession – Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1949 that *because* a woman undergoes this fractious process, she can better see herself in the silvered glass. In her words, “all her life woman is to find the magic of her mirror a tremendous help in her effort to project herself and then attain self-identification.” Between these poles – where the mirror is less the subject than the vehicle for subjective explorations of femininity – Dominique Rey traverses historical discourses and political debates to probe the contemporary relationship between image and identity. In photographic series extending from *The Bathers* (2000-2003) to *Selling Venus* (2000-2005) she incorporates a broad range of philosophical, political, and art historical references to mine the many pressures that populate a woman’s conception/construction of *self*. This essay will trace this investigation over Rey’s interconnected body of work, surveying how she creates new space for Venus to see herself by focusing upon her neo-feminist use, depiction, and interrogation of the mirror as a sight/site of ambivalent self-identification.

To challenge the inferior subject position of women that Berger and Armstrong identify, feminist theory has long sought less determinist models of subjectivity that could produce alternative representations from which new social relations can emerge. Yet as contemporary feminist theorist Kirsten Campbell suggests, the politics of feminist knowledge (which she dubs “feminist epistemology”) have become circular (and potentially stagnant) as they fix and idealize concepts of identity that recall the ineffective biological determinism of earlier models. As an alternative to this tautology Campbell proposes a return to the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, whose socio-sexual strategies of deconstruction were a formative influence to female artists working in the Surrealist movement, as well as the later feminist writings of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray. Among this group of artists and theorists, the mirror’s reflection and related concepts of displacement, doubling, fragmentation, and fetishization were employed in various ways to challenge the fixity of existing social formations with recoded symbols. However,

Campbell is careful to emphasize that while psychoanalytic theory can be a potent political instrument, “Lacanian theory is not feminist theory,” and Lacan’s perceived “phallogentrism” has, and continues to generate numerous difficulties for feminist thought. As evidence of this ambivalence, 2nd wave feminists of the 1970s (such as Kate Millett and Germaine Greer) diverged from Kristeva and Irigaray in their identification of psychoanalysis as a patriarchal institution prescribing normative femininity. In the decades to follow, Nancy Fraser argued the use of Lacanian thought compromises feminist politics and naturalizes oppression, and in 1990 Elizabeth Grosz respectfully lamented, “While providing arguably the most sophisticated and convincing account of subjectivity, psychoanalysis is itself phallogentric in its perspectives, methods, and assumptions.”

Yet where some strands of Lacanian orthodoxy admittedly reject feminist politics as a threat to their beliefs, neither psychoanalysis nor feminism are homogenous, or even unanimous theoretical bodies. As such, when dogma has been put aside and existing commonalities employed to create dialogue, there have been many productive exchanges between these parallel paradigms, as well as postcolonial and queer theory. For her part, Campbell utilizes what she calls a “productive appropriation” of Lacanian theory to enrich her politically-minded feminist epistemology – negotiating obstacles and challenging methodologies to bolster a socially dynamic approach. In a related manner, Rey conducts a selective appropriation of *both* feminist and Lacanian concepts – referencing and rearranging their tenets to better examine the formation of subjectivity within the female experience. And while Rey therefore eschews an explicitly feminist



Dominique Rey, *The Bathers*, 2002

reading of her work – finding the term too limiting in the preconceptions and stereotypes it engenders – her use of feminist politics to challenge the theories of Lacan generates a provocative debate at home in the hybrid formations of 3rd wave feminism. She takes neither theory at their word, instead initiating a crossover that replaces biological determinism (on both sides) with an evolving aesthetic dialect that confronts the dialectic at the core of Lacanian thought.

By shifting the psychoanalytic concept of subjectivity into a decidedly socio-political context, Rey aims to reconcile existing theory with the experience of all those that appear before her camera – including friends, family, and herself. More specifically, her overarching interest in subject/object dichotomies enacted in/through rituals of female beautification connect with Lacan's interest in uncovering the discursive structures that shape the self. Their parallel goals of enhanced self-understanding ultimately intersect on the slippery, nebulous surface of the mirror – crossing and diverging like sinuous sound waves as Rey's self-proclaimed "emphasis on delving into the passage from narcissism, through self-definition, to selfhood" skews the structure of Lacan's mirror stage. First presented in 1936, Lacan's influential paper *The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience* drew upon Freudian concepts of narcissism and the specular ego to position the origins of human self-consciousness on the surface of the mirror. On this surface, he believed the previously unknowing child (somewhere between the ages of 6-18 months) first encounters his/her reflection and assumes the image in what Lacan calls a transformative "identification...in which the I is precipitated in primordial form." Yet while he characterizes this initial experience as a "jubilant assumption" on the part of the subject, this mirage of physical sovereignty subsequently launches its beholder into a life of unfulfilled desire and alienation he titled "the cipher of mortal destiny." For as the "Ideal I" moves into the world, it is objectified in a dialectic of identification with "the other" and socialized in a network of interaction (namely language) that conflicts with the illusory gestalt observed in the mirror. As such, what was at first jubilant becomes an "assumption of the armor of an alienating identity" as the inevitable deflection of the *specular I* into the *social I* produces lifelong feelings of paranoia and turbulence – marking the

subject's entire mental development with a schism between imaginary (anticipated) wholeness and environmental interchange.

To remedy this discord and combat the "mental permanence of the I," Lacan sought to *undo* the effects of the mirror stage through psychoanalytic treatment that hinged upon social exchange and symbolic reduction. Rey, on the other hand, seeks to move towards a similar dialectical synthesis through the mirror – translating the singularity of Lacan's mirror stage into a kaleidoscopic survey of contemporary femininity. She retains Lacan's emphasis on the social, but reverses the flow of his mirror stage by breaking down monadic reflections with portraits that are fragmentary and indeterminate. In so doing, she transforms this fatalistic site of self-absorption into a network of negotiations that incorporate (and analyze) the multiple social determinants of the self. Yet far from prescribing solutions, this is – like psychoanalysis itself – an ongoing project that takes on increasing elaboration with each new series, and each new subject. From *The Bathers* to *Selling Venus*, considerable inroads have been made through a variety of representational studies that overlap private moments with public considerations. Within this growing body of work, Rey made a significant move in the *Mirror Series* (2001-2003) when she broke the frames of both self and site, positioning fracture on the way to (re)formation.

To overcome the disjunction between mankind's (perceived) autonomy and his actual social reciprocity, Lacan sought to reach a state of environmental awareness/integration he cryptically captioned "Thou art that." Borrowed from the sacred Hindu Upanishads – a series of teaching stories between seekers and sages that collectively



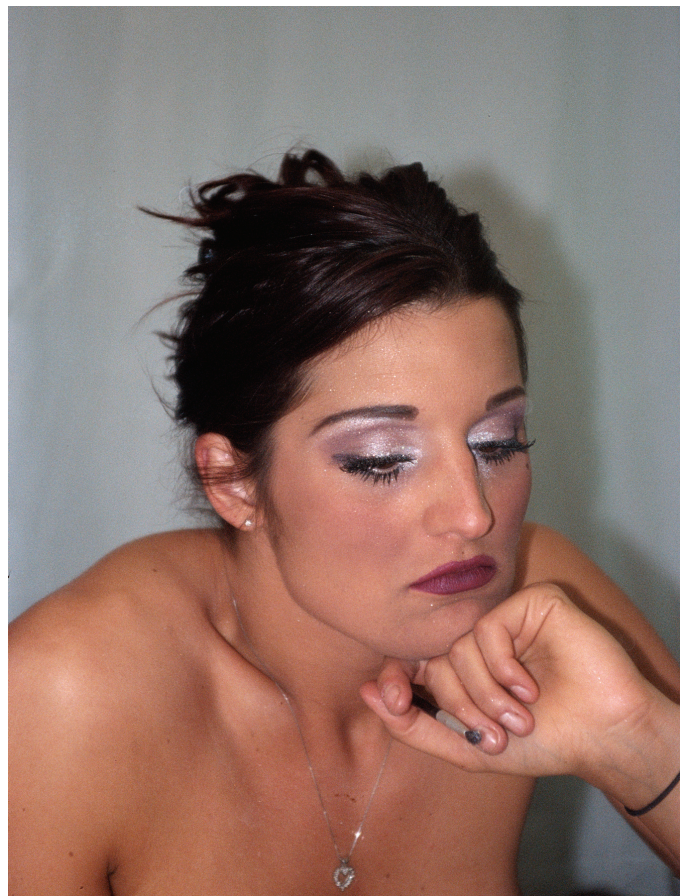
Dominique Rey, *Ginette, Seine River*, March 2002

posit salvation in the Self (atman) – the notion of *Thou art that* espouses a diffuse form of subjectivity in all things: unseen, but omnipresent. However, while providing a poetic model for both the delivery and aims of his psychoanalytic practice, Lacan struggled to visualize this state relative to the visual immediacy of the mirror image – noting that the fragmented body appeared sporadically to his patients in hazy, amorphous dreams. Striving to capture this fractured state in a more material manner, Rey employed mirrors in a suite of works that – contrary to Lacan’s 1:1 ratio of reflection-to-mirror – evoke the multi-faceted mirror displacements of artist Robert Smithson. In his diverse body of work, extending from his sculptural *Mirror Wedge*, Montclair, New Jersey (1960) to the multimedia *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* (1969), Smithson short-circuited the logic of reflection-as-affirmation as he courted the irrational. More precisely, Smithson mobilized a fleet of mirrors within the natural environment to simultaneously reflect and displace the physical world, creating an elusive series of “non-sites” that shifted the emphasis from external, to *internal* reflection. Perhaps the most poignant example of this transfer occurs in *Incidents*, where Smithson cantilevered twelve square mirrors into deposits of soil, clay, crushed limestone, tree roots, sandbanks, tangled grass, and other organic elements as he traversed the Yucatan. The mirrors were removed immediately after each scene was photographed, but in these fleeting acts the artist captured flashes of collapse – or “arrested breakdown” in his words – where “dirt hung in the sultry sky,” geography blurred, and vistas merged on magical mirror planes.

In her *Mirror Series*, Rey performs similar actions for expanded effect: entwining geographical “site” (Smithson) with woman as “sight” (Berger) to incorporate the question of female subjectivity into a mosaic of environmental reorganization. Taken during urban and country “expeditions,” works such as *Sarah #2* and *Ginette #2* provocatively locate moments of introspection in open fields: evacuating the autonomous gaze/guise in the interaction between subject, setting, and reflective surface/s. In the former, swamp and sky collide around Sarah as the square mirror bearing her profile sinks into a mound of wet, black soil; in the latter, Ginette’s hooded countenance slides to the bottom of overlapping mirrors stuck in the snow – dually

multiplied, but obscured by spatters of snow and stark light. In related works such as *Joanne #2* and *Sarah #1*, conventional definitions of background/foreground, focal distance, and subject position break down as mirrors conspire with Rey’s camera lens to flatten and amalgamate a multitude of perspectives. In the process, as fragments of both subject and setting speed forward and backward in Rey’s centripetal frame – traveling via the vehicle of mirror displacement – she moves from formal sleight-of-hand to deeper political issues regarding the *psychological* location of her subjects. In the ensuing patchwork, Rey combines the strategies of Smithson and surrealism in photos that subdivide the “Ideal I” of Lacan’s mirror stage into mosaics evoking the holistic fusion of *Thou art that*. Yet to transfer this nascent notion into tangible socio-political capital, Rey looked beyond symbolization to confront these multiple, intersecting planes as they circulate inside the socially-motivated gaze/guise of the female.

Building upon the findings of the *Mirror Series* to peer deeper into the complexities of female representation, *Selling Venus* (2000-2005) internalizes the split female psyche in photographic images that belie reflected wholeness with



Dominique Rey, *Mache*, 3 to 4 years, 2003

fractured thoughts. Thus, while the subjects – strippers working at the Crazy Horse Bar in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina – ostensibly occupy two readings of Lacan’s mirror “stage” (psychological and performative), their actions unsettle the autonomy he hypothesized with subdivided gazes conscious of the many constituents they serve. Rey chose these women as epitomic examples of visual objectification, enacting the rituals of beautification that *all* women undertake (in degrees) as their perspectives are simultaneously self-directed and socially projected. As such, the women of *Selling Venus* intricately survey their sexuality in brightly-lit backstage mirrors – displacing the solipsistic narcissism of both the mirror stage and *Vanitas* genre with the multidirectional performance of gender. They are equally and simultaneously *surveyor* and *surveyed*, inhabiting multiple roles as they forecast the individual desires and expectations of diverse onlookers. In photos portraying *Mache*, *Leia*, and *Mahogany* in this process – applying make-up, fixing their hair, and appraising their appearance – Rey poignantly visualizes the observations of Berger as he said of womankind: “She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life.” And while men arguably perform parallel rituals of “masculinity” in contemporary society, Berger qualifies that the male identity flows primarily from an outward projection of power, whereas a woman defines what can/cannot be done *to* her by the image she publicly presents.

To assert some degree of ownership over this divided state of being, collecting the constituent pieces like she merged the multiple planes in the *Mirror Series*, Rey suggests a controversial form of coalescence in *Selling Venus*. By freezing these portraits in a perpetual stage of preparation – somewhere between raw material and finished product – Rey captures both surveyor and surveyed in images evocative of Freudian doubling. In so doing, visualizing the internal “other” that looks upon herself through a shared set of eyes, Rey creates a dialogue *within* the fragmentary self that theorist Rosalind Krauss likens to a surreal signifying of the real and unreal at once. The presence of Rey’s journal reinforces this reading as it records the stage name and actual name of

each subject, illustrating the internal conversation of women that converge multiple selves on the mirrored stage. Yet for all the empowerment this awareness suggests, the proposed reclamation of “the other” in *Selling Venus* also raises the spectre of ideological submission – implicating modern women (like Venus in the hands of Titian, et al) in their own objectification. Indeed, one must ask if synthesis can occur when the female is no longer able to distinguish between subjectivity and the condition of being seen? In this fraught cultural context, piercing ideals of *Thou art that* with a multitude of potential political downsides, Rey attempts to find tentative equilibrium in representational ambivalence.

Reflecting on the many questions raised within the shifting implications of his mirror displacements, Smithson mused, “Art brings sight to a halt, but that halt has a way of unravelling itself.” The women that flicker before the dually framed mirror/camera lens of Dominique Rey – neither fully present in their representations, nor completely free of them – reside in a similar space of unresolved intensity. For her work (like that of Smithson) artfully circulates within a tapestry of “unresolved dialectics,” probing the uncertain territory between discursive structures



Dominique Rey, *Mahogany*, 4 years, 2003

and components of the self. Yet where Smithson was content to remain in the irresolution of the enigma, Rey pursues a way out – envisioning a fragile, but fluid state of self-awareness she tentatively titles “spirit.” Her compass in the search for this spirit has been the mirror, tapping its iconographic history and contemporary theorization to produce a richly-layered aesthetic that reflects upon the complex relationship between image and identity. Synthesis between the two is nearly as distant as it was during Lacan’s first mention of *The Mirror Stage*, but by grafting feminist-minded politics onto this mirror and skewing its reflective singularity, Rey moves from the mirage of oneness to a mosaic of the many.

Bridging what Lacan and Berger made separate, she locates the desire for subjective wholeness and its opposing environmental forces in, and across a multitude of mirrors – picturing a fragmented, yet *fuller* femininity aware of its multiple components. The continuing dangers of capitulation behind a

façade of empowerment temper this state with feminist fears of patriarchal collusion, but Rey refuses to deny any aspect circulating within the nebulous space of selfhood. Surveyor, surveyed, and a vast array of accompanying social influences occupy this realm at once, intersecting and overlapping in the synchronic frame of Rey’s insightful photographic work. At its source is a mirror that reflects confusion in communion, evoking a “a feminine unconscious space” that artist, psychoanalyst and feminist theorist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger sees as a place of “simultaneous co-emergence and co-fading of the I, and the stranger that is neither fused nor rejected.” Rey persistently peers into the looking glass, but never pretends to penetrate its surface and/or find the magical delights that Alice envisioned lurking behind its exterior. Instead, she continues the process of collecting and analyzing the multiple reflections that cryptically dance across the glass – chasing not that which lies behind the mirror, but that which hides behind the eyes.

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About the Artist

Dominique Rey has an MFA in photography from the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College. Her exhibition *Selling Venus/Vénus au miroir* was shown at Plug In ICA (Winnipeg) in 2005 and through 2007 will have traveled to Clark Gallery (Montreal), Michael Gibson Gallery (London), and Alternator Gallery (Kelowna).

About the Writer

Steven Matijcio is the curator of Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He is a graduate of the Center for Curatorial Studies and has held positions at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, and the National Gallery of Canada.

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