

Construction of Critique

In this essay I want to explore the subversive potential of the work by contemporary artist Yasumasa Morimura (1951¹-). In the artwork *Elizabeth Taylor I (Cleopatra)* (1995, fig. 1,) Morimura stages himself as Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra* (dir. Mankiewicz, 1963, fig. 2). By positioning himself within the framework of already established gender roles, Morimura uses and manipulates the exact stereotypes that he criticizes. Consequently, his art becomes a standpoint of critique.

In her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitutions: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” American gender theorist Judith Butler (1956²-) explains how “gender is in no way a stable identity.”³ Instead gender is a construct, “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.”⁴ A continuous enactment of socially established gender roles creates an illusion of a pre-given entity mediated by the biological sex. Hence a veil of “naturalness” conceals the construct of gender roles. To be a woman is to conform to and reproduce corporeal acts in obedience to seemingly objective, but in reality historical and ideological, ideas about what makes a woman. Gender is thus a performative act. Those who fail to cultivate their bodies into “discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual dispositions”⁵ are punished and marginalized in both obvious and indirect ways.

This social system is founded on an interpretation of sexual difference. Within this system, women are subjugated to men. Male primacy is justified by the idea of the male sex as being superior to its female counterpart. Hence the oppression of women originates in and is legitimized

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yasumasa_Morimura

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Butler

³ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” p. 519

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ p. 525

by an idea of her sexual inferiority. In this patriarchal hegemony women can only articulate themselves in accordance with their inferior social position defined by men. As a consequent of this subjugation, women become the secondary sex defined by difference. Women thus signify Otherness. Whereas men are the creators of culture, women remain an artifact within culture fixed in a secondary position meant to secure the superior status of men.

The film *Cleopatra* (dir. Mankiewicz, 1963) is an example of a cultural production in which the female character, Cleopatra acts in conformity with her gender's dispositions. Though I believe this film offers a portrayal of an empowered Cleopatra⁶, her character is still created in accordance with a way of being, attributed to the female gender. Defined by her gendered "Otherness," she is a product of a male fantasy. Throughout the film she is glamorous, sexualized and her body is always on display, thus functioning as an erotic object for the male gaze. Cleopatra's character is constructed to express itself within the frames of a pre-defined gendered model, which makes manifest the sexual imbalance within society. Cleopatra is thus performing a gendered body within the culturally established hierarchical arena of possession and control. She conforms to already existing directives, consequently reifying the power of the patriarchy.

"Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed."⁷ What gives significance to terms as "femininity" and "masculinity" is a sustained social construct, a postulate that deludes and gives meaning to a substantial core in correlation with a biological sex. In reality "genders can be neither true nor false."⁸ Performing one's gender in accordance with a fictional and stereotypical gender identity thus amounts to concealing and contradicting the true performative fluidity of gender.

⁶ I have (partly) argued for this statement in a previous essay and since it is not my primary focus here I will not explain this further.

⁷ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" p. 527

⁸ Ibid. 528

Through the use of self-portraiture, Yasumasa Morimura stages himself as Cleopatra, consequently exposing the construction of gender-identities. As an Asian man, Morimura is representative of a group of people who is segregated within the context of Western art history. By performing and embodying a specific set of visual codes applicable to women within the context of classic mainstream Hollywood film, he makes himself visible in a society where he is normally marginalized or at best misrepresented. Morimura doesn't appropriate his body to the extent of seamless likeness to the actress Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra* (1963). Instead he uses hyperbolic exaggeration as a weapon to attack this stereotypical portrayal of women. Looking at *Elizabeth Taylor I (Cleopatra)*, one is never in doubt that this is a photograph of an Asian man. This effect is a way of making the viewer question art production as a field dominated by white Western males taking white woman as objects of their art. Why does the portrayal of a sexualized Japanese man seem wrong in the context of art? Why is the variety of human beings not represented in terms of race, sexual orientation and cultural affiliations? These are the questions that Morimura's photography generates.

Whereas Cleopatra, in Mankiewicz's film, represents a character that lends her body to the patriarchal gaze through a reproduction of socially established normativity, Morimura subverts and transforms this idea of normativity, thus confronting the viewer's expectations to such a representation. Throughout his larger body of work, Morimura stages himself as the character of multiple well-known artworks, but always in a way that creates a feeling of alienation. He is therefore the producer of identity, but an identity that doesn't comply with socio-cultural standards of normalcy, since it is an identity that is always different, always multiple, always fragmented. By exposing the one-sidedness of visual representation, he unveils the extreme oppression inherent in a society that prevents individuals from exploring their potentials and inclinations free of the pressure to conform to stereotypical norms. Staging himself as an object of art, becomes a means through

which he can expose his subjective reality as being one of oppression. He ultimately makes manifest the manipulative nature of the artistic medium, thus exposing the constructedness of values and identities that our social and cultural institutions educate us to perceive as “normal” and “natural.” Positioning himself outside of the norm of the social established idea of the male gender, he uses his body as a medium for self-expression. By dressing in clothes “appropriate” to the opposite sex he challenges the culturally constructed seamless congruence between appearance and sex: “The transvestite, however, can do more than simply express the distinction between sex and gender, but challenges, at least implicitly, the distinction between appearance and reality that structures a good deal of popular thinking about gender identity.”⁹ His identification with Cleopatra is thus ironical. Morimura makes art a means to objectify himself, and by refusing to relegate into one specific role, “he is false to himself – and showing how ungraspable and changeable the self is.”¹⁰

Morimura hasn’t altered his appearance to the degree that he looks like the historical actress, but we recognize the visual rhetoric that he borrows from the theatricality of her character – the blue eye shadow, the golden dress and the strong and insistent facial expression. One is never in doubt that he borrows the visual legacy of this exact version of Cleopatra. Therefore the photograph gives rise to an experience of familiar gendered codes, but in a way that alienate the viewer. Cleopatra only wears that exact dress at two specific instances in the film: during her procession into Rome and at her deathbed in her tomb (at the time Cleopatra commits suicide she wears another dress and so the golden dress must be applied by her handmaidens after her death). The moment of time that Morimura’s photograph makes manifest is therefore not one that is represented in Mankiewicz’s film. Hence his photograph is an addition to the legend of Cleopatra. By making yet another

⁹ Ibid. 527

¹⁰ Kuspit, Donald, “Art’s Identity Crisis: Yasumasa Morimura’s Photographs,” in Yasumasa Morimura: Daughter of Art History (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2003) p. 10

artwork in the name of Cleopatra, he shows how her legend is a construct, but also an ongoing process.

By refusing to perform his identity in conformity with stereotypical ideas about what it means to be a man, Morimura transforms the way in which we experience gender-identities. He constructs a platform from which he can criticize, transform and even subvert the hegemonic social conditions that our society is build on. This is made possible by the creation of an identity detached from gender. Consequently he contributes to an expansion of the cultural field through a bodily subversive performance¹¹. As a comment on Elizabeth Taylor's version of Cleopatra, he demonstrates how "every masterpiece is a rhetorical performance."¹² His work is a testimony to the constructiveness of her legend, but I also believe that the visual rhetoric of the Egyptian queen is especially useful to Morimura, as in most textual and visual retellings of her story, she is subjugated as both a woman and an Oriental. When Morimura, who in "Western" eyes is an "Oriental" himself, is staged as Cleopatra, he contributes, not only to the deconstruction of the presupposition of gender-categories, but also the category of race.

¹¹ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" p. 531

¹² Ibid. 8

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VISUAL MATERIAL



Fig. 1 Yasumasa Morimura, *Elizabeth Taylor 1 (Cleopatra)*, 1995, from the series: On Self-Portrait - Through the Looking-Glass, Instant color film / Polaroid, 13 x 10 cm, <http://reflexamsterdam.com/artists/yasumasa-morimura/attachment/032/>