

*You can make up your own life with scissors, others, and the bruised fragility of space, the busted parody of the one thing at a time unstoppered sensorium spread to the four corners of the most real body you've ever seen a picture of.*

Bob Perelman, "Lines"

There is a tendency to equate all sexual representation with fetishization, even in those rare instances of self-representation and representation of consensual pleasure. However this equation has led to two forms of censorship: the legislated prohibition of images that exceed "community standards" and a reactionary iconoclasm from certain segments of the art community. Both these positions unconsciously replicate the authoritarian, patriarchal structuring of unexamined representation – they presume to know what is dangerous for us. It is precisely the examination of the erotic properties of advertising and pornographic imagery that rankles the spectator of both Mark Lewis's *Burning* and Terry Ewasiuk's "Whose Eros?". But these are important attempts to disrupt the ceaseless repetition of the image-glut, the pornography of expectation that insidiously perpetrates and perpetuates dominant ideology.

In *Burning*, materials taken from high-gloss consumer and soft-core pornographic magazines have been placed in the context of art institutional discourse. Doing so, Lewis critically addresses – directly, functionally, and polemically – the contradictions and problematics of phallic economy. Pages of print media imagery have been telescoped into tubes, vertically positioned, rephotographed, and, after considerable enlargement, articulated in an horizontal sequence. They are then situated beside a vertically descending column of dizzy verbal smut, colour-coded in some formal relation to its inseparable image-sentence. Already slick surfaces are then lacquered even more heavily – the saturated colours of the pictures and dripping verbal text quite literally highlighted and heightened.

The erotic positioning and re-positioning of the figures arouses an uneasy sense of complicity in the viewer. The pre-ordained 'male' position is turned and scoped in on itself; the 'male' figures

as well as the 'female', subject to a phallic gaze, become objects in/of 'drag'. We all recognize the images and the context from which they are taken. The rhetorical devices are remembered from the transcendental gestures of the baroque, the conventions of excess. This overload lends itself to a peculiar movement of cancellation and reinvestment. The objects of opulence intensely visible yet somehow insubstantial.

In "He Fucked The Earth Until Their Anxious Glands Became Invisible" the postures of the figures move rhythmically across the columns, rising and descending. The leftmost figure is facing away from the camera/viewer, head down with only the lower section of the body draped in a lush red cloth, thereby revealing the naked, muscled back. The arms hold aloft a gigantic Chanel logo like Atlas supporting the earth. Moving to the right, we find an ersatz pugilist or soccer player, white 'male', right profile, chin jutting forward and clad in rather anachronistic looking long shorts, socks, and lace-up boots. This anachronistic property is underlined by the fakey looking sepia tone print. Moving right along, a full colour white 'female' – knees up, wearing black lace-up boots, lacy socks, a black broad-brimmed hat and nothing else that we can see within the confines of the picture space – her right side being cropped while her left side, which is presented to us, moves to the right as her leg blocks the middle

of her body and stands in as a phallus for the figure to the right. Only her naked breast, lolling head with eyes closed, lips thrust forward, and goose-pimpled shoulder are visible or available to us. So far, the movement of the figures themselves have been up the tube and listing to the right. But how *here* we have a 'male' figure in lolling *deshabillé* veering to the left from his lower section of the pole, his blond head and bare nipple gazing off to our upper and lower left, respectively. Next we come across another black-and-white, white 'male' figure, placed even lower than his syntagmatic predecessor, his handless arms elbowing a yin-yang around his naked chest and gawking back at us while some inexplicable black object from the groin zone to the left mimics the angle of a happy penis.

A right-to-left reading of the images (or any way at all) is certainly permissible but in *this* way, one arrives syntactically at the text.

The pictorial procedure in Ewasiuk's "Whose Eros?" was to submit to digitization a set of anonymously produced pictures (taken from a recent book of reproductions) of turn-of-the-century pornographic postcards and images from a pornographic magazine of the early 60's and a photograph she took of a weird little doll. These computerized images have then been enlarged and mounted on matteboard, framed in thick black wood, and even given the artist's signature beside a vertical column of text. Each piece, as with *Burning*, consists of an image and a text framed in

singular relation, although the textual component of Ewasiuk's work does not bear the lascivious quality of Lewis's nor the same relation to the other elements of the work. Recalling something along the lines of Jenny Holzer's early statements or assertions (the *Truisms*), these 'texts' allow one a position to elect to agree – or not – in an interrogatory encounter with linguistically and politically more accessible material, i.e. *Clothing Pushes Guilty Flesh, Perfect Phallus For Perverse Desire or Who's Whipping Who?*

Ewasiuk's texts are set up as a commentary on the image that at first mask their confrontation impulse, whereas, after the initial reaction, (revulsion, perhaps?), to the hilariously prurient anxiety of Lewis's text, their tendentious aspects become more apparent, if still uncomfortable. And the synecdoche pokey of the (often *previously* partialized) images won't help alleviate the tension on a little bit. Although it may seem obvious that the reader/viewer/subject is a 'male' position, it is not a 'universal male' as it seems impossible for an entry into the deliriously smarmy opacity of the (heated to a near trans-rational boil) text.

Each of these artists use text confrontationally and not as a mere facile commentary or adjunct to the pictures. A certain perseverance is necessary both on the part of the viewer and the artist in taking on Ewasiuk's and Lewis's work as these are



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## SMART SMUT



(above) Terry Ewasiuk, *Who's Whipping Who?* (1987), digital photography, 36 x 51 cm; (right) Mark Lewis, *Burning* (1987), one of eight colour diptychs, 128.5 x 177 cm

not good-natured, ah shucks demonstrations of all-sorts-of-neat-stuff everybody's been reading or thinking lately. Ubiquitous and familiar, the images have become invisible through over-saturation and satiation. By recontextualization, they are forced to re-appear and throw-up for examination the contents with which they are invested. As they are offered up to fascinate, discomfort, and confront, so are we placed in an adversarial position to the technologies and accumulations of affect that imply "You can make up your own life." Rather than a simply recuperative project, procedure, or operation, this in fact a projective interrogation of the complexes and systems of ideology that we are subject to and that constitute our subjectivity

Terry Ewasiuk, "Whose Eros?", Or Gallery, Vancouver, February 16 to 27. Mark Lewis, *Burning*, Artspeak, Vancouver, March 12 to April 2.