



Black Cat Fever: Manifestations of Manet's "Olympia"

Author(s): Jennifer De Vere Brody

Source: *Theatre Journal*, Mar., 2001, Vol. 53, No. 1, Theatre and Visual Culture (Mar., 2001), pp. 95-118

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25068885>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Theatre Journal*

JSTOR

Black Cat Fever: Manifestations of Manet's *Olympia*

Jennifer DeVere Brody

Pre-scene-ium

Close your eyes and imagine (or is it remember?) Manet's *Olympia*.¹ What do you see in your mind's eye? A woman? What color is she? How is she posed? Is she handing something to you? Flowers? Breasts? A mystery?

Now, open your eyes. Did you see the black cat? Did you smell something foul?

Say what? Do you copy? Calling Performance Art History

Is history a cable? a telephone? a faded memory? a painting we keep copying?
—Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex*²

Like a manifestant, this text revives the riven, if not rival, discourses of art history and performance studies. Split apart by conventions of seeing and knowing developed in and practiced by the academy, art history and performance studies explicate different textual forms. For example, painting, sculpture, and architecture belong within the purview of art history, whereas plays, parades, and social rituals belong to the field of performance studies. Despite such differences in their historical constitution, both the discipline of art history and the trans- or inter-discipline of performance studies share an interest in vision, visibility, and scopic regimes (not to mention particular investments in perspective). From Martin Meisel's landmark 1983 study, *Realizations*, to Elin Diamond's recent citation in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, connections among and between such frames of reference and referent framing draw

Jennifer DeVere Brody is Associate Professor of English and African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is the author of Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture (Duke, 1998) and is working on a new book entitled, The Style of Elements: Politically Performing Punctuation.

I would like to thank Amelia Jones, Andrew Stephenson, Carole-Anne Tyler, Sharon Holland, and members of the audience at the 1999 American Studies Association for their assistance with an earlier draft of this essay. The anonymous readers for this issue of *Theatre Journal* gave me invaluable advice for which I am grateful. David Román deserves special mention for his editorial acumen.

¹ *Olympia* was painted in 1863 and exhibited in 1865. It was hung in the Louvre in 1907. For more on the painting's provenance, see T. A. Gronberg, ed. *Manet: A Retrospective* (New York: Park Lane, 1988). Subsequent references to this edition shall be noted in the text.

² Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London: Routledge Press, 1997), 119.

Theatre Journal 53 (2001) 95–118 © 2001 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

these disciplines together.³ What a performance theory-based reading of a work of art can do, however, that art historical readings tend not to do, is to make the painting come to life as a force in the world. Performance theory can show the painting as culture at work, as a material entity that motivates movement and engages its audience in visceral, embodied ways. In other words, the “meaning” of a painting relies on its reception or interactive effect. As a note in a recent issue of the journal *Critical Inquiry* explains, “followers of J. L. Austin, in a bid to replace meaning with “effect,” ask what a work of art does, rather than what it intrinsically means—their proposal, now two decades old, has yet to be mined fully for its enduring relevance to art historical inquiry.”⁴ Only recently (and therefore retroactively) has such inquiry impacted the field of art history (and here I am thinking of work on the discipline by Donald Preziosi, Amelia Jones, and Mieke Bal in particular).

Although we usually think of painting and performance, or “static” art and “moving” art, as distinct phenomena with specific spacio-temporal differences, in fact, such images purveyed by these media, consumed by various publics, never remain in place once their presence has been made present. Viewers travel with them, even when they appear to be remaining still. Given that you see painting with your eyes, or more accurately, your cornea, which is covered by a blinking “scarf skin,” the image you see cannot be said to be unmoving. Indeed, the intermission provided by the intermittent drama of the blink obscures and then reveals the image in an action that repeatedly changes the image.⁵ In the blink of an eye, the image appears anew, different from the nanosecond in which it appeared in its initial reception. Anne Hollander argues that painting as a medium is unlike theatre in that painting is “intended for all time [whereas] theater is ephemeral—each production lasts only as long as its run, and each performance is a new version of the piece.”⁶ We may wish, however, to challenge some of her assumptions about such matter and see similarities between the object(s) of art history and performance studies.

Locating the intersection between art history and performance studies shows us “how meaning *takes place* in the practices of visual culture—[such that] . . . art critics and art historians [are implicated and imbricated in] an engagement with processes of art production and reception [that are themselves intersubjective and] performative.”⁷ As Elin Diamond explains, “Common sense insists on a temporal separation between a doing and a thing done . . . performance even in its dazzling physical immediacy, drifts between present and past, presence and absence, consciousness and memory. Every performance, if it is intelligible as such, embeds features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, and aesthetic traditions—political and cultural pressures that are consciously and unconsciously acknowledged.”⁸ I argue

³ Meisel’s *Realizations* discusses the particular temporality of the different arts especially Lessing’s work. See Chapter One, “The Moment’s Story” (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 18.

⁴ Eugene Wang, “The Winking Owl” *Critical Inquiry* 26.3 (2000): 441.

⁵ The term “scarf skin” is Thomas Jefferson’s from his tract, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, William Peden, ed. (New York: Norton, 1954).

⁶ Anne Hollander, *Moving Pictures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 3.

⁷ Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, “Introduction,” *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1.

⁸ Elin Diamond, “Introduction,” *Performance and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1.

here that pictures live in the mind's eye and perform as "visual manifestations of intuitive thinking."⁹ Such inter-subjective or, in Mieke Bal's words, "shared entanglements, are considered events rather than things—events of becoming rather than being . . . timeless art to be reintegrated into the flow of time."¹⁰ Thus, the following/forthcoming history, story, critical genealogy and performative writing, which is also a reading of *Olympia* (1863) (Fig. 1) remains to be seen through and with future remains.¹¹ I argue that our understanding of *Olympia* comes through performative means in that it is intelligible primarily through our reading of its visual rhetoric; the act of interpretation is an interaction that is performative. Thus, I focus on reception and reading as acts of translation, or manifestations akin to perception performed by the viewer.

The context in which a work of art is displayed also contributes to its materiality and performative power. Unlike other forms of narrative one need not follow a prescribed order of reception when one enters a gallery. This text that you read here has been scrolled vertically, printed and flipped, so that you now read it, I presume, with pages face-to-face from left to right, and yet, here too, you have some freedom of movement about the text. I mention the taken-for-granted cultural and political conventions of reading in order to remind you of how this work translates *Olympia* for its own purposes, into (non) linear linotype. So too, our referent is a reproduction. To quote Hollander again:

Paintings have been reproduced as prints ever since the 15th century; and important works, transmuted by graphic technology into familiar images, could gradually get onto more intimate emotional terms with the public than they could ever establish from fixed and often inaccessible sites. Reproductions hanging in provincial schoolrooms or printed in history textbooks show paintings doing this larger work—making suggestions, instilling visual notions, arousing responses, helping to fill the moving landscape of the inward eye for generations of people who might never see the originals.¹²

Indeed, we form attachments to debased and/or absent forms as a matter of course. In her book, *Mourning Sex*, Peggy Phelan cites numerous examples of this phenomenon several of which include canonical paintings. The book speaks eloquently of our ironic desire to "enact the disappearance of the manifest visual object." Phelan writes: "Performance and theatre are instances of enactments predicated on their own disappearance. Like a detective's chalk rendering of a murdered body, the demolished pop-up page illustrated the outline of a body in a state of arrested movement. The book now presented the shadow of a man lying down in a pale white casket, a man's outline asleep on the page's proscenium stage . . . I wanted the outline of that body, its paper ghost, much more than I wanted the illustrated body."¹³ Phelan discusses two

⁹ This phrase is from Maria Berg-Marklund.

¹⁰ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 30–34.

¹¹ Beth Archer Brombert's biography, *Edouard Manet: Rebel in a Frockcoat* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1996), begins by mentioning a bookplate a friend of Manet's designed which puns on the painter's name. The design depicted Manet's "bust on a pedestal with the motto *Manet et manebit*, which in Latin plays on [his] name, meaning *he remains*, and in the future *manebit, he will remain*." This anecdote seems to confirm the continual confusion of temporal modes.

¹² Hollander, *Moving Pictures*, 4.

¹³ Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex*, 2.

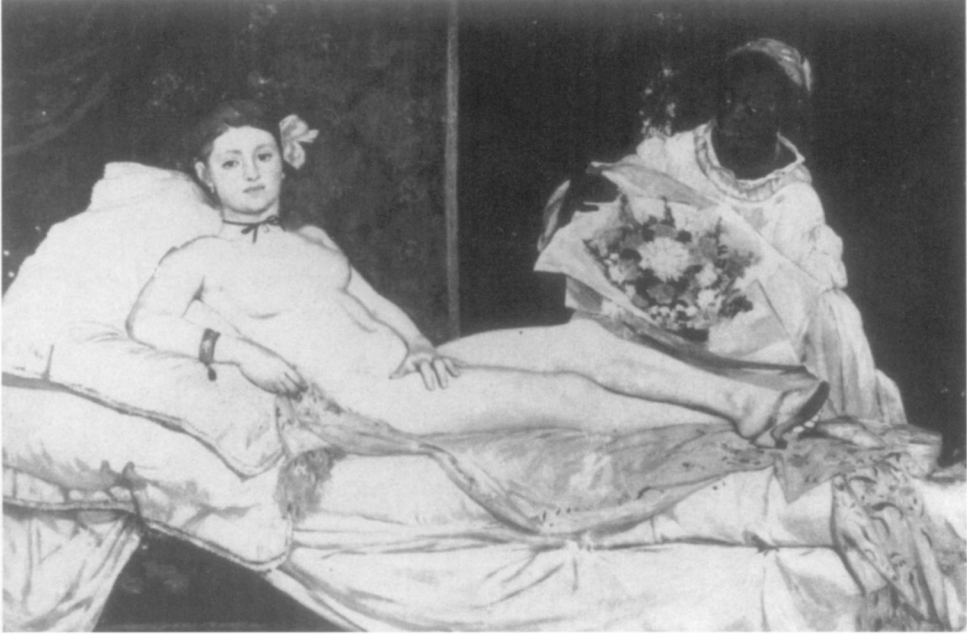


Figure 1. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*. 1863. Oil on canvas. 130.5 x 190. Courtesy Musee D'Orsay, Paris.

famous paintings; first she muses about what remains of the body after death in Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*, and then she examines "shattered skulls" in Holbein's *The Ambassadors* as the context for a reading of Rodney King's brutal beating at the hands of the LAPD. She notes that, "Perspective is a theatrical technology and a technology of theatre. Parallel lines do not meet, yet the vanishing point makes it look as if they do. The 'as if'—the illusionary indicative that theatre animates allows for the construction of depth, for the 'invention' of . . . psychic subjectivity."¹⁴ Phelan uses canonical art to serve as a touchstone for her larger, performative meditation on loss and desire. By showing the ways in which "psychic subjectivity" is invented through her performative writing, she also shows how images contribute to such on-going inventions by which we are transformed. It is for this reason (and with this reasoning) that Manet's painting enters the realm of performance through its partial, absent presence, filtered through a memory of the subsequent.

In the punning title of her book *Moving Pictures*, Anne Hollander discusses the decay present in still lives as a means through which to mark the movement of death. I read such evidence as being analogous to a taut line stretched, etched, sketched between life and death, materialization and manifestation going slack, momentarily, so that we may witness/imagine its pre/performance. In other words, the following re-reading of *Olympia* seeks to recapture and re-invent the painting's queer future through an act of re-member-ing and re-vision that views the painting through the "perceptual intervention of performance art."¹⁵ In this queer black feminist reading,

¹⁴ Phelan, *Mourning Sex*, 27.

¹⁵ Jackie Apple quoted in David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Indiana University Press, 1998), 119–20.

Manet's masterpiece provides, through fraught seeing, a means to perform with, for, and through other audiences and viewers. The painting, with which I have been intrigued since I first saw it in my high school art history class (in fact, I have never seen it as it exists as a "thing" rather I am overly familiar, yet unfamiliar with its reproduced image) becomes a totem in our ritual understanding—a memory that makes us remember, re-member our subject positions, our politics in the world. I am neither the first nor the only black feminist to be drawn into the world of painting. Lorraine O'Grady and Harryette Mullen, to name only two, have already done something with and to this performative picture. *Olympia* speaks to us and in so doing, proves its ability to make meaning manifest. So too, I am neither the first nor the only "queer" reader to let the painting serve as a means to articulate another end.¹⁶ Ripped out of the rarified realm of classical high art, *Olympia's* politics here are laid bare as the painted body of the modern odalisque. I look into and through the painting's surface to stare into its graphic faces in both senses of the term "graphic." For, as Anne Hollander explains, the term "graphic" means both "like writing" and "like truth."¹⁷ This kind of in-your-face display plays with our renewed understanding of new terms such as "graphic interface" which emerged from the latest technological revolution of computers but may be as old as the template of the book. This too has a black vernacular corollary in the phrase, "in your face," which enacts in verbal terms the violent, threatening movement of literally getting too close to another subject. When faces face each other as an invasion of space or as a confrontation of direct gaze—eye to eye, ego to ego—it becomes an event akin to the action of looking at *Olympia's* confrontational, even glaring, gaze. Nevertheless, this imagined confrontation has a specific historical valence that has been undone by Rebecca Schneider's work on *Olympia*. She notes, "Within the terms of perspective, there is not reciprocity—the seen does not see back. Classically, even if the seen is presented so as to be looking at the viewer (as in Titian's *The Venus of Urbino* or Manet's *Olympia*), what is acknowledged by the direction of her gaze (whether defiant or compliant) is the viewer's sight marking her as seen. She can only acknowledge that she is seen, but she cannot author vision, cannot see back. She does not render the viewer visible. Rather, she renders him sighted. Emblematic of the scopic field itself, she *is* the vision and he *has* vision—she is the vision he has."¹⁸

While most discussions of Manet's painting trace the picture's antecedents, reconstructing a line of decent descent, after (yet before) the image, my reading views the painting retroactively with crossed, entangled eyes that look chiasmatically in terms of race, place, space, and time. It seeks to see performance as precedent—as something of the "past"—whose translated presence and re-presentation make it present, active, manifest. These pages re-do or translate the painting's ante- or inter-cedents and show the various performative engagements with Manet's active thought, which are performed through the meditative medium of paint put together on canvas. Performance

¹⁶ I discuss Yasumasa Morimura's revision later in this essay. Nigerian-born Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955–1989) did a portrait entitled, *White Bouquet*, which has been read as an allusion to *Olympia*. For more on his work see Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁷ Hollander, *Moving Pictures*, 33.

¹⁸ Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge Press, 1997), 67. I agree with Schneider's stunning reading of this and other works. Her explication of Manet's work appears explicitly on pages 21–28.

theorists need not abandon the particular “ontology of performance in which reproduction is impossible.”¹⁹ Indeed, it is impossible to have an unmediated connection with a painted work. As my review shows, our vision is dependent upon technologies of vision and recognition. These mechanisms work in conjunction with our remembering which always already implicates us as individual social actors and places us in positions determined by power, politics, and society.

My use of the term “read” is a translation from a black (gay) vernacular understanding in which to “read” is to critique or “throw shade.” It implies that reading is a conscious “act” and an act of consciousness. The term should allow us to remember that the act of reading is in fact a (re)reading or translation, which requires that we acknowledge a point of view that complicates a text’s interpretative revision(s).²⁰ We can only know Manet’s text through the con/fusion of its contexts, which are recreated repeatedly in each re-view—confident that the mechanisms through which we see are constrained, never original, always partial. Seeing is an act of embodiment, and it cannot take place without the engagement of active viewers.

Manifest/O

In 1856, Manet copied, in the pedagogical practice of his day and ours, Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, which he saw in Florence. Titian’s *Venus* is the most often cited source for Manet’s nude, *Olympia*.²¹ In his book, *Manet’s Modernism*, Michael Fried elaborates on the painting’s obvious precursors. However, like all perspective, Fried’s scholarly review has a blind spot. Fried does not address the fact that how we see is determined by conventions of translation—that we, for example, enlarge or crop images, print them side-by-side, change them from color to black and white and/or project them via power point, in an effort to prove our distortions.²² And yet, thinking about how art is disseminated, viewed, and valued contributes to how we read works of art in a broader context. Making explicit one’s “theory” of the ways in which art performs directly impacts how art is read. For example, David Sylvester in a review of his curatorial practices at the New Tate Modern in London, comments:

today works are being placed together not because they have some community of style or date or place of production but because they all depict people having tea together or lying around naked . . . It’s obviously healthy when the way art is shown changes in accordance with changes in the way people think about it. The trouble with rejecting an approach that sanctifies thingness is that, when it comes to showing art, thingness won’t go away.²³

¹⁹ Phelan, *Mourning Sex*, 1

²⁰ See my “Shading Meaning,” in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (London: Routledge, 1999), 89.

²¹ See Michael Fried, *Manet’s Modernism, or The Face of Painting in the 1860’s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). In his hunter/gatherer historical and histrionic contextualization, Michael Fried sees similarities with contemporary cartoons. Charles Bernheimer also has a fine discussion of the cartoons in his book, *Figures of Ill Repute* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) as does Alan Krell in his *Manet* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

²² For an interesting reading of the history of the performative practice of the art historical slide lecture, see Robert S. Nelson, “The Slide Lecture, or the Work of Art History in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Critical Inquiry* 26.3 (2000): 414–34. The main essays in this issue do a fine job of theorizing some of the different ways in which one can read between art history and performance studies.

²³ David Sylvester, “Mayhem at Millbank,” *London Review of Books* (18 May 2000), 20.

Sylvester goes on to explain the lesson he learned when he curated a retrospective of Magritte for the Tate in 1969. In an attempt to rethink relations among Magritte's works, Sylvester organized the pictures as if they were icons and presented a "thematic hang." Sylvester continues in the review: "the result was awful. When the [differently dated pictures were] reproduced together, all about the same size on the smooth surface of printed pages, they had looked great. When the originals were put together, the colours and textures of the 1928 paintings came from another world than those of the 1966 painting. Because the originals were not just images: they were things."²⁴ Sylvester's pedagogical experiment bears upon this discussion because it proves, unwittingly, that even "failed" translation is instructional. The outcome of an event cannot be determined ahead of time, and yet, here, like many directors, Sylvester tried to direct/shape his potential audience's interpretative responses to the show. Who is to say, however, that a viewer might remember the 1928 image when, having moved to the end of show, he sees a similar picture, patina altered, from 1966? Here we come to a central crux in performance studies, which Joseph Roach, one of its key practitioners, identifies as "the relationship between memory and history."²⁵

Where most art historical studies situate *Olympia* along the typical line of masterful renditions of "the female nude," my reading draws from the discipline of performance studies and sees the painting enmeshed in various varying (dis) guises or performative manifestations and frames. Let us review. The standard story of Manet casts the artist as the gentleman rebel whose canvases are both sign and symptom of modernity. Manet's painting cites, or rather resembles in art historical terms, not only the already mentioned *Venus of Urbino* by Titian but also Venuses by Giorgione, Ingres, and Velasquez. All of the paintings show as their subject a supine, nude woman and a servant. Manet's modernist translation of the mythological scenes of the "masters" made his work the subject of mockery. Georges Bataille characterizes Manet's mock-up copy of Titian's masterpiece by noting, "Manet's rash, impassioned manner brought the goddess down to earth and inflicted human standards upon her . . . Only with *Olympia* do we reach that moulting time, when painting cast off its old trappings and emerged as a new reality."²⁶

Like some Sesame Street graph that teaches us to identify and categorize pictures, art history teaches us to read according to its conventions. Art history tends to fixate on dates and catalogues—official openings that fail to interrogate their own critical assumptions. The discipline recalls conventions of traditional theatre history in that it too can be seen as being overly wedded to positivism.

Critiquing such traditional theatre history with its vocabulary of key dates and critical reviews, David Román writes, "to call a performance a world premiere assumes a genealogy . . . in truth, such genealogies obscure the materiality of the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁵ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xii.

²⁶ Georges Bataille, *Manet* (New York: Skira, 1955), 68–69. This phrase resembles a line from one of Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" sonnets which reads: "I grant I never saw a goddess go / my mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground." The comparison is apt given that both texts involve hymns to racialized beauty.

production's history."²⁷ Similarly, art history obscures the process of art-making in favor of the official marking of an artwork's "debut." *Olympia's* drafts/rehearsals make plural its origins although we think of it as a singular event. The painting's genealogy may be political depending upon how you date its entrance. Was its first viewing by the female models, or was Manet, like Pygmalion, the first beholder? Others saw it before the licensed critics at the Academy did. Indeed, Manet kept what he considered to be the finished painting in his studio for two years before submitting it to the officials. This discrepancy is reflected in the dating of *Olympia* which varies; some art historians date the picture to 1863, when it was supposedly completed in the artist's studio whereas other art historians date the painting to 1865, when it was displayed at the Academy. In short, the historiographical practices of art history, what Hayden White would call "metahistory," might allow us to see things from a different perspective.²⁸ The problematic of what I term, "retroactive reading" should allow us to counter the "museumification of historical memory."²⁹

The term "manifestation" performs according to the multiple meanings ascribed to it in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This source defines the word as "an open statement, a manifesto, a public proclamation or declaration; the list of a ship's cargo, signed by the master for the information and use of the officers of Customs; clearly revealed to the eye, mind, or judgment; open to view or comprehension; obvious; having evident sign of, guilty of, possessed of." Literally, manifest means "hit by the hand," from the Latin and French combination of "manus festus." Manifest also can be that which is readily perceived by the senses, especially sight. For these reasons, it is a perfect term to help us understand what happens in the performative interaction among manifold displays in which the picture is seen/scene. The verb form "to manifest" is defined as "to make evident to the eye or understanding, to reveal, show plainly, disclose; to display (a feeling, quality); a ghostly presence; to make an appearance." Moreover, *Webster's Dictionary* states that the term signifies the occult phenomenon of materialization: "It is a public act on the part of the government or political party to make known its views." The synonyms these definitions present interest me—especially the way in which subtle differences and shades of meaning are at once elided and made manifest. Particularly noteworthy are the triple terms "eye, mind, judgment" and "having evident, sign, guilty and possessing." In a sense, these terms function as unified prisms—in performance or practice they work in collusion with one another. We can say that Manet's picture performs manifestations. The painting is an open statement or a text open to interpretation—a public proclamation or declaration.

Another aspect of the painting pertains to its economic value. Manifestations, like Manet's painting, involve transactions, price listings, (not to mention the listing of the (slave) ship's hull), each of which are related to the economics of art performed at Christie's, Sotheby's, and the like. *Olympia* has been used to sell high-priced clothes and even coffee, which we can read according to Joe Roach's logic of "the [circum-Atlantic] traffic in bodies [which was used] to promote the sale of other commodities."³⁰ In short, *Olympia* was and is part and parcel of an economically based cultural

²⁷ David Román, *Acts of Intervention*, xvii.

²⁸ Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999).

²⁹ See my essay, "The Returns of Cleopatra Jones," in *Signs* (Winter 1999).

³⁰ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 211.

traffic. The recognizable aspect of Manet's modernist style was traded such that, "Style as resistance becomes commodifiable as chic when it leaves the political realm and enters the world of fashion."³¹ *Olympia's* performance depends on certain returns for its own and others' investments. So too, there is a value attached to and produced by the representation of a black femme flaneuse. The doubled femininity of "femme flaneuse" is deliberate and necessary given the historical erasure of black women from the realm of the feminine.

E-Race

A light white disgraceful sugar looks pink, wears an air, pale compared to shadow standing by. To plump recliner, naked truth lies. Behind her shadow wears her color, arms full of flowers. A rosy charm is pink. And she is ink. The mistress wears no petticoat or leaves. The other in shadow, a large pink dress.
—Hayette Mullen, *Trimnings*³²

Black feminist re-readings of *Olympia* revive the black figure, erased in the title of the painting, and reveal her presence. They show how she grounds the figure of whiteness. Indeed, the two-tone twinned identities of the "women" in the picture are represented not simply in formalist terms as the sutured light and shadow of chiaroscuro but rather as political representations.

Mullen's poem, quoted above/before as the epigraph to this section, is a black feminist remake of *Olympia*. It colors Manet's modernist masterpiece by reading it through a black feminist lens that sees the significance of the shadow in making us see (and therefore think) pink differently. Color-insight-ful rather than colorblind, we read the picture synesthetically—as letters that illustrate, through translation from one sense—perception to another, such that the poem can be read as a painting. In order to see the picture as shocking, new actors and scenes have been introduced, particularly by the disarticulation and deconstruction of marginalized groups such as feminists and "queers of color," whose appropriative, menacing mimicry of such objects defamiliarize them.³³ I am looking from/to/at the margin, through the lens of my own political positioning, attempting to see not the heteronormative script enthralled with whiteness but the black cat. In Eunice Lipton's novel about *Olympia*, I strain to see the black woman. I flip the cover over and over again looking for her image. She is nowhere to be found, not even in the black and white printed narrative whose subject is the search for the actual model—the painted painter Victorine Meurent. It is as if looking for both women—for two women together—is too much. The white woman is a priority, the black woman a minority. As Griselda Pollack comments: "Sliding down the metonyms of history, there are links between the slave market and our schooled acceptance of the normality of the hierarchy of clothed viewers or masters and unclothed objectified female objects in art history. Manet's portrait of Laure . . . do[es] not, at least, inflict that wound of exposure on Laure. When we look at this painting we

³¹ Danae Clark, "Commodity Lesbianism," in *Out in Culture* ed. Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 485. See also Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

³² Hayette Mullen, *Trimnings* (New York: Tender Buttons Press, 1991), 15.

³³ Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 88.

do not have to ignore the sitter's feelings in order to be able to bear to look at her at all."³⁴

Gustave Courbet's 1855 painting, *L'Atelier* (The Artist's Studio), on second look, contains the erased image of Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire's "black" mistress. Her erased presence was seen during an x-ray cleaning, which suggests that the black figure requires a second look to be seen.³⁵ The dominant concern in critical analyses of *Olympia*, as is the case in *Olympia* itself, has been with the "white" figure in the foreground and not with the "black" figure in the background. Presumably, most viewers, past and present, do not desire the black woman, if they see her at all. Have they been blindsided by the lasciviousness of the more clearly "given-to-be-seen" foregrounded object, Olympia? It seems that, the black woman, Olympia's maid, like the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, is "invisible . . . simply because people refuse to see [her] . . . because a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom [the figure comes] in contact. A matter of the construction of the inner eyes."³⁶

In her essay, "Olympia's Maid," Lorraine O'Grady writes:

[the non-white woman is] castrata and whore . . . [her] place is outside what can be conceived of as woman. She is the chaos that must be excised, and it is her excision that stabilizes the West's construct of the female body, for the femininity of the white female body is insured by assigning the non-white to a chaos safely removed from sight. Thus, only the white body remains as the object of a voyeuristic, fetishizing, male gaze. The non-white body has been made opaque by a blank stare.³⁷

But one can read otherwise. My eye, straining, trained to seek difference, looks at the background first. Although Norman Bryson questions the "at first glance" assumption that the black woman is a maid, asking if she is "a friend, or a lover?" her gestures suggest that she is subservient.³⁸

Another intertext for *Olympia* is Zacharie Astruc's poem which initially accompanied the painting. The painting was seen as an ironic translation—as too traditionally romantic to render what was taken to be Manet's urbanelly knowing subject. Astruc's poem said in part, "When tired of dreaming, Olympia awakens / Spring enters on the arms of the mild black messenger / She is the slave who, like the amorous night / Comes to adorn with flowers the day beautiful to behold / The august young woman is whom ardor is ever wakeful." The poem suggests a correspondence between the

³⁴ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 301. This looking is reminiscent of the debates about looking at/for the vaginal imagery of black women in Judy Chicago's collective artwork, *The Dinner Party*. For more on this debate see Hortense Spillers's "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in Carol Vance, ed. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge, 1984); Saidiya Hartman, "Excisions of the Flesh" in Lorna Simpson: *For the Sake of the Viewer* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1992) and *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Berkeley: UC Press, 1996).

³⁵ See Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 261–70.

³⁶ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 2.

³⁷ Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity" reprinted in Joanna Fruch, Cassandra Langer, and Arlene Raven, ed. *New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Collins, 1994), 152–70.

³⁸ Cheryl Dunye's "mockumentary" film, "The Watermelon Woman" (1996), explores the erotic, explicitly lesbian desire for a black actress who played "mammy."

female figures depicted in the painting. The picture and the poem quote a convention of early modern portraiture in which the “b(l)ackground,” to use Kim Hall’s pun, serves to whiten the foreground. In her study, *Things of Darkness* (1995), Hall argues that in early modern portraits,

The black attendant is always offering something to the primary sitter [typically a wealthy white woman] . . . e.g. flowers—some part of the culture of consumerism as well as an adoring gaze . . . the primary sitter is never portrayed as acknowledging the gift or the gaze which means that the exchange has the impersonality of commodity exchange rather than the connectedness of gift exchange . . . yet the European woman and her African attendant are connected in subtle ways . . . by jewelry . . . or a parrot.³⁹

Manet’s work can be read in these terms that would mitigate against reading the attendant as a friend or lover. For example, Linda Nochlin’s catalogue of *Olympia*’s features includes the black servant as one of the courtesan’s possessions. She writes “with her mules, her velvet ribbon, her black cat, and Negro servant carrying a token of admiration up to her boudoir, is very different from idealized nudes.”⁴⁰

The black female body is the vehicle needed for the (re)productive performance of “white” sexuality. Another part of the maid’s role is to make the white figure whiter via her constructed, contrasting difference. As a 1676 treatise entitled, “The Character of a Town Misse,” suggests, the Miss “hath always two necessary Implements about her, a Blackamoor, and a little Dog, for without these, she would be neither *Fair* nor *Sweet*.”⁴¹ Such popular, low cultural references and sources are never noted in standard attempts to read *Olympia* as a modernist masterpiece. Even the arguably conservative gesture of turning to biography and “authorial intent” seems also to have been overlooked in finding sources for the painting. Indeed, it is remarked only rarely in the august annals of art history, that in 1848, the year of European revolutions, an impressionable sixteen-year-old Edouard Manet set sail for Brazil aboard the merchant marine ship, *Le Havre et Guadeloupe*. Writing home to his Mother from Rio de Janeiro, the young Manet creates his own manifesto:

in this country all the Negroes are slaves; they all look downtrodden; it’s extraordinary what power whites have over them; I saw a slave market, a rather revolting spectacle for people like us. The Negresses are generally naked to the waist, some with a scarf tied at the neck . . . they are usually ugly, though I have seen some rather pretty ones . . . Some wear turbans, others do their frizzy hair in elaborate styles and almost all wear petticoats adorned with monstrous flounces . . . Most Brazilian women are very pretty; they have superb dark eyes and hair to match . . . they never go out alone but are always followed by their black maid or accompanied by their children.⁴²

This quotation repeats particular certainties of eighteenth and nineteenth century racial and anthropological discourse. Manet characterizes the foreign women, having observed them with his as yet untrained painter’s eye, according to their costume, customs, and most importantly their physiognomy. Moreover, as Lindon Barrett

³⁹ Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 242–43.

⁴⁰ Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (London: Penguin Books 1971), 203.

⁴¹ Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 240.

⁴² Quoted in Gronberg, *Manet: A Retrospective*. 38–39. For more on Manet’s letters from the ship see Beth Archer Brombert’s biography, *Edouard Manet*.

theorizes: "Ocularcentricism is embraced by Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment cultural logics." Barrett claims that "the scopic . . . comes to stand (like literacy) for reason, intellect, and perhaps even consciousness. For Western modernity, which one can date from the peculiar coincidence of Enlightenment thought and the ambitious pursuit of the trade in and enslavement of Africans and African Americans—the scopic is a preeminent cultural matrix of power and order."⁴³ Manet's letter connects the picture to the witnessed street scene, to lived experience and to memory. His letter can be read as a kind of forgotten rehearsal for the studio production, named postscript, if you will, as *Olympia*, which was produced in the metropole decades later. As was the custom of his time (and ours), Manet confuses race and nationality in his inscribed/scripted description of the Brazilians and the enslaved Negresses.⁴⁴

In my reading of Manet's *Olympia*, this letter from Rio serves as one of the painting's preposterous precedents.⁴⁵ In short, in the recontextualization, the painting is read not in the tradition of the great masters, nor even so much as part of a larger historical cultural milieu, as Marxist-inflected art historians such as T. J. Clark do but in relation to questions of race, gender, and sexuality that circulate in other seemingly disparate, even distant performances. From blackface minstrelsy to cartoons, from memory to museum, *Olympia* works in and through multiple sites/sights. Perhaps this is why Joseph Roach reads the painting in relation to a famous nineteenth-century drama by the Irish playwright, Dion Boucicault, the pornographic photographs of Edward Belloq of New Orleans brothels, and lesser-known paintings of "black" and "white" or more accurately "dark" and "light" women together.⁴⁶

⁴³ Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 216. The final chapter, "Signs of the Visible: (Re) Moving Pictures in the Narrows," provides an excellent reading of this novel through the lens of theories of vision.

⁴⁴ He mentions women in balconies, which appear later in his painting *The Balcony*, and of course, the negress with the headdress in *Olympia*. It was on this trip that Manet began sketching daily. Manet's mention of the "monstrous flounces" worn by the women recur or return like the repressed in his striking *Portrait of Baudelaire's Mistress* (c. 1862). The mistress in question, a mulatta/creole actress purportedly named Jeanne Duval or Prosper—the object of the so-called Black Venus cycle of Baudelaire's infamous, *Fleurs du Mal*—depicts the faded beauty lounging on a sofa, in a pose quite reminiscent of (although painted prior to) *Olympia*. The enormous, almost surreal white lace curtain that sweeps across the background is a theatrical detail that appears again, but in velvet in *Olympia*. Other memories from Brazil may exist in Manet's oeuvre.

⁴⁵ Here I am thinking in particular of Kenneth Clark's comment that: "Manet's *Olympia* is a masterpiece all right. But pictures that, by their scale and pretension, might once have had claim to be called masterpieces are dead." Kenneth Clark, *What is a Masterpiece?* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 43.

⁴⁶ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 211–37.

Bad Bouquets

Sula raised herself up on her elbows. Her face glistened with the dew of fever.
 She opened her mouth as though to say something, then fell back on the
 pillows and sighed. "Oh they'll love me all right. It will take time, but they'll
 love me . . . after all the faggots get their mother's trim; when Lindbergh
 sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stephin Fetchit;
 after all the dogs have fucked all the cats.
 —Toni Morrison, *Sula*

This quotation speaks of breaking numerous interrelated taboos, all of which, on closer examination, seem to be related to Manet's *Olympia*. This inter-species, inter-racial, incestuous scene, which opens with the woman on the divan that is to be her death bed, speaks to another woman, her "face glistened with the dew of fever." This graphic scene functions as a superb subtle translation of *Olympia's* work and gives voice to the black woman who is here the central figure.

In innumerable analyses, *Olympia* is hailed repeatedly as a dirty picture. The seventy French critics who witnessed its debut debunked the picture as debased. Critics claimed that the "woman" in the picture was "in need of a bath," and some saw her as "decomposing." The pink paint was stroked to transform the model Victorine Meurent, herself a professional painter, into the figure of a prostitute. The figment of pigment made manifest viewers' imagined notion of the image of a "classic" femme fatale. Customarily taken to be the most Baudelairean of Manet's works, *Olympia* enacts a staged series of substitutions that center on the marginalized black cat lying at the crossed feet of the diva, which is also the foot of the divan. The black cat performs as a visual non sequitur, what Michel Foucault in *Les Mots et les choses*, calls heterotopia. Unlike a utopia, heterotopia is "disturbing, probably because [it] secretly undermines language . . . destroys the syntax which causes words and things to hang together . . . dissolve[s] our myths and sterilize[s] the lyricism of our sentences."⁴⁷ In this case, the cat kills desire and deadens and makes sterile what should be the fecund not fecal lore and lure of beauty. The cat makes a mockery of the situation at hand.

Viewers search in vain for what lies underneath Olympia's hand, beside her bed, between her legs. On closer examination, we are confronted only with the figure of the cat which functions as an index of what we must/must not see. Like the "dis-ease" surrounding the genitalia of the "Venus Hottentot," the black cat/chatte (the pun homonym in French works as does the English "pussy") oscillates between our desire both to oblige and to obliterate its obscured presence.⁴⁸ Put crudely, the painting or, rather, readers' performative translations of it place it as part of the proverbial, pornographic "selling hot pussy," to use a graphic quote from bell hooks.⁴⁹ *Olympia*

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 4.

⁴⁸ See Anne Fausto-Sterling's excellent discussion "Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of Hottentot Women in Europe, 1815–1817" in Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla, ed. *Deviant Bodies* (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1995) and Sander Gilman, "White Bodies, Black Bodies," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1984): 204–42.

⁴⁹ T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting makes a similar point in her reading of *Olympia* in relation to Zola's novel *Therese*. See her *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 79–80.

continues to be a popular commercial icon of modern sexuality in the West. The felicitous feline furrows its brows (we imagine) and scrutinizes our look—quizzical, comic, querying. The painting with its theatrical detail of the heavy green velvet-like curtain on the far left of the canvas performs the display of such phenomena.⁵⁰

In order to redress and address this enigma we must direct our attention to the black cat crouching on the couch, its yellow eyes slit black in the middle where its iris should be. I read the black cat as the canvas's blind spot. In the nineteen versions of the painting that I perused, only one or two of them represented the cat as black. Several use a white cat in the place of the black one although most excise the cat entirely—a gesture quite different from that of the nineteenth century, when parodies made the black cat the focus of their translations (Figures 2–4). As one contemporary critic wrote, "Olympia . . . reclining on a bed, wearing nothing but a knot of red ribbon in her hair; the Negress dressed in pink bringing her a bouquet; the black cat which arches its thin back and whose paws stand out against the white of the sheets, all form the strangest painting one could imagine."⁵¹ Or, more damning still,

This redhead is of perfect ugliness. Her face is stupid, her skin cadaverous. She does not have a human form; M. Manet has so pulled her out of joint that she could not possibly move . . . at her feet a cat who wakes has a good stretch, a cat with hair on end, out of a witches' Sabbath . . . white, black, red and yellow make a frightful confusion on the canvas; the woman, the Negress, the bouquet, the cat, all this hubbub of disparate colors and impossible forms seize one's attention and leave one stupefied.⁵²

These critics obsessively focus on the barely visible black cat—an iconic symbol of femininity like the dead metaphor that substitutes flowers for femininity. The black cat is both beholden and withholding—performing in the same moment an inscrutably inscribed gesture like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, whose source, not surprisingly, is Victorian theatrical pantomimes.⁵³ Manet had painted cats before, but after *Olympia*, the cat became his trademark. Indeed, he was known subsequently, as "the painter of the black cat" as well as a painter thrilled by the challenge of painting blacks (as in color if not character).⁵⁴ Manet, like many other artists, was a graphic artist as well as a painter, and his ability to perform in several media makes these arts comparable.

⁵⁰ Here the answer to the painting's mystery lies in the black cat/cunt which Courbet painted as the infamous, headless, foreshortened *Origin of the World* (1862) which marked the proverbial womb/tomb that feminist artists and critics have debated for generations. Apparently, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan owned Courbet's infamous painting of a foreshortened view of a woman's thighs, hips, stomach and vagina called "Origin of the World" but kept it covered—hidden behind a velvet curtain. It is like the debate over Judy Chicago's collectively produced installation, *The Dinner Party*, which represented Sojourner Truth, a black woman, with three faces while the white women were represented by what in this case became "normative" vaginal imagery. The choice to represent difference differently became the problem of representation itself. Thus, Hortense Spillers, Alice Walker, Deborah McDowell, and numerous other black feminist critics have critiqued the installation for how it chose to include while occluding black women from the "party."

⁵¹ A. Bonnin writing in *La France*, 7 June, 1865. Quoted in Gronberg, *Manet: A Retrospective*.

⁵² Felix Deriege, *Le Siecle*, 2 June 1865.

⁵³ See Alison Perona's unpublished paper, "Carroll's Magic," University of Illinois at Chicago.

⁵⁴ Alan Krell has an excellent discussion of this in *Manet and the Painters of Contemporary Life* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1996).



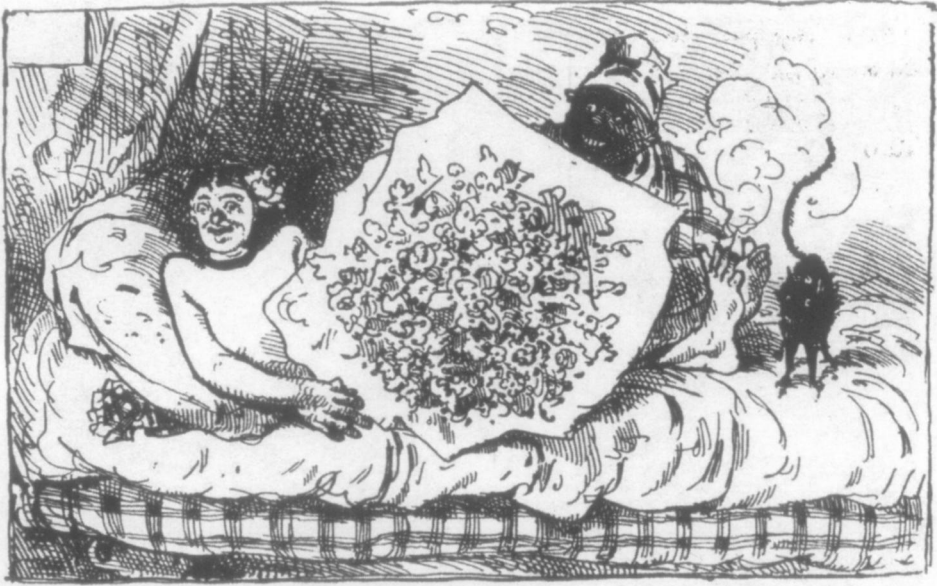
Figure 2. Bertall Caricature of Olympia. 3 June 1865. Wood engraving. *L'Illustration*.

In her book, *The Symptom of Beauty*, Francette Pacteau comments on Freud's discussion of female genitalia: "In a chain of civilizing displacements . . . from animal to human . . . we have shifted from seeing and smelling the genitals, to seeing the genitals, to seeing anything *but* the genitals, to repudiating the genitals entirely as an object of interest (even so far as finding them disgusting or ugly)."⁵⁵ In contradistinction to this trajectory, nineteenth-century cartoons of the painting whitened the background in order to foreground the cat, which grew larger, its tooth and tail getting longer with each citation. Surreal and grotesque in these exaggerations, the cat moves to the center of the picture in yet another cartoon version (Figure 5). If the black cat could be understood in linguistic rather than visual terms, it would serve as the painting's most important punctuation mark: it declares more than merely denotes its darkened difference. This too is a mark of the black cat's active performance in the picture.

In a discussion of an altogether different black cat, this one a 1940's male hipster from the novel *The Narrows* by Ann Petry, one of the characters describes a newspaper photograph with the headline, "NEGRO CONVICT SHOT," as follows:

The lurid picture showed the convict not as a man but as a black Anima, teeth bared in a snarl, eyes crazy, long razor scar like a mouth, an open mouth, reaching from beneath the eye to the chin, the flesh turned back on each side, forming the lips of this dreadful extra

⁵⁵ Francette Pacteau, *The Symptom of Beauty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 16–17.



'This picture by M. Manet is the bouquet of the exhibition. ...
The great colourist has chosen the moment when the lady is about to take a
bath, something which she certainly seems to need.'

Figure 3. Bertall, Caricature of Olympia. 27 May 1865. Wood engraving. *Le Journal amusant*.

mouth . . . Everyone who saw the picture would remember it and wake up in the middle of
the night covered with sweat.⁵⁶

This terrifying depiction of a distorted, tortured body recalls not only de-formed
blackness, but also corresponding images of the infamous vagina dentata. The gender
distinctions in such images of horrific "black" death matter less than the utter gothic
monstrosity they enact through destruction. In the case of Manet, critics read through
the painting to their/our own dark desire and saw not smooth satin sheets but, rather,
dirty linen, aired in public, reeking of realism.

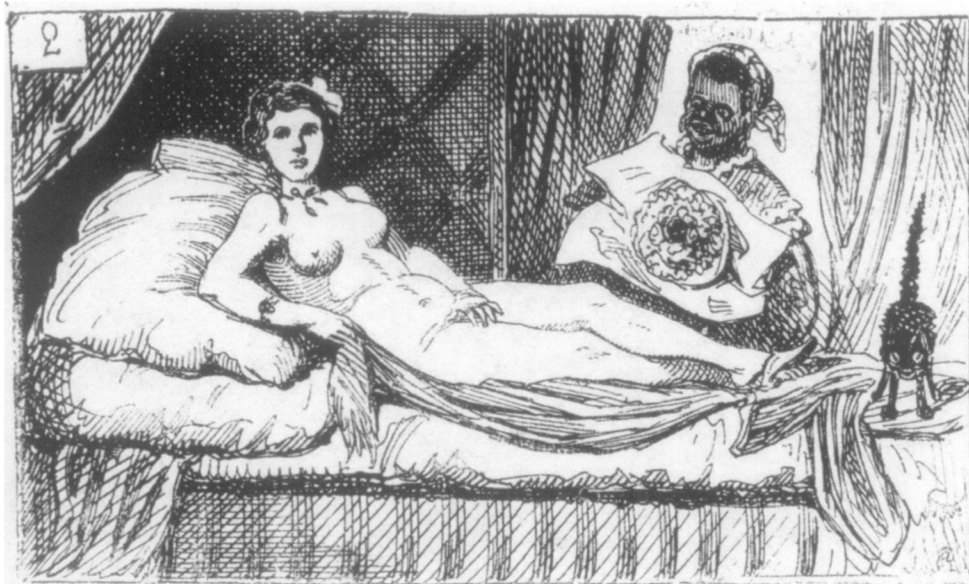
Postmortem Manifestos

Why did I see coffins where Manet saw pale figures?
—Rene Magritte writing to Michel Foucault⁵⁷

In this section I read various (per)versions, "queer" quotations and mangled
manifestations of *Olympia*. From the viscous impasto of Manet's oil to Seward
Johnson's sculpture that casts the perfected hard beauty in bronze, we can "learn

⁵⁶ Quoted in Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, 239.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 58.
trans. and ed. by James Harkness. The letter is dated June 4, 1966.



'Madame.' 'What is it?' 'D'ere's a man dat wants to see you ...
on business.' 'Show him in.'
(Apparently that's the way things are done among certain 'ladies'.)

Figure 4. G. Randon, Caricature of Olympia. 29 June 1867. Wood engraving. Le Journal.

something useful about works of art from translation into another medium, especially when these appear to be vulgarizations."⁵⁸ Manet possessed a mordant wit, as his illustrations for Mallarmé's French translation of Poe's poem "The Raven" suggest. Similarly, as a childhood friend of Proust, Manet had a reputation for being ironic, sardonic, a kind of "Dandy of Realism." These biographical readings inform the 1983 Georges Pompidou Center exhibit, *Bonjour Monsieur Manet*.⁵⁹ Included in this catalogue is Picasso's 1901 (per)version, titled, *Parody of Manet's Olympia*. This black and white sketch projects what, retroactively, must have been *Olympia's* (in)visible "blackness" that colors future readings of the picture. In even a cursory review of recent scholarly literature on *Olympia*, the Picasso version appears regularly, rather like a ritual association.⁶⁰ Ever available for re-circulation, *Olympia's* value lies in its ability to

⁵⁸ Martin Meisel, "The Material Sublime: John Martin, Byron, Turner and Theater," in *Images of Romanticism: Verbal and Visual Affinities* ed. Karl Kroebler and William Walling (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 211.

⁵⁹ This is a wonderful source including many twentieth century revisions of Manet's work (1983).

⁶⁰ Much has been made of the similarities between *Olympia* and Gauguin's *Tehura, Manao Tupapau* or *Spirits Watching the Dead*, which he painted in Tahiti where he had a copy of *Olympia* pinned to the wall of his hut. See Lee Wallace's "Gauguin's *Manao Tupapau*, Primitive Ambivalence and Rear Window," *Genders* 28 (1998) for more on this issue.



MANET.
La Naissance du petit ébéniste.

Figure 5. Cham, Caricature of Olympia. 14 May, 1865. Wood engraving, Le Charivari.

be transformed. Thus, we have Herb Hazelton's 1964 version, *Marilyn Monroe as Olympia* (Fig. 6), with a pancake-bearing, Aunt Jemima-like Mammy in the background. Consider too, Caroline Coon's *Mr. Olympia* (1983), where Olympia has transmogrified into a black male, with a visible genital member more "deformed" than the mythical apron of the Hottentot Venus.⁶¹ His white female attendant directs her gaze at the center of the painting, where one hideous member has been replaced by another. Again, a black cat is missing or rather has disappeared. Like the maid in the painting, the black cat is both hyper and invisible: represented and yet nowhere to be seen.

⁶¹ The list of artists who have reconceived Manet's work is too voluminous to name here.



Figure 6. Herb Hazelton, Marilyn Monroe as Olympia. 1966. Oil on canvas. Provenance unknown.

Australian feminist artist Annette Bezor's *Odelympia* (1988) (Fig. 7) is multi-layered since it is composed of superimposed images. Even the title, with its homonyms, homophones (eau is water in French), and the pun on ode, is an homage to Olympia's complex representation. The work superimposes a painting on an upside-down-as-if-in-a-slide-projector photograph of naked women; black haired vaginas are lined up in a row, the whole covered by a cartoon drawing of a fish in a fishbowl. Notably absent in this rendition is the cat, which in this case might have been overkill since our curiosity about the image suffices to hold our interest. Bezor's brilliant concatenation of images allows us to see the queer elements always already present in Manet's work—his photographic realism, the graphic influence of the cartoon, and the supertext of blackness.

In contrast to this irreverent feminist remembering is Seward Johnson's sculpture of Olympia. The literature advertising Seward Johnson's bronze sculpture entitled, "Confrontational Vulnerability" (1996) (Figure 8), explains that the sculpture is "one work in a new series of life-size realistic figures inspired by the paintings of Impressionist Masters. Using icons of art history, Johnson hopes to tap into our memories of these images while encouraging us to step into both the atmosphere of the painting and the painter's imagination."⁶² Johnson has made Olympia and her maid vulnerable to our touch. The figures are no longer confrontational but, now, invitational. Johnson's sculpture allows the viewer to step onto an actual oriental carpet—to participate in the scene/seen as if entering yet another dimension. We will leave the rapture of being swept away on a "magic carpet" to our imaginations. Now,

⁶² "Confrontational Vulnerability," 1996.

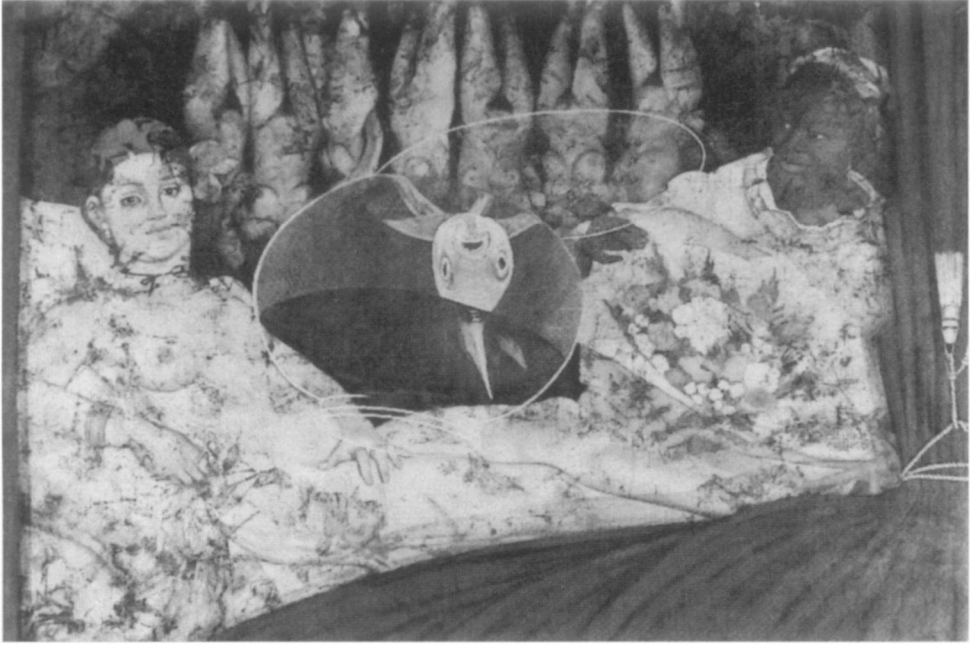


Figure 7. Annette Bezor, "Odelympia." 1988. Oil on Linen. 162 x 240.
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

one can impose not merely one's gaze but also one's body on the rounded body of a hardened prostitute. Johnson's classical rendition of the work increases the space between the odalisque and the black servant standing back. The two are no longer sutured by brushstrokes, part of an unbroken two-dimensional canvas whose colors bleed from one quasi-defined figure to the next; now, the edges are distinct—cut, stopped, and stilled so that we can survey and colonize the entire scene with our desire. Johnson is known best for his familiar if defamiliarizing everyday sculptures of middle-class citizens sitting patiently, indeed permanently, at outside bus stops or cafes or police stations. His allegiance to realism and a sense of "collective" memory disallows a reading of "realness" in the phantasmatic terms of much black queer cultural critique, which does not want to reproduce reality but, rather, to repeat with difference and distance. Moreover, to render something more substantial according to the hierarchy of media, where sculptures of "classic" subjects in the official academies are given more weight than oil painting, seems at best a conservative move.

Other three-dimensional translations that I consider to be interventionist include Carolee Schneeman and Robert Morris's *Site* (1965) or, more recently, Ellen Van Eijnsbergen's feminist piece, *De-Constructing Olympia*, which shows broken doll body parts encased in glass, and Carol-Anne Gainer's *Ex-posed*, the latter a live performance art piece in a South African art gallery, where the feminist artist Gainer represents her own nude body in the corner of the space during an opening, offering herself as a living, breathing representation of a work of art that confronts viewers with her own critical gaze. Such an "explicit body in performance" to quote the title of Rebecca Schneider's book on feminist body art, confounds many viewers in that the body

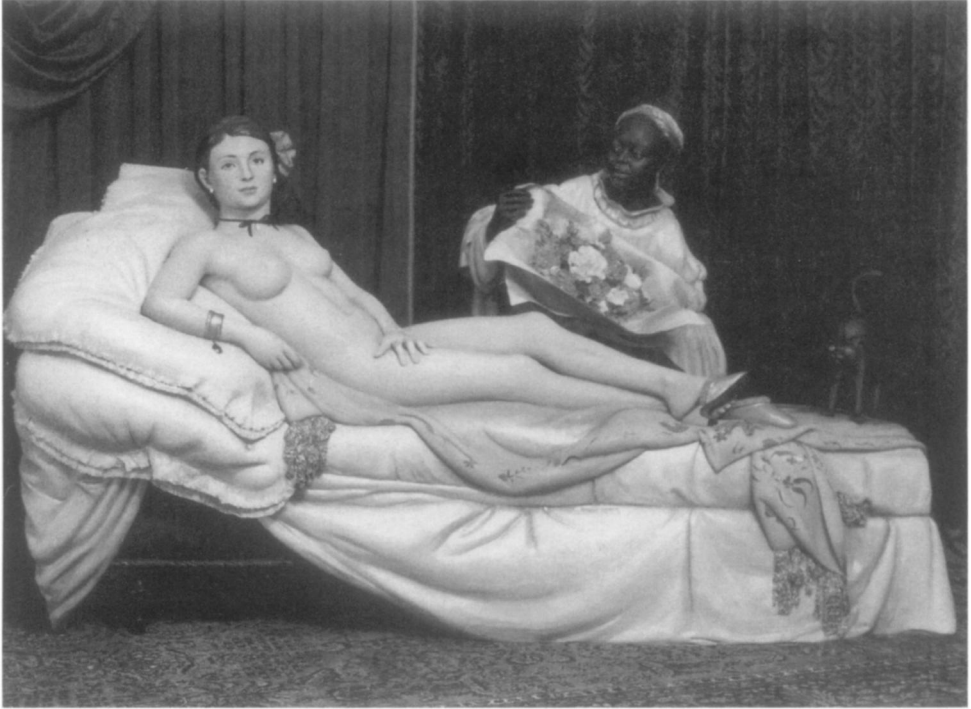


Figure 8. Seward Johnson, "Confrontational Vulnerability." 1997. Bronze. Berlin.

appears "naked"—both overexposed and underexposed, lacking the patina of the past, not swathed in "culture." This shock, of course, can never replicate the apparent shock of Manet's coevals given that it is a woman artist who poses herself in a period where such acts are deemed facile and perhaps passé.⁶³ Indeed, on the PBS series, "The Shock of the New," a contemporary New York artist, Mark Bidlo, paints an aptly-titled *More Modern Olympia*.⁶⁴ Over the course of the two-hour show, viewers watch as a naked "white" model and a "black" model pose for their double portrait, which is painstakingly rendered à la the atelier of the Master. Such a faithful recreation simply replicates rather than intervenes in the traditional historical situation of male artist and female model. Given these complex events, we must ask art to perform interventionist difference. We must argue for the importance of performance theory that looks through specific culturally marked lenses that read the interrelatedness of race, gender, class, sexuality, and power. Cultural critics should know that the "subject" represented is never a guarantee of active engagement in the performance of difference. We must look to the staging of the event and its disappearance as a means of liberation.

⁶³ See Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge Press, 1997) on this issue.

⁶⁴ See Judith H. Dobrynski, "Looking Again at Art that Made a Culture Blink," *The New York Times* 23 January 2000, 35–38.

If Johnson's rendition of the painting is serious and overtly faithful, an irreverent, unfaithful reading is produced by Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura in his *Portrait (Futago)* (1988) (Figure 9), a part of his *Art History* series. The art work is a color photograph of the artist performing in signifying drag. He wears white-face make up of a greenish cast, ruby-pink glittered boudoir slippers, and a cock-eyed blond wig as Olympia and blackface make up and a cheap pink tulle dress as the maid.⁶⁵ Morimura follows several earlier manifestations that used "the double" as a figure for reinterpreting Manet's work such as the cut-out life-size paper sculptures of Larry Rivers, whose wonderful *I like Olympia in Black Face* (1970) has been described as "a tableau-vivant burlesque of Olympia."⁶⁶ Like Cindy Sherman's work, Morimura's self-portraits are familiar yet strange. Such artworks, according to Rebecca Schneider, "garner their post-modernity in their ghost dancing, their playful mimicry of precedence."⁶⁷ Hailing himself as an "entertainer" rather than a photographer, Morimura slyly mimics the fetishized brushstrokes of painters by using a palette knife to smear a clear acrylic paint over the surface of his otherwise slick color photos.⁶⁸ The process both reduces glare and makes a mixed-media impasto surface whose form follows its content. Here I refer to the fact that Morimura is already painted with greasepaint in the portrait.⁶⁹ Actually, his manifestation of Manet's work works beyond a doubled perspective: not only does he double himself via computer technology, but he also simultaneously cross-dresses and undresses, plays both white and black face, and impersonates in a triple move, different nationalities and times.

Morimura makes such interactions more than formal. Where, for example, art historians had compared the flatness of Manet's work to Japanese prints (in the portrait of Manet included a copy of a Japanese print), few saw thematic similarities such as the supposed availability of the Oriental female to the West.⁷⁰ In Morimura's fabulous fantasy the artist performs the purportedly impossible—he appears as both an idealized nude and a realized fantasy of the West.⁷¹ His female impersonation places him within and against such traditions of Western representation that stereotypically feminizes Asian men and sees Asia itself as feminized. In the picture, the Japanese cranes featured in the wallpaper of Manet's famous painting of the blond

⁶⁵ Marianna Torgovnick has a brief discussion of Manet's work in this context in her book, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 99–100.

⁶⁶ Richard Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 146.

⁶⁷ Rebecca Schneider, "After the Savage Goddess" in Elin Diamond, ed., *Cultural Politics and Performance Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 155. I am indebted also to Schneider's thinking on related topics in her discussions of the porn/art performances of Annie Sprinkle and her mention of the Carolee Schneeman performance of *Olympia*.

⁶⁸ Given these connections with realism and photographic realism, in particular, there is a logic to the many photographic translations of the painting. Such ideas are complicated by the reproduced photographs that appear in this article. For more on Morimura see, Norman Bryson, "Three Morimura Readings," *Art + Text* 52 (1995): 74–79.

⁶⁹ See www.assemblylanguage.com/reviews/morimur.htm and www.arts.monash.edu/visarts/globe/issue4/morimxt.html for more information.

⁷⁰ James Rubin, *Manet's Silence and the Poetics of Bouquets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁷¹ See Rey Chow's essay, "Dream of a Butterfly" in *Human All Too Human* (Routledge, 1996), ed. Diana Fuss. For excellent essays on gender and photography see Jennifer Blessing, ed. *A Rose is a Rose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997).



Figure 9. Yasumasa Morimura, "Portrait (Futago)." 1988. Color photograph. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; A. W. Mellon Acquisition Endowment Fund.

prostitute *Nana* have flown off and alighted on the silk covering of the bed. Not surprisingly, the French word for crane, "grue," is a slang term for prostitute.⁷²

As in Herb Hazelton's Marilyn Monroe parody of *Olympia*, Morimura's Olympia is blond. The roots of the dyed blond (dumb and dead) are black—part of the traffic in nineteenth-century eroticism.⁷³ The infamous black cat here looks like a hard, shiny black plastic "Hello Kitty" bank, its petite paw coyly clawing the air. Morimura's double image (Futago means twin in Japanese) evokes Lorraine O'Grady's and others' understanding of whiteness and blackness as "two sides of the same coin."⁷⁴ And speaking of coined images, Morimura trades on the economic, trademark value of Manet's work in an effort to elevate his own status as an artist. Morimura, like the original model, Victorine, who behind the scene/seen wielded the brush as a painter herself, the artist here is not just a painted, objectified woman; rather, he performs as both subject and object of the painting (and subject and object again in recreating the nude and the maid). In this sense, he resembles contemporary performance artists who stage themselves as a representation. Morimura's multiple crossed-cast image performs as a "queer," canny counter-reading that nevertheless resembles the "original" oil painting's violent reception at the Salon of 1865.

⁷² For more on the term prostitution in relation to authorship see Charles Bernheimer's *Figures of Ill Repute* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁷³ Here I refer to scholarship about the invention of the blond "bombshell" by Richard Dyer in *White* (London: Routledge, 1995), and James Snead in *White Screens, Black Images* (New York: Routledge, 1994) both of which are discussed in my *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity and Victorian Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

⁷⁴ Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid," reprinted in *New Feminist Art Criticism*.

Morimura's work was featured in an *Art News* review of the Hirschorn Museum's 1999 *Regarding Beauty* exhibition that asked, "Does Beauty Matter? The Question That Won't Go Away." In the magazine's recurring section, "Perspective," William Feaver asserts, "After a restless slumber, beauty is back."⁷⁵ Interestingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, the article is literally backwards in the magazine; it begins at the end of the text printed on page 216 before the beginning proper that appears on page 215. Mr. Feaver poses the following problematic and uninteresting question to Morimura's work: "Is [the image] still beautiful when you [sic] realize the odalisque is actually the artist in drag?" The answer depends on who is (be)holding the picture, and HOW. Feaver seems to want to put the question of beauty to rest—to make it inert, singular, silent. In contrast, queer viewers and artists may desire to speak with forked tongue, flexed hand, arch language, so that beauty is rendered complex, contradictory, performative. We ask of the image, "what's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" We are caught in the impossible identification where eye/body/flesh are enmeshed.

Post Seen Discussion

I want the eye to move all over the surface. No one part is a central focus.
I want to engage and entertain the viewer. Once the visual work-out is over, the
painting must hold up for repeated viewing.
—Robert Kushner discussing his mixed-media collage,
Olympia—Robert and José 1983⁷⁶

Olympia varies according to the vintage/vantage/viewpoint from which one looks. Robert Kushner, in his self-portrait, both plays and portrays Olympia while his friend, José plays and poses as the attendant. Like Annette Bezor's *Odelympia*, Kushner's collaged and complex form frustrates identification and forces viewers to read through, with and against its multiple referents. Reformulating a role, his work, like all seen performance, gives its viewer a "work-out," after which we are expected to return for a repeat performance. Finding our way around the picture requires that we see what we think we are looking for, rather than what we are looking at. This statement works with our understanding that paintings come to life only through performative interaction. Foucault wrote to Magritte "Peindre n'est pas affirmer" (to paint is not to affirm).⁷⁷ While the painting may not affirm, it does perform, act and solicit affect, allowing us to be caught by its effect and our desire to participate in the performative movements we might forthwith call "manet-festations."

⁷⁵ William Feaver, "Reawakening Beauty," *Art News* (October 1999): 215–16.

⁷⁶ Robert Kushner, "Some Things I Think about in My Work" in *Bonjour M. Manet*, 92.

⁷⁷ Magritte quoted in James Harkness, trans. and ed., *This is Not a Pipe*, 53.