

### **Gender - Double Trouble and Transgression: Yasumasa Morimura's appropriation of a desirable body**

By performing not only an already given artwork - Eduard Manet's 1863 painted portrait of *Olympia* - even though the medium is exchanged from painting to photography, but also by transgressing different boundaries, Yasumasa Morimura represents in his 1988 taken photographic portrait *Fugato* questions on the relationship between artist and model, subject and object, original and imitation, power and powerlessness, desire and refusal, gender-identity and gender-performance. All these items involve further questions on gender-roles, on the pre-dominance of the artificial binarism of gender-construction and many more.

In order to evoke these references on gender-discourses, Yasumasa Morimura makes up his body, wears a wig and imitates with his masqueraded body-image a female gender-role as a servant of sexual desires. In doing so, the frame of reception is pre-determined: His left hand covers the region of his male body, where the sex of the undressed body usually is identified. So, the hand as a mask directs the view. As another tool to focus the attention of perception, the artist is holding a corner of the coverlet in his right hand, framing the signified area of the body. Furthermore, the proportions of the spaces in the picture, being separated by the masquerading hand, follow approximately the Golden Cut in classic arts. Also, the red-golden frame of the paravant in the background behind the artists, leads the view of the onlooker to the region of the body, where the signifier is to be assumed.

This gender-performance provokes questions on the possibilities of presentations as subversive acts: What kind of gender-construction is created by performing a seemingly opposite gender-identity? What about the own - culturally pre-determined - perspective of perceiving gendered body-images? Are we caught in conventions as soon as we take a look at transvested body-images? Whose gaze and whose body-image gains the gendered power?

Ostensibly, Yasumasa Morimura tries to double not only the image of Manet's *Olympia* as a kind of imitation. In fact, it is no imitation in the sense of a 1:1 copy. On the contrary, he transforms fundamental components of the composition and the conception. Morimura also doubles the trouble within the respective roles and the therewith connected questions on power and powerlessness. A comparison with Manet's *Olympia* will illustrate the shift of transgression.

Eduard Manet presents in his painting two female body-images - *Olympia* and her servant. But he, furthermore, integrates an essential gender-role outside the frame of the canvas: the gaze of the male onlooker - at first hand the artist himself, painting this portrait actively, looking at the seemingly passive and naked body of the model, and secondly the recipient in the art-gallery. The female object of the male view represents desire by offering her body to be looked at.

Manet includes a transgression of gender-roles as a subversive act. Looking at the onlooker, *Olympia* as the object of the gaze visualizes the subject's desire. The subject becomes object and furthermore realizes his new role as being observed by his own desires, refused by the desired body, since *Olympia* ignores the offered flowers from her suitor, presented by her servant. Although in this painting, the transgression of gender-roles is focused on the view, it is the exchange of perspectives that lead to the subversive act of performing gender-roles and of representing the predominance of male gender-identity.

Yasumasa Morimura, in contrast, takes it all: he himself embodies both female gender-roles taken from Manet's painting. In this sense, he -as an artist - is not only outside the image as the one, who is creating the composition as a subject. He is also inside the performance, taking a double role: two female servants on different levels.

Within his artwork, Yasumasa Morimura inserts the transgressive shift much earlier than Manet did. Transvesting his own body-image, he alleges to achieve at least the outward appearance of the opposite gender-identity. However, not only the lack of female breasts indicates the male identity which dominates the performance. Inside the pre-determined frame of perception, Morimura emphasizes the still given existence of the phallus as signifier of gender-identity. The subliminal association of the phallus - initially a neutral - distinctive mark and the penis as an organ excludes the female gender-identity from a positive self-definition caused by the absence of the sign. What the artist presents in his performance remains the male gaze on an 'incomplete' female body-image.

Although he surrenders his nearly completely naked body to the (male) gaze, Morimura never is in danger to lose his power connected with his masculinity. In no way he is victim of the gendered gaze, because he presents his hidden penis by framing the region of the body, where the determination of gender-identity is to be assumed. Furthermore, the artist imitates the view of Manet's *Olympia* - maintaining her power over the onlooker's desire. Therefore, the artist as performer of a female gender-role doubles his predominance: First, he emphasizes his male identity, although his body-image is partly effeminized. Secondly, he as an artist determines the performed image of a woman as a desired object, although it is a transformed imitation of another portrayal. In contrast to Manet's painted model, where the artist remains outside the frame, Morimura pretends to take the role of the other as an object of his own performance and therefore of his own desire as well.

Morimura's construction of an ostensibly female body-image, trying to represent a female gender-identity, is and stays a male attempt from the outside. Neither his performance offers a female identity, which is convincing in perception. Therefore, he emphasizes his masculinity, using various tools to focus the onlooker's attention on the hidden penis. Nor his performance offers a male

identity, represented by the power of the performer and the performed identity. Therefore, the effeminised body-image and the two decided female gender-roles offer in one case his naked body as an object of desire. His gender-construction, furthermore, presents in no way the ideal of the androgyny, since within the performance the balance of power between the two given gender-identities does not exist.

So, this performance visualizes a deviation from the 'pure' difference as a binary construction of gender-assignment, because there is no appropriate designation for the transgressive body-image, offered as the object of the gaze. Yasumasa Morimura presents a body-image without any gendered relation and forces the viewer to consider his culturally pre-determined perspective of perception in categorizing body-images into one of the two 'given' gender-identities. Even though, the artist visualizes not only a transgression of gender but also of culture, the question of receiving a gendered body-images is still the same. There seems to be a 'pure' difference, distinguishing female from male identity and using the penis - identifying the penis with the phallus - as signifier in Japanese culture as well as in European and North American reception. This goes along with Jacques Lacan's division of 'having a signifier' or 'being the signifier', separating male and female categories. But what occurs to this act of classification, if the body-image is transgressing the seemingly definite hegemonial binary gender-model? Yasumasa Morimura's transvestive performance is beyond the scope of a 'pure' difference of gender-assignments and clear identities. He holds up the mirror of restrained perception to the onlooker and tells her or him that this way of classifying is caught in false conventions. There are genders and gendered body-images beyond the binarism of male/female. There are gender-performances, whose representation transgresses the gender-assignment given by birth, but do not reach a clearly defined 'opposite' sexual identity. There arises a kind of double trouble, leaving the pre-determined gender-identity, originally categorized by the existence or absence of the phallus - i.e. the penis - by birth and at the same time the failure to reach the 'opposite' sex by performing and using therefore a mask.

Transvestes find themselves in a 'nowhere-land', in an undefined space beyond categories, conventions, and pre-determined culture. Morimura's performance visualizes the loss of 'pure' difference, of the limits of perceiving a naked - ostensibly - 'cross-dressed' body-image. This subversive transgender-performance not only develops his concept on transgressing the gaze, but also the body as a medium, performing a gender-identity, like this is done in everyday-live by every-body.

In doing so, he transgresses also the power that derives from the gaze. There is no more the question of the artist as a subject and the model as an object - onlooker and looked-at - since subject and object are identical. It is the artist as an object inside his own performance who as the one, whose artworks are object of the gaze, at whom the recipient is looking. He is also the one, looking out of

the photography, maintaining his position as creator, although he effeminized his outward appearance.

This kind of masquerading - as a prostitute, refusing the flowers/the courtesy of her suitor/the consumer of her 'art' - reminds on the unequal balance of power not only referred to gender-identity, but also to the situation on the art-market. But in taking the role of the usually suppressed woman he enhances his male power by occupying her position. He as an artist creates the scenery of the performance. Furthermore, he eliminates the presence of a female body. He is the only one able to fill in her place and to present the male gaze on the male onlooker outside the photography.

His self-consciousness, gained by superseding every female body - proceeding, there are only two possible gender-representations - is also a result of his power as the creator, deciding, who may be represented in which position within this performance. It is and remains his male pre-dominance as artist and object, emphasized by various tools, framing the place of the hidden phallus. He appropriates the place, the gaze and the gender-role to double his power and to eliminate the powerlessness which is usually assumed as soon as a naked female body is presented as an object of desire, especially in the position of a prostitute.

Manet's *Olympia* is the female model, representing both: power and powerlessness as a gendered problem. She offers her desirable body as a sign of submission, taking a passive role. But her gaze, set against the onlooker, regains and maintains power by visualizing his desires which remain unfulfilled.

Morimura's transgressive performance eliminates femininity as a bodily representation. His masculinity - masqueraded by accessories and a hidden penis - is omnipresent and therefore replaces powerlessness by the visually emphasized power. Does this lead to a new image of femininity? Does this mean men are able to occupy the female gender-role totally, even though they become objects of their own desire? Does this mean replacing the female body-image by an effeminized male body turns powerlessness into power?

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