

# Seeing Is Believing (?) Blurred Boundaries and Loving Looks in Nancy Burson's Art<sup>1</sup>

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Nancy Burson is a contemporary American digital artist, photographer, born in 1948. Her work is shown in museums and galleries internationally including major exhibitions at The International Center of Photography and the New Museum in New York City, The Venice Biennale, The Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, and The Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago. She has served as a visiting professor at Harvard and was a member of the adjunct photography faculty at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. "Seeing and Believing" was the title of her traveling 2002 retrospective originating at the Grey Art Gallery, and nominated for Best Solo Museum Show of the Year in New York City by the International Association of Art Critics.

## Frames: Social Criticism, Theoretical Relevance

The title of the retrospective exhibition is extremely telling of Burson's art, since Burson has been preoccupied since the beginnings of her career with issues of culturally conditioned representation, perception, and interpretation. Her aim has been to unveil communal myths by showing how socially sanctioned misrepresentations (particularly of body, self and humanity)—necessarily fostering mis(self)identifications and misinterpretations—privilege and manipulate "seeing" as a token of "believing" and as a guarantee of "reality"/"authenticity." In the title of my study I slightly modified the exhibition's title from "Seeing and Believing" to "Seeing Is Believing(?)" in order to make the artistic project even more explicit, since I believe that Burson's photography always provides a thorough criticism of the ideologically invested nature of spectatorship and to-be-looked-at-ness, of visibility and invisibility, and calls attention to the unequal, hegemonic (gendered, raced, classed) distribution of empowered spectatorial, and of contained, controlled spectacularized spectacle-positions which become naturalized and normativized through the Foucauldian ideological *technologies of truth-production*.

Burson presents strange portraits of "naturally unnatural" pathological, deformed faces or of computer manipulated, metamorphic faces gained with the help of the digital morphing technology invented by her in order to transgress frames, to challenge aesthetic norms and normativized body-images, to unsettle ideologically ready-made truths, and revision our conventional "ways of seeing." Her morphed and metamorphosing photos destabilize her very mode of artistic expression, by mockingly troubling the "Seeing=Believing" equation apparently reinforced by the nineteenth century invention of photography.

On the one hand, her photos disclose our contemporary western consumer so-

ciety's aim to incorporate, to discipline and repress *difference* precisely by making it hyper-visible: she shows how the spectacularization, the commodification, and the neutralization of an *otherness* put on public display serves to keep the *other(ed)* safely within the limits/at the margins of the dominant culture. Thus, she criticizes hegemonic power's willingness to exercise its control by the ideological technology of *panopticism*, by encouraging all *docile social subjects* to interiorize the normalizing all-seeing, omnipresent *panoptical gaze* of power (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 146-66) setting norms and margins alike, encouraging all to "correct" differences according to the logic of the illusorily homogenized "self-same." On the other hand, Burson's strange visages question mass-produced normative *regulative ideals* (Butler 1) of immaculate beauty propagated by various beauty industries (fitness, diet, cosmetic) financially motivated in fostering the Beauty Myth (Wolf 22-33). Burson's photos of "special faces" problematize the cultural prescription not to stare at corporeal difference, and inhibit the normative interpretation of the society's *medical gaze* that categorizes anything un-usual as unquestionably un-natural, ab-normal, ob-scene, doomed to be *othered*, marginalized, pathologized either by being over-spectacularized, or hidden to be (mis)interpreted and corrected. In my view, Burson's photos revolt both against the *panoptical* and the *medical gaze* of contemporary norm-setting representations. As she says, "I've been showing people what they can't see or didn't want to see" (Berwick 1). She concentrates on the initiation of kaleidoscopic perspectives, cross-cultural viewpoints, and the re/deconstructions of subversively metamorphosing identities, with the primary aim to introduce alternative evaluations of *otherness*. Her photos conceive *otherness* not as a disabling, deviant *difference* to be dominated and excluded, but as an enabling *alterity* to be re-discovered as a potentially enriching, inherent part of our heterogeneous selves. On the whole, Burson's art stresses the potentials of an ethically invested, caring, "loving look" in the transformation of vision.

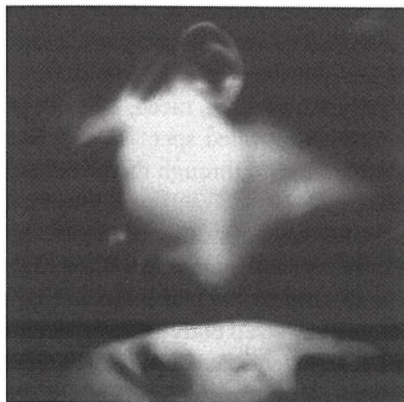


Fig. 1. Nancy Burson, "Untitled." *Special Faces Series* 1992. <[http://www.nancyburson.com/cranio\\_fr.html](http://www.nancyburson.com/cranio_fr.html)>. Reproduced by permission of Nancy Burson.



Moreover, Burson's photography spectacularly reflects the anxieties related to the Foucauldian *body-disciplining bio-power*-technologies applied by our contemporary post-industrialist Western society (see Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 57). Burson's morphed and metamorphosing images perfectly illustrate how our capitalist, patriarchal, hegemonic, consumer society of spectacle prescribes to us extremely paradoxical body-images to identify with. Hence, our socialization is inherently accompanied by the ideologically disciplined subject's cultural embodiment that Francis Barker calls the *supplementary body*, referring to the cultural construction and corrective containment of a normatively neutralized, safely corporealized, artificially homogenized, *positive body*. Yet this cultural body keeps being haunted and tempted by the irresistibly re-emerging, repressed corporeality, bodily functions, drives and desires Barker calls the brutishly material, residue-like, *tremulous, private body* (62-66). Burson's photos recall how advertisements turn idealized bodies into norms, and represent asceticized (dieting, fitnessing, epilating, cosmetic surgically enhanced) bodies as eroticized bodies who endeavor to stimulate the desire for consumption through a simulated orgy associated with the product on sale, but actually contradicting the corporeality strictly controlled and neutralized due to ideologically infiltrated representations. Through her art we are constantly reminded how our bodies are simultaneously spectacularized and self-disciplined. On the one hand, the identity is increasingly enacted on the surface of the body stylized by fashion industry's fetish props to create the most trendy and individual look, an ephemeral image destined to (fail to) represent the self. On the other hand, our embodied identities are disciplined through the interiorization of the surveillant gaze of the Foucauldian "eye of the power" that turns the soul into a prison of the body, or through a pathologizing medical gaze that decodes bodies in terms of (ab)normal symptoms. Accordingly, bodies are hypervisible, but only in an aestheticized, anaesthetized form: in advertisements blood is always blue, diapers never smell, deodorized bodies do not sweat, women's hunger can be satisfied by bite-size sweets, the sick bodies remain sexy. (Rather tellingly, in recent Hungarian TV ads for medicines, a woman with heartburn lets her skirt, loosened furtively under a restaurant's table, gently slip off her thighs, while a menstruating girl cheerfully performs a graceful gymnastic exercise at a sports competition). Thus, the real corporeality simultaneously remains an ultimate object of fascination and anxiety as well as an unrepresentable, ob-scene phenomenon.

Burson reveals that the postmodern promise of infinite possibilities resulting from the plasticity of bodies, "the fantasy of self-mastery in an unmanageable culture" (Bordo 250) coincides with the inevitable social, cultural pre/inscriptions, the power technologies' ideological discipline, engendered stylizations and discursive manipulations on/of the framed, contained, "representationally closed" body. Her art shows that the illusorily authentic, unique self coexists with the inherent intertextuality of an identification with ready-made, simulated images (illustrated by the slogan, "Be yourself, buy Adidas!"). Moreover, Burson seems to encourage a gender-sensitive perspective which is able to make spectators recognize their mis(self)recognitions, and

to realize how representations paradoxically *interpellate* feminized subjects as “similar,” mythic, universal *Woman* and as differing, singular, heterogeneous *a(-)woman* (De Lauretis 124), addressing them both as victims of marginalized, metamorphosing, monstrous corporealities *and* masters of contained, controllable bodies. The cultural-critical artwork unveils that the dream of presence that surfaces in extreme sports, swinger parties, radical body modifications, or the latest craze of Californian youth hanging themselves on meat-hooks (in de-contextualized initiation rites deprived of meaning) *and* the awareness of the inescapable prison-house of re-presentation, of inevitable mediation, of everything’s being a “copy of the copy,” a “recognition of misrecognition” reflected by recurring (self)ironic metatexts, are parallel phenomena. Likewise, today’s sexualized body simultaneously implies an immediate, deathly, divine, erotic, “interior experience” (hailed by the new age cult of the mystical science of tantric sex). Yet it is also associated with an alienated simulation-like cybersex (illustrated by the increasing popularity of internet porn sites turning classic partnership into a network of faceless clients, avatars, animations and computer programmers), while furthermore it is identified with a demonized threat originating from the unknown other (so that AIDS is still often regarded being the “fault” of gays and blacks).

Burson’s pictures recall how this paradoxical logic affects the imagery of popular visual culture, particularly the rhetorics of advertising and the commodification of bodies identified with images. As consumers, on the one hand, we are invited to hedonistically submerge in the Žižekian ideologically enhanced and exploited *idiotic pleasure of consumption* (see qtd. in Kiss, “Az objekt ikonográfiája” 128), believing we can acquire a brand new lifestyle or identity with the purchase of a commodity fetish (e.g. buying Marlboro cigarettes, Axe perfume, or Coke beverages becomes a guarantee of the consumer’s sexual attractiveness). On the other hand, buyers are also made to resemble Baudrillard’s androgynous android-like, disillusioned, postmodern subject deprived of desires by the overflow of satisfactions (Baudrillard 23-28) and the repressed yet persistent knowledge that the advertised images are illusory (by now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century all TV spectators are aware of the fact that the ads’ doctors and patients, housewives and washing-machine repairmen are actors merely simulating unbearable pains, fast cures and immediate satisfaction).

In parallel with corporeality’s cultural taming, exploitative commercial “recycling,” and its identification with ready-made images, the body also seems to return as cause, effect and ultimate token of our experienced reality, as, for example, an increasing number of psychic disorders are explained by biological malfunctions, and pills like Prozac replace the Freudian “talking cure.” Thus, we are led to the conclusion that our bodies, despite their being obvious cultural, discursive, representational constructions, are still primarily identified with corporeality, and are regarded by common sense as natural, “raw,” material, biological entities. This trend that Attila Kiss calls the last decade’s *heterological turn*, characterized by the material body’s apocalyptic return and the subject’s *anatomization* infiltrating regular practices of our

everyday lives (see “Corpusemiotics”), constitutes a latent subtext of Burson’s art. Yet Burson’s morphed and metamorphosing photos in general primarily seem to illustrate how the natural body is nearing its extinction in the Western world as our bodies become technologically supplemented or medically reshaped. We are reminded that even if we have not undergone plastic surgical interventions or organ transplantation, we resemble half-human, half-machine cyborgs: non-organic material like amalgam fills the holes in our bad teeth, contact lens ameliorate our eye-sight, toxic material circulates in our bodies infected by environmental pollution, and we regularly plug ourselves into the world wide web, or augment our body image by mobile phones or cars. Emerging new social, political, historical, cultural phenomena reorganize our bodies in radical ways. The actual ecological disaster undermines the simulated Edenic pleasures of popular media commercials’ rhetoric, while the threat of terror causes a cancerous internal subversion of the system, to end up in destabilizing all illusory safeties and emphasize ethical considerations. Like the internet enabling the formation of new identities mapped in cyberspace both as unreliable self-fictionalizations and as relational, solidarity-governed members of e-communities, they foster fundamentally destabilized, metamorphic, ambiguously re-embodied identities. These are some of the ambiguities and anxieties related to the experience of our discursively constructed, yet corporeally motivated bodily realities—particularly telling for women who experience the disciplining of their bodies on a daily basis—which are enacted, portrayed in various forms in Nancy Burson’s art.

## Oeuvre: Transgressing Borders, Blurring Boundaries

Burson is best known for her pioneering work in digital morphing technology first employed in 1980 in collaboration with researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *The Age Machine*, her computer program manipulating digitalized photographs to age-enhance the human face was sold in 1987 to the FBI, and has been widely used ever since by police departments worldwide to locate missing children (they facilitate predicting how maturing affected facial features). Similarly, her immensely popular *The Couples Machine* frequently posited in American shopping malls offers infantilized facial composites of couples allowed to picture how their common offspring would look like.

Burson’s early artwork utilizes this technology to meld series of “found photographs” into troubling facial composites of various “humanoid hybrids.” Her 1982 *Beauty Composites* (the first [con]fusing features of Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelley, Sophia Loren, and Marilyn Monroe, the second those of Jane Fonda, Jacqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields, and Meryl Streep), mock the self-stylized “look” as a screen for the genuine self or the invented star-persona, and highlight the paradoxical nature of body-image both as a token of singular identity *and* as a popular icon becoming a trademark commodity fetish. These pictures proved to have a prophetic message, forecasting how today’s looks can be easily erased or altered by technology, in plastic surgical operating rooms, gene-modifying, bioengineering labo-



ratories, just as well as in the virtual realm of cyberspace. Her 1982 *Warhead* presenting a mask-like face—composed of 55% Reagan, 45% Brezhnev, less than 1% each of Thatcher, Mitterand, and Deng, percentages matching the size of the nuclear arsenal disposed of by the given world-leader—illustrates aggressive, financially motivated warfare's utterly dehumanizing capacity (and is just as ironic as the Beauty composite in so far as it mocks the very notion of the idealized type along with "fantasies and fears about power and identity" (Burson, "Seeing and Believing" 3). Her 1983-85 *Mankind* (remade in 2003) constitutes an Oriental-Caucasian-Black facial composite weighted conforming to current population statistics to call attention to the unrealistic, even untruthful nature of the race-biased normative overrepresentation of Caucasian beauty-ideals, circumscribing the global racial majority as the marginalized, "othered" (pseudo)minority.

Burson's 1997 *He/She* series of ambiguously gendered portraits demonstrates gender's socially constructed nature, its performative, thus "deconstructable" quality, and potentially malleable fluidity, and illuminates our alternative selves through "challenging the individual's notion of self-perception, and allowing viewers to see beyond superficial sexual differences to our common humanity" (*Nancy Burson's Website* 5). Her *Human Race Machine* uses a software with a database of about fifty photos to morph portraits taken of viewers, allowing to see themselves on the screen as a different race: African, Asian, Eastern Indian, European, and Latino. The project bears a classic humanist slogan preaching solidarity: "There is only one race, the human one. The concept of race is not genetic, but social. There is no gene for race. *The Human Race Machine* allows us to move beyond differences and arrive at sameness. We are all one" (*Nancy Burson's Website* 11). No wonder this project has gained an immense success in contemporary US tormented by existential, ontological, epistemological uncertainties due to the threatening terror attacks, environmental catastrophes, and virtual reality's simulacra spreading by virtue of technological innovations as the internet (threats which underlie and destabilize the more and more apparently illusory happiness of the "American dream"). Photos generated by *The Human Race Machine* accompanied by the line "There's no gene for race" appeared as a billboard at the corner of Church and Canal streets of New York City in 2000. They were published on the cover of December 2003 *Scientific American* edition arguing that some genetic differences do exist across populations, but they are slight (Bamshad and Olson 80). In 2006 the Machine was featured on Oprah, while currently it has been "touring the US college and university market, as a diversity tool that provides students with the profound visual experience of being another race" (*Nancy Burson's Website* 11).

Burson's other recent projects follow the same solidarity-, consensus- and caring-based, ethically invested, pacifist, globalist, humanist direction. Her 2003 *One* layering images of Jesus, Mohammed and Buddha, like her *The Goddess* fusing classic representations of Mary, Quan Yin and Isis, stress human beings' shared, communal need for higher values, protection, belief, and hope. These projects, like her 2000-1 photo-series (*Guys who Look Like Jesus, Women who Look Like Mary*) and

facial composites entitled *Jesus* and *Mary* created out of photographs of people of varying age and race who answered her advertisement placed in *Village Voice* calling for Jesus look-alikes and Mary look-alikes of all ethnicities certainly call attention to the socially constructed nature of (racial) differences. They attack past traditional (pseudo)sciences', like human physiognomy's, frenology's and eugenics' dangerous and absurd creation of links between appearance, intelligence and racial superiority, and they tackle cultural assumptions on body-image by questioning artistic, religious representations of the divine (as the peak of aesthetically pleasing and spiritually elevating) as a paradigm of White perfection. In fact, paradoxically, while Burson clearly aims at criticizing the identification of "outside image" and "inside essence," her technique of facial-composites is inspired by a method developed in the late 1870s by Francois Galton, the founder of eugenics, who superimposed multiple portraits of individuals representing what he deemed a "natural kind"—the criminal, for instance—onto a single photographic plate in order to reveal what the "ideal" of that type would look like (Gookin 1).

Yet, the problem with Burson's re-imagined, re-cycled images reevaluating the concept of race is that no matter how metamorphic or morphed her photos are, they seem to remain within the frames of the beauty standards prescribed by classic Judeo-Christian art or contemporary Euro-American (beauty-myth dictated) iconography. Just like in the case of Mattel's Barbie dolls, the skin color, the most prominent racial trait might be altered on (our) new faces generated by the Race Machine, yet the mould, the Caucasian bone structure remains the same (see Du Cille). J Richards (sic) creates a photoshop image to show how an "intellectually more honest" cover of *Scientific American* would have looked like. He quotes John Goodrum, claiming that although an "overwhelming majority of genetic variation is found *within* populations, reaffirming the importance of treating people as individuals," while "the motivation behind the assertion that human races are 'merely social constructs' is a positive one, but denying biological realities at the outset is unlikely to lead to productive social dialogue on coping with human differences" (Richards 42). Although Richards' argument is presented in the anthropological section of a website tellingly entitled [www.majorityrights.com](http://www.majorityrights.com)—thus certainly implying criticism of leftist politics—, yet his photoshop picture (Richards 11) illustrates my doubts concerning Burson's race-de-stabilizing photographic work. It is easy to be convinced that there are no differences when we are all presented as aesthetically pleasing, conforming to the conventional (traditional Euro-American) beauty-norms. Moreover, some social critics, like Wendy Hui Kyoung Chun, caution that the Race machine's morphing of images risks erasing power, racial and cultural differences "by treating black, white, Asian, or Latino people as the same technological transformation" (Bewrick 5).

## **Special Faces, Loving Looks: From Difference to Alterity**

The above are some of the doubts due to which I find much more convincing a series of Burson's earlier portraits taken during the 1990s, when she photographed "special faces," those of people altered by cancer, reconstructive surgery or prosthesis, and those of children with craniofacial anomalies, as progenia (accelerated aging) or Apert syndrome (bone malformation). After her computer-generated photos' political-critically-invested irony and technologically sophisticated, precise impersonality, on her *Special Faces* series Burson turns towards a much more personal, even confessional, as well as poetical and touching mode of representation and self-expression. Tellingly, Burson became preoccupied with genetic anomalies as potential photographic subjects while expecting a child and feeling anxious about her baby's health. Simultaneously, her friend Jeanne McDermott gave birth to a son affected by a rare genetic disorder producing craniofacial bone structural deformations along with webbed hands and feet. (McDermott, herself a science journalist, wrote a book on the chaotic emotions and the trials and hardships her family had to face when bringing up a child with a difference. Her *Babyface. A Story of Heart and Bones* comments with forgiveness on the rudeness of strangers shocked at the sight of the baby's deformed face.) The first portrait in Burson's series was taken of McDermott's son, and Nathaniel's close-up was followed by a series of portraits of children with craniofacial anomalies in gelatin silver prints shot with an inexpensive Diana camera in-between 1990 and 1993. The portraits are fascinating because they neither romanticize, nor trivialize, neither exoticize nor pathologize their subjects. The otherness of the portrayed ill children is never presented as a disturbing difference to be hidden, rendered invisible (marginalized), over-spectacularized (in the Foucauldian sense, contained), or corrected. Our initial, culturally conditioned reactions of shocked terror, shameful disgust or pitiful curiosity at the sight of difference are increasingly replaced by a charm. Burson's ingenious, unsentimental yet moving and empathic, even celebratory photos portray deformed, "defaced" faces of culturally *othered* "freaks," socially outcast, ab-normal monsters while rejecting the conventional marginalizing and neutralizing, disciplining and homogenizing gaze prescribed by a society demanding conformity. On the contrary, Burson portrays these special faces with dignity, revealing their secret beauty pointing beyond our conventional normative beauty ideals and aesthetic standards. She invites to look beyond the limited vision of the self-same, to consider the alternative viewpoint of the "other," and experience *their* perspective becoming *ours*.





Fig. 2. Nancy Burson, "Untitled." *Special Faces Series* 1993. <[http://www.nancyburson.com/cranio\\_fr.html](http://www.nancyburson.com/cranio_fr.html)>. Reproduced by permission of Nancy Burson.

The *Special Faces* series also strangely evokes the cultural constitution and the historical metamorphoses of the concept of the *monstrous*. Throughout its cultural-historical transformations and re-evaluations the monstrous initially signifies the *sacer* (sacred and profane) *lusus natura* endowed with the extra-ordinary, other-worldly faculty of mediating between the natural and the supernatural, cosmic world. Later it is transformed into the human oddity exhibited at the nineteenth century freak-show or circus side-show as an incurably inhuman, sub-normal curiosity. During the world wars it becomes the victim of race-cleansing, eugenic Nazi concentration camps, embodying the impure debris to be cleaned away. Afterwards the deviant *other* is turned into a symbol on the banner of the 1960s' revolutionary human rights movements and counter-politics, and it still remains an icon of daring, radical, subversive potential. Be it obviously marginalized and suppressed as differing from the norm, fetishistically exoticized, or pseudo-democratically over-celebrated (in the name of equality reaching the universalization and homogenization of its very distinctiveness), *otherness* somehow seems to be doomed to be dominated. Society is in constant need of the cast and category of *others* who can be scapegoated (pathologised, hyper-sexualized, objectified, and deprived of subjectivity) in order to reinforce in the status of the "difference" the normality of the self-same. The historical emergence of the cultural process of *othering* can be dated back to the seventeenth century's *Great Confine-*

ment described by Michel Foucault and Francis Barker, as the process whereby the society's unwanted, "freakish" elements—the sick, the poor, the orphaned, the unemployed, the homeless, the criminal, the mad—who had been integrally present, visible in society, are gradually dispossessed (by ideological state apparatuses as the prison or the madhouse studied by Foucault), and become reduced to the status of detritus through their being separated, excluded, and made invisible (as well as useful via regulative labour) in order to guarantee the foundation of the then emerging, by now fossilized, normal(ized)/normative modern bourgeois subjectivity (Barker 13; Foucault, "The Great Confinement" 124-41). The monstrous freak also embodies the feared "other, secret self within," in so far as it constitutes a screen upon which repressed cultural anxieties and desires can be projected. Contemplating Burson's series we can also realize that in contemporary Western societies we live in the age of the "last metaphorical shift in the status of monsters" (Braidotti 92). As the last "real," physical freaks disappear due to the development of medical sciences and the mandatory prenatal care provided by social security, new "imaginary," "invented" freaks take over contemporary popular culture. An increasing fascination for the fantastically monstrous is attested by the random surrounding freak-figures, as cult-series *Star Trek's* extraterrestrial mutants, the recent TV hit *Heroes'* protagonists endowed with supernatural capacities, children's favourite furry beings adorned with antennas on their heads and screens in their abdomens, the Teletubbies, or rock-stars like Marilyn Manson whose role-plays include androgyns and antichrists alike, as well as commodified, spectacularized human-curiosities starring MTV's stunt-show *Jackass'* stars, featuring a midget and a fat man who suffer injuries from crazy performances fusing elements of circus-act and extreme sports, or are simply beaten up in various "inventive" (supposedly comic) manners in each episode.

But most importantly, Burson portrays her special-faced models surrounded by the unconditional love of their family members, usually embraced by their mothers marked by expressions of joy and affection. Thus, Burson's photo series initiates an entire identity-politics encouraging viewers to surpass the sacrificial, scapegoating "logic of negativity" that governs our social identification defining the "self," the "me" in opposition to and superimposed over the different "not-me." Instead, the unconditional love seen on the photos points towards a *relational model of identity* (Barát)<sup>2</sup> based on an *ethics of care*. This identity-construction illustrated by Burson relies on relationality, connectedness, solidarity, caring, and a loving embracement of the *other* conceived not as dangerous, disabling *difference* but as a potentially enriching, enabling *alterity*, an integral part of our heterogeneous selves (that nevertheless respects the singularity, the individuality of the other, and lacks the will to homogenize it). The mothering (merely symbolically maternal, otherwise ungendered) *embracement*, the caring love of the *other* sharply contrasts the patriarchal *cannibalism* that violently incorporates the *other* to discipline, exclude and repress it, and define it negatively *against* himself. Instead of the ideologically-invested *othering*, that imposes disabling differences upon others to reinforce one's self-identity, Burson invites

us to open ourselves up to “reciprocal othernesses” entailing negotiations between exciting, heterogeneous beings whose “alterities” (Grosz 192, Bordo 41) enrich each other through an exchange that instead of aggressively remodeling them, leaves and loves them(selves) “deformed” as they are. In our relationship with *otherness*, irritated tolerance is exchanged to caring solidarity.



Fig. 3. Nancy Burson, “Untitled.” *Special Faces Series* 1995. <[http://www.nancyburson.com/cranio\\_fr.html](http://www.nancyburson.com/cranio_fr.html)>. Reproduced by permission of Nancy Burson.



## **Space-Off: A Caring Ethics of Embrace**

The ethics of embrace is implied in Burson's photography in a way which De Lauretis would designate by the film theoretical concept of *space-off*: "the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible" (26). Of course, this "ethics starting out from the side of the marginalized *other*" (Russo 12) has been revisited by various feminist theoreticians.

Nancy Chodorow claims that the dichotomously gendered selfhood—reinforcing the autonomy/relationality split and enhancing very different intersubjective relationships and moral comportments—is due to the fact that the primary caretakers of all children are women, whom girls learn to identify with, and boys are taught to differentiate from. As a result, the feminine sense of the self is founded on relationality and caring, while males protect their ego-boundaries through disconnecting from others and differentiation, especially from the overwhelming feminine (m)other (Chodorow 41, Friedman 43). Carol Gilligan, inspired by Chodorow, introduces her feminist *ethics of care*—also referred to as a *morality of responsibility*—as an alternative theory of moral development for women. She challenges Lawrence Kohlberg's *ethics of justice* considered to be the peak of moral maturing and unreachable for women. Gilligan praises—instead of abstract, normative, universal ethical principles of the masculine *morality of rights* and reason—women's strategies in solving moral dilemmas and taking ethical decisions, driven by intimate relationality, sensitive contextualization, respectful tolerance, compassionate empathy with otherness, interdependence, mutual help and altruistic caring (5-23, emphasis added).

Similarly, Marilyn Friedman suggests that self-realization and social interrelationship are not mutually exclusive categories, given that a relational conception of autonomy can be outlined through the example of female caretakers (41-59). Donna Haraway defines loving care as learning how to see faithfully from *another's* point of view, and she heralds related women's values, such as partial perspective, situated knowledge, relationality, solidarity, vulnerability and humour as major constituents of feminist empowerment and agency (190). Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson argue in favour of a new politics of identity and theories of agency—which are to be reintroduced by people previously marginalized from dominant social spheres and silenced by mainstream public narratives—with the innovative aim to transform otherness into variation, to free difference from normative devaluation, and restore the respect of previously disdained differences as female care-taking, being in relations and solidarity (53).

Alison Weir criticizes the "sacrificial logic" which defines Western identity through constant negativity, a struggle for mastery over an otherness that cannot be mastered, and she proposes to replace the masculine model of "self-identity as domination" by an alternative self-assertion built on the development of intersubjective relationships, active dialogue and mutual recognition instead of separation, opposition and negation of/to the other. Her re-interpretation of Hegel suggests that "embodiment must be seen as self-expression, self-completion, rather than self-negation" and that "self-con-

consciousness requires not the simple, abstract negation of the body which renders it permanently other, but the dialectical negation which negates its otherness" (Weir 21).

Julia Kristeva's ideas on feminist ethics can be even more easily connected to Burson's photos on deformed faces brightened-beautified by maternal love, since Kristeva talks about a *heretics of love*, in which the subject metaphorically identifies with the mother who conceives the *other* (synonymous with her child) as natural, inevitable, someone "who has come out of myself, which is yet not myself but a flow of unending germinations, an eternal cosmos" ("Stabat Mater" 262). In Kristeva—like, I believe, in Burson—this "motherly peace of mind" gnaws at the symbolic order's almightiness, bypasses perverse negation and constitutes the basis of the social bond by resembling others and, thus, fosters a "slow, difficult and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself" ("Stabat Mater" 262-63; "Women's Time" 206). Moreover, in Kristeva's view, this (her)ethical motherly love—which provides law with flesh, language and jouissance—pacifies in times of crisis when the "symbolic shell cracks and a crest emerges where speech causes biology to show through [. . .] at the time of illness, of sexual, intellectual, physical passion, of death [. . .]." ("Stabat Mater" 262). Paradoxically, the (her)ethics—the "self"'s opening to the "other"—introduced by the experience of maternal love or the communally shared esthetic experience is troubled by the radical splitting of the subject. Yet this "redoubling of the body, [this] separation and coexistence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech" (Kristeva, "Women's Time" 206) allows us to do away with discriminating differentiations, and reach a (pro)creative totality. Tellingly, in Kristeva's view, this (pro)creative totality is particularly easily reached with the help of contemporary art characterized by a transgressive discourse closer to the body, the emotions and the social contract's unnamable repressed by the social contract.

Burson keeps focusing on alternative evaluations of otherness with her *The Anomaly Machine* that shows people how they would look with various disabilities, as well as with her 1998 *Untitled Facial Composites* producing fantastic faces by blurring human and beast features, aiming at playing with interpreters' *hesitation* regarded by Tzvetan Todorov as the cornerstone of the fantastic (25) and the destabilization of stable identity categories. Yet the traditional, private portraits of the *Special Faces* series seem for me to be more sincere and convincing than her more recent, technologically sophisticated, more impersonal projects.

## Recent Projects: Focusing on Peace

Burson's most recent projects are still preoccupied with alternative ways of seeing, investigating what lies beyond appearances and problematizing the visibility or verifiability of reality, while tackling on global and personal levels her recurring vital question "where we come from and what we believe in" (Berwick 7). Making use of the most cutting-edge technological innovations, she uses a gas discharge visualization camera to depict (in)visible and unspeakable spiritual phenomena, capturing the



energy fields manifested in colored light emanating from faith healers' hands near the patient's body (*Healing*), or surrounding "sacred" objects like religious sculptures (*Mary* 2006, *Archangel Michael* 2006, or appearing as "orbs" of plasma energy—in a sense electrified air—in crop circles in England (*The Hand of God Crop Circle* 2003, *Pie Crop Circle* 2005). She uses more traditionalist methods to capture the "sacred" on her photographs of the magical, infinite expansion of the Vibhuti, a sacred ash that is said to have healed millions in India (*Vibhuti series* 2005), or on her pictures of dove feathers photographed in a sacred site, a cradle of Christianity, the yard of Glastonbury Cathedral in England (*Dove Feathers Series* 2004). The floating dove feathers not only symbolize the Holy Spirit as well as faith, truth and balance, but more specifically they refer to the fragile "balance between dark and light at this particular moment in our history" (*Nancy Burson in Clampart Website* 4).

It is precisely the fragility and the absolute necessity of a balance, of consensus, of solidarity and peace in our contemporary reality that Burson's significant recent project—realized in collaboration with Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and Creative Time—aimed to highlight. In 2002, 30,000 postcards and 7,000 posters inscribed "Focus on Peace" were distributed around the site of the World Trade Center to coincide with the first anniversary of 9/11, while a monumental (50x40 foot scrim) banner was hung along the WTC site's perimeter. Forming a visual pun, the grey text floating on a monochromatic background "Focus on Peace" was comprised of letters slightly out of focus, in order to communicate a "message with optic, psychic and meditative dimensions," and "to serve as a visualization/contemplation tool to shift our consciousness forward." As Burson claimed in her artistic intention:

It is a positive action message of healing and hope. What we see outside ourselves is a projection of what lies within. By asking people to "Focus on Peace," we are asking them to focus on their own personal peace within, as well as the concept of world peace. There can never be peace until we have peace within ourselves. Therefore, real peace consists of all the pieces. By holding the frequency of peace we create the intention for it to manifest.  
(*Focus on Peace Project*)

Beyond its surface meaning, the somewhat banal, commonsense wisdom on inner peace constituting the basis and fundamental prerequisite of world peace, there are some thought-provoking latent messages embedded within this claim of Burson. The slogan "Focus on Peace" comprised of letters out of focus creates a paradox resulting from the contradiction of text and image, of content and style. This mode of artistic representation invites the spectator to *defocalize* his/her own fixed point-of-view, and to discover that this spectatorial position taken for granted as the only one from which the Truth can be perceived is merely a partial perspective, only one of the numerous, subjective experiences, looks of reality. We are encouraged to explore alternative perspectives, and particularly a *bifocal vision* that is willing to take into consideration,



beyond our own, other(s') views (usually of marginalized minorities) which hegemonic majorities conventionally denounce to be "out of focus," to be blind, worthless, senseless. Being out of focus, Burson's phrase demythologizes the concept of the neutral, realist gaze free of ideology, while the propaganda slogan-like line fading into a blurred image evokes that "to manipulate means to create an *image* of reality that looks like *as if it was reality itself*" (Breton 20, emphasis in the original).<sup>3</sup>

The slogan's repetition on thousands of cards and posters recalls the *argumentum ad nauseam*, this ideologically-invested rhetorical strategy of truth-production that here becomes subverted through the infinite blurring of the words. Burson certainly chooses an innovative way of presenting the Irrepresentable, when—going against the common trend described by Slavoj Žižek—she refuses to comment upon the events of the September 11 2001 terror attacks as/in a theatrical *spectacularization* of the Real shattering our illusory reality as the Unimaginable Impossible. Instead of the shocking *images* of the planes hitting the WTC towers we all wanted to see again and again in a repetition compulsion beyond the pleasure principle (Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert* 9, 12), Burson decides to subvert the discursive system from within, using gradually dissolving linguistic signs, fading letters, blurring, decomposing words which seem to portray the slow, but inescapable decay of the Western representational system, meaning-formation and metaphysics. Highlighting the meditative dimension of her message, Burson leads towards Eastern philosophies and religions in which the spiritual practice of relaxed attention inward to the mind entails a dissolution of the mind freed of thoughts as well as a mental opening up to divine benevolence, universal peace and a loving kindness towards all beings. The repeatedly blurred letters in this case even have a healing hypnotic potential, while the syllabants in "Focus on Peace" recall a whispering, a soothing hushing, a meditational mantra. Interestingly, meditation's focus upon the present moment coincides with the ultimate aim of photography that aims to fight and preserve time simultaneously.

In place of conclusion, we can say that Nancy Burson's artistic projects seem to be *par excellence* realizations of Susan Sontag's definition of photography: they "teach us a new visual code, [they] alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe, [and they constitute] a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing," providing edification and pleasure to our insatiable eyes (Sontag 1).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Attila Kiss for lending me an anthology on twentieth-century representations of the body, in which I first discovered Burson's fascinating photography.

<sup>2</sup> See particularly Chapter Six: "From a Comparative Study to a Case Study of the Relational Nature of Identity" (103-127).

<sup>3</sup> My translation. A.K.

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