

## scrolling the banal babe, in the work of Clunie Reid

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I can see the back of her head, but not her face. She's half sitting-up and half-reclining in the way girls do on the beach, remaining in the right position you need to be in to tan *and* remain visible at the same time. Not totally recumbent but relaxed enough to look like she'd be fun to someone. Her knees are tucked together, suggesting the sexual body, but keeping it hidden from strolling lifeguard eyes. I could be looking at a photograph of myself as a teenager—it is an image of such repetition and banality: but this pink, purple and blue-pigmented image has been found and appropriated by the artist, pulped from the internet, where the search terms were probably as banal as 'beach' and 'babe'.

She is the cyberspace Lolita, endlessly the same and endlessly sexualised: completely gazed upon by the male consumer while she turns her head. Scrawled in black marker pen, either side of the young girl's body, are two words—BANAL ACTUAL—a visceral response to an abject thing. This handwritten conjunctive is the title of the 2011 work by the British artist Clunie Reid, and embodies the paradoxical reality of her sameness. Banally actual and actually banal: she is real insofar as she is fake, a disappearing act that is further accentuated by the photograph's printing on silver-backed holographic paper. She twinkles like an object, or ornament.

'Banal actual' is an aphorism that could have just as easily come from Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (2012), which simultaneously performs and critiques the global colonisation of the teasing young girl temptress. She is literally eaten up and spat back out again as another young girl, in a magazine or on TV. As Tiqqun, translated by the poet Ariana Reines, writes: 'the very moment that the evidence of the Young-Girl attains the force of a cliché, the Young-Girl has already overcome it, at least in her primitive aspect of obscenely sophisticated mass production'.<sup>1</sup>

In the work of Clunie Reid, the artist appropriates and slashes through this sophisticated mass production with a sly force of critical mimicry. Mimicry that is often visual, as she collages photographic prints together and pirates digital imagery, but also verbal, as she writes over the image in plagiarised language. *In Pursuit of the Liquid*, Reid's 2013 four-screen video installation, harnesses this method of communication: it is a mode of speaking, which looks to critique (through the copy) the representation of the digitised girl-body. Crafted to do so by a backstage animator, in the videos, a mutant creature crouches on all fours, forcibly inviting, while another beach-babe arches her back, banal and actual (also forcibly inviting). These digital dolls, spliced together as one comprehensive 'image', are delectable in their artifice and plastic curvature. But their pretendness is also the reality of their misogynistic coming-to-being, brought to light by Reid's recontextualisation of the material. As Donna Haraway wrote of the animal/machine girl hybrid in her 'Cyborg Manifesto': she is a 'creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction'.<sup>2</sup>

Seen in moving-image installations such as *In Pursuit of the Liquid*, or photographic montages—like *Pump it Baby!* (2015)—that play on the moving-image, in Reid’s practice of plagiarism, image and text mutates from one frame to the next with the blink of an eye: as fast as the pop-up windows that her playthings inhabit. And it is with this excessive and strung-out appropriation of the plagiarised image where Reid’s work enters a space of gendered critique. In her method of doe-eyed avatar duplication, the artist reveals the online representation of female sexuality and young-girl femininity to be an engineered, mechanical performance, a fictional template to be infinitely repeated by its makers, and infinitely enjoyed by its consumers. These are passive images to be actively shopped, scrolled, browsed and used. Working on top of the image is the text. As Reid performs the vocabulary of the internet, stealing the robotic syntax of the chat-room nymphet, but displacing it in a repositioned context, she draws our attention to the sexist ventriloquism operating behind the scenes.

In the works featured in this 2015 *Photoworks Annual*, the artist is once again stealing (or at least mimicking) the constructed speech of the desiring digital avatar. In a number of the images, a song lyric of lusty confession—‘I won’t let these little things slip out of my mouth’—is overlaid and repeated on mainly monochrome grounds of photographic collage. This language of (strangely anonymous) visibility is suggestive of the chat-room message feed, in which sexuality and desire is consistently performed, over-emphasised even, but rarely realised in bodily contact. It is a space of role-play, fantasy *and* cliché.

In another image, the artist appears to be playing on the girlish confession that is leaking all over the internet’s blogs and social media, as Reid plagiarises *and* writes, in defiantly analogue typography: ‘My self is a stinking dead cronut’. An image of this ‘postmodern’ pastry encrusted with pink heart emojis makes a jokily abject and vulvic logo out of the confession. As in her previous work, such as *Banal Actual* (2011) or *It’s Time for Bed Cassiopeia* (2009), in this new body of work, Reid is commenting—through appropriation and performance—on the rehearsed and predictable femininity that defines the language and image of female subjectivity across digital and media spaces.

On multiple images, the whooshing hearts spiral out of control, close in on a masculine and dangerous zombie, while the repeated presence of the thorn-stemmed rose suggests that perhaps there might be room to claim back this digital space. A lethal femininity, having her revenge. In Reid’s new photographic prints, female body parts have been cut up and carved, made indistinct by the architectural squares of the artifice, and the mediated grain of the image. In one image we even encounter a firmly androgynous body, divided in half, with an erect breast and an erect penis. Through this fractured construction of physicality, where a limb or a lip is abstracted beyond recognition, comes a fractured vision of gendered subjectivity. The interior and exterior self is compartmentalised as opposed to whole, neither ‘female’ nor ‘male’ but a cyborgian both. ‘Resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity’,<sup>3</sup> I will follow the cyborg’s lead when I sunbathe on the beach this summer, and refuse to be contained by the banal actual position. My limbs will splay in multiple directions, like a feminist hyperlinking internet.

1 Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, trans. Ariana Reines (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), p. 20.

2 Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s' in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 7

3 Ibid., p. 9

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