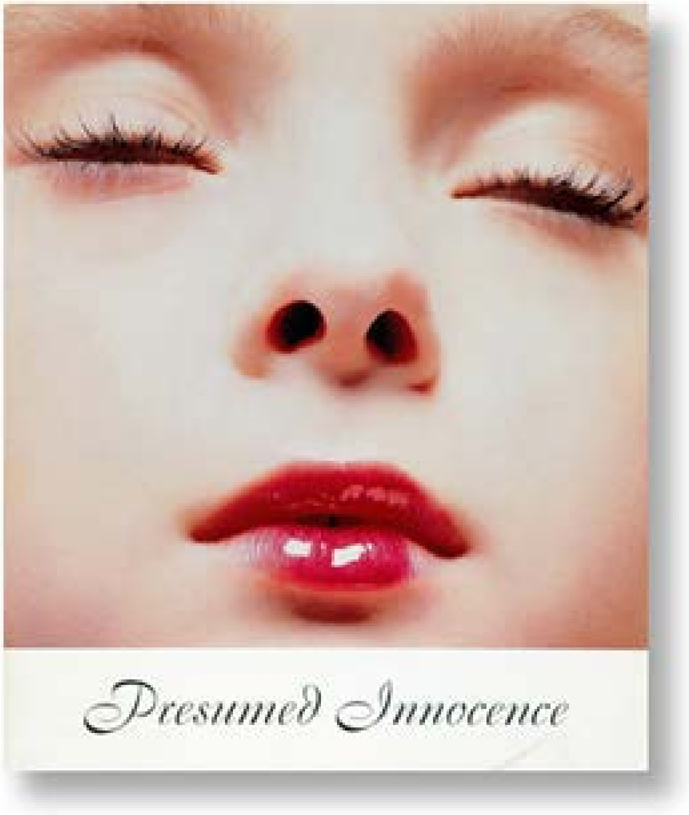

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YOUTH'S PURGATORY: PRESUMPTIONS OF INNOCENCE AND OTHER CHILDHOOD ROLES

Robert Hobbs

Although childhood in the past has been presumed to be a time of extended innocence, as the title of this exhibition and catalogue ironically suggests, innocence is only one of many roles that children have played in their obstacle-ridden journey to adulthood. Complex societies necessitate an ever increasing reliance on specialized languages predicated on shorthand typifications (roles) that have assumed the objectivity of reality.[1] In order for society to function efficiently, adults as well as children need to ratify some roles as the norm. As with other publicly sanctioned parts, childhood innocence is a social and historical development, not a natural state. Its continued embracement in the twentieth century may stem from its important ideological function of solidifying and stabilizing society's need to believe in its innate goodness and ability to renew itself with each forthcoming generation. Rarely, however, has this ideology been recognized for what it is: a widespread endorsement of a highly artificial philosophical system traceable to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762). In this treatise on the education of a young boy, Rousseau equates Émile's goodness with his ability to realize his natural potential, thus romanticizing and legitimizing nature.

This ideology has pervaded the work of even so-called documentary artists such as Lewis Hine, who, almost a century and a half after Rousseau, made gritty photographs of working children. His images of young, helpless factory workers appear to counteract the myth of humanity's intrinsic goodness, even though they are in fact predicated on it. Hine's photographs served a social activist goal that ultimately resulted in child labor laws, but they also portrayed the same insistent belief in innocence as painter John George Brown's homeless, yet ingratiatingly wholesome boys. Brown's scrubbed waifs personified early stages of the Horatio Alger "rags-to-riches" myth that seems to have exonerated Gilded Age entrepreneurs of possible guilt feelings about the dire living conditions suffered by great numbers of street children.

Only in the 1950s when teens were recognized as a distinct market was the myth of childhood innocence partially dismantled. And even then, in some of the most celebrated films of the time, such as *East of Eden* (1955) and *Rebel without a Cause* (also 1955), the characters played by the decade's proclaimed renegade, James Dean, were viewed as misunderstood rather than malevolent.[2]

In successive decades, the myth of presumed innocence has been challenged by other social constructs. In the 1960s, the youth of this country were rebelling against both the Vietnam War and the rampant consumerism resulting from the peak period of American prosperity (roughly 1954-1964) that social critic Thomas Hine has named "populuxe."[3] Hollywood projected, on this formerly inculpable screen, images proclaiming the existence of untrammeled evil. Films such as *Children of the Damned* (1964), which is a sequel to the 1960 film *Village of the Damned*, and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) played with the tensions between society's former assumptions of children's natural goodness and its realization that a lack of guile could mask undeniable evil. These contending roles dramatized in shocking and elaborate, yet ultimately nonrealistic narratives, the mass culture's growing need to cope with youth's mounting independence as a distinct and particularly vociferous subculture.

In ensuing decades the myths for describing youth have changed dramatically as adults began to lose their unflagging belief in childhood as an idyllic, almost sacred realm and accepted it as an unsettling purgatory enunciated by increased violence and substance abuse. Both perpetrators of crime and its victims, youth has become the site of a number of power struggles in which society acts out its fears and aggressions. These conflicting and overlapping discourses have gained momentum from a number of striking statistics such as these from a 1995 survey:

> 70 percent of 12- to 13-year-olds know someone their age who smokes; drinks: 44 percent; does drugs: 33 percent; has a gun: 29 percent; has been to jail: 27 percent; has a child or is pregnant: 20 percent; has been forced to have sex: 12 percent....[4]

In hopeful contrast to their familiarity with the pitfalls of contemporary life, a majority of children in the same survey said that their number one future goal was to marry and have a good family; and their second was to establish a closeness to God.[5]

The general loss of idealism about childhood is symptomatic of unsettling questions people have asked themselves in recent decades. Do we have an essential identity or are we merely role playing? Does reality exist, or is it merely the unexamined face of innumerable simulacra - models of reality for which there is no substantive basis? Are people only blank slates on which society inscribes its rules and roles? Is individuality, as classic Marxists have pointed out for more than a century, a necessary adjustment to product differentiation, whereby individuals are rated by their consumer likes and dislikes? Are we being trivialized by our economy and so mediated by our technology that our thoughts, attitudes, and desires are merely a set of programmed and predictable permutations? These and many more questions have been plaguing greater numbers of people in recent years, who in turn have been projecting their insecurities onto children.

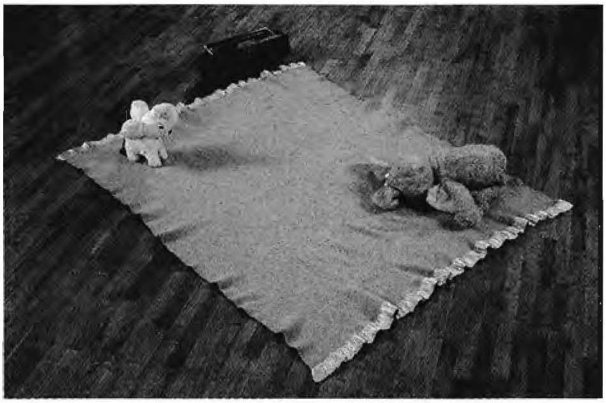
But instead of allaying their parents' apprehensions, many of these offspring have escaped both parental authority and a concomitant crisis of belief through an uncritical acceptance of technology's quick fixes. Taking the form of television and video games in recent years, these mass-media art forms have too often provided both illusorily simple and extremely violent solutions to problems by transmogrifying them into easily sanctioned enemies.

Since the late 1980s a number of artists have responded to this crisis of identity by mirroring societal projections on the seemingly blank screen of childhood. Rather than using art as a propagandistic tool to proselytize a given definition of childhood or adjudicate among competing roles, they have taken the far tougher route of reframing dominant constructs and lining up society's supposed culprits. Not wishing to make decisions for viewers, artists in this exhibition have enticed them through the distancing and compelling lens of art to consider the ways that children and their playthings have furnished both late twentieth-century society and its new technologies with a number of intriguing masks. Although these artists might have chosen to assuage their viewers with comforting, even nostalgic images, they have chosen to deal with some of the most complex and difficult personae currently assuming the face of reality in the daily news. The partially deconstructed masks appearing in this art are necessarily ambiguous: children are neither good nor evil, neither entirely blank screens nor fully formed individuals. They are often caught between competing role models as evidenced by Janet Biggs' preternaturally tall preschool children in *When Five Year Olds Are Ten Feet Tall* (1993), Sally Mann's photographs of her daughter *Jessie as Jessie* and *Jessie as Madonna* (1990), and Karen Kilimnick's teenage girl protagonists whose dreams assume the form of mass-media clichéd representations of sophistication, even though their juvenile handwriting and stereotypical drawing styles give them away. In addition Lisa Yuskavage's prepubescent females' very real problems with newly discovered sexuality and pregnancy are at odds with the sickly sweet purity of the dime-store art genre in which they are rendered. Between the polarities of good and evil, a number of artists in *Presumed Innocence* have created important spaces whereby models of reality can be dissected and analyzed if viewers wish. An extreme case of role-playing is Tony Oursler's *Spectral Disorder* (1995), which consists of a limp rag doll on whose blank face are screened via a small video projector fifteen different personality disorders.[6]

Created earlier than Oursler's is the work of his friend Mike Kelley, a California artist from a Catholic mid-western working-class family, who began in the late 1980s deconstructing truisms of childhood. He explains:

> The modernist cult of the child is generally a very naive and antipsychological one, like the idea of the "noble savage." After Freud we all know that children have sexual drives and all that. So it's funny to me that a lot of the art-world discussion of childhood imagery still centers on the child as innocent instead of talking about the reasons for maintaining that myth. My work is about showing these ideas as adult constructs - the construction of a false innocence, the denying of children their identity, and the projection on top of that of the romantic idea of the artist as a regressive personality.[7]

In his art Kelley finds ways to make inroads into the ideology of innocence by pointing up its absurdity. In *Dialogue #2 (Transparent White Glass/Transparent Black Glass)* (1992), stuffed animals poised on a child's blanket, together with a cassette playing a barely audible philosophical discussion, heighten the



Mike Kelley, *Dialogue #2 (Transparent White Glass/Transparent Black Glass)*, 1992. Mixed media, 74 x 49 x 11". Collection of Susan and Lewis Manilow.

contradictoriness of two adult versions of reality: a mandated innocence represented by the toys and the realm of abstract thinking that the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget believes to be acquired by children beginning around age twelve.[8] Piaget's genetic epistemology based on suppositions about nature's hypothesized timetable is destabilized but not denied in Kelley's work. Related to his *Half a Man* series that he initiated in 1987, *Dialogue #2* presents two views of adolescence: the first is symbolized by the metonym of well-used childhood toys to which an adolescent might still cling, while the second refers to the acquisition of the ability to deal with concepts, represented by the barely audible philosophical ideas played on the cassette.

Kelley's *Ahh...Youth!* (1991), used as the cover for the Sonic Youth's 1992 CD *Dirty*, plays on this adult way of musing about children's ineptitudes while condoning them.[9] The piece presents an adolescent photograph of the artist as an acne-ridden supernerd, which is one mugshot among a series of stuffed toys (both manufactured and homemade) that might have been legacies of Kelley's own childhood. This work implies that while our society might congratulate itself on its widespread efforts to recycle its waste metals, plastics, and paper, it continues to discard its most important resource, its youth, once the initial lustre of innocence has begun to show signs of wear. But, despite their cavalier attitude toward teenagers, adults continue to maintain an unwavering belief in the inculpability of preadolescents as the title *Ahh...Youth!* indicates.

Kelley's reclamation of discarded toys in this work has a basis in his childhood when he saw a puppet on a children's TV program "who was supposed to be on an endless stairway and falls off into nothingness."[10] Recalling this plunge into an abyss as "the most frightening media thing I can remember from my childhood," Kelley appears in this and other works to be resurrecting both this lost puppet and his adolescence. Rather than regarding adolescence as a natural category, Kelley judges it a case of simple economic expediency:

> Though biologically adults, adolescents are legally children. Adolescence is a by-product of industrialization. Because these people aren't wanted in the work force, since there are too many workers, you extend the notion of childhood past the point of biological adulthood.[11]

A social construct naturalized as an extension of childhood, adolescence is an ideology that is as absurd and as haunting as the lineup of human and surrogate human suspects populating *Ahh...Youth!*

While Kelley's fascination with childhood no doubt stems from his own acknowledged dysfunctional upbringing, it also resonates with the sensibility of abjection defined in Julia Kristeva's book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*[12] (published in French in 1980 and in English translation in 1982) which appears to have inspired a range of 1980s work, such as early Kiki Smith sculptures and Andres Serrano photographs, both of which emphasize the role of body fluids including blood, sweat, saliva, semen, and urine in defining the postmodern and no longer autonomous self.

In this book Kristeva builds on Jacques Lacan's elucidation of the mirror stage of infant development in which a child learns that its reflected image is both itself and not itself since the mirrored image's completeness makes the child painfully aware of the inadequacies of its own body. Building on the theory of the mirror stage, Lacan conjectures that the imaginary basis of the ego represents an impossible standard first for children and then later for adults to attain.

In Kristeva's system, the division of the self signaled by Lacan's mirror stage is dramatized as self-rejection: infants, who have regarded their mothers as inherent parts of themselves, now abnegate this mother-self. Kristeva's updated and insidious oedipal narrative characterizes a recurrent growth pattern in which one rejects aspects of oneself (Kristeva's "preconscious semiotic") in order to come to terms with the symbolic name-of-the-father, i.e., the biological father who is known indirectly through signs. Julian Trigo's painting of a mother together with the proliferated fragments of her look-alike child addresses the child's identification with its mother.

Writing in a poetic and evocative manner that has proven appealing to a number of artists since the publication of *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains how abjection might begin with a loathing for a particular food such as milk - no doubt a reference to mother's milk:

> When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk - harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring - I experience a gagging sensation.... Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that *they* see that "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.[13]

In this passage Kristeva places the "I" in quotation marks to emphasize a new sense of self that follows the infant's self-disgust for allowing the desire of one's parents to supplant its own feelings, followed by a rejection of itself including that alien desire. This abjection necessitates a symbolic death without the reassurance of an eventual resurrection in the form of a new self.[14]

The abject in Mike Kelley's work, to which a number of writers have alluded but not analyzed, takes the form of stuffed animals, often found in Salvation Army stores, that have been loved, stained with food and urine, and eventually tossed aside or abandoned. This cyclical development or "semanalytic" process, to use Kristeva's early neologism combining semiotics and psychoanalysis, has assumed the role of metaphor in subsequent art in which a child's development takes the form of self-abnegations of culturally constructed roles, which were once deemed essential aspects of the self, in order that he or she might come to terms with a truer sense of self. Of course, Kelley's art and that of a few of his contemporaries is highly ironic because there is no true self to be revealed in the manner of princes in fairy tales released from frog-like casings through love and understanding: there are only newer social and historic constructs that have tended in the 1980s and 1990s to be produced by mass media.

Although abjection appears to be the transcendental signified explaining the art made by Mike Kelley's occasional collaborator Paul McCarthy, McCarthy's sources are to be found in the art of Yves Klein, the Vienna Actionismus School, dadaists, futurists, fluxus artists, the Japanese Gutai, and the zero movement, as well as in French existentialism. And yet McCarthy's favored existentialist text, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), could even be considered a prototype for abjection since it parallels the catalytic phase of Kristeva's abjection in which a subject begins to experience a strong internal loathing. Written in a seemingly objective manner, Sartre's diaristic, philosophical novel chronicles in detail Roquentin's suspicion of an internal rift, as the following passage, cited and slightly edited by Paul McCarthy, indicates:

> Something has happened to me, I can't doubt it any more. It came as an illness does, not like an ordinary certainty, not like anything evident. It came...little by little; I felt a little strange, little, my Aunt Bigeois told me "If you look at yourself too long in the mirror, you'll see a monkey." I must have looked at myself even longer than that: what I see is well below the monkey, on the fringe of the vegetable world, at the level of jellyfish. It is alive, I can't say it isn't; but this was not the life that Anny contemplated: I see a slight tremor.[15]

One might say that full-blown nausea is the singularly most important factor in McCarthy's spectacularly horrific performances that began in the 1970s when such foods as mayonnaise and ketchup, which resemble body fluids, were liberally slathered on his body and even used as emetics.

In *Pinocchio Pipenose Householddilemma* (1994) McCarthy, appearing in a Pinocchio mask and costume, confronts the little Italian puppet who wants to become human. The ensuing interactions between the artist/adult/child and the puppet/child become a potential basis for the audience's experience of abjection since all viewers must don full costumes in order to view the videotape. Their abjection, or initial nausea, comes from a disgust with the media-generated selves they are watching and implicitly emulating in their dress. In this manner, McCarthy enacts a scene whereby viewers can react viscerally and negatively to role-playing in general and to the Disneyesque Pinocchio role model in particular.

According to the artist, Disney's sanitized and ultimately inhibiting version of childhood and America is one of several targets:

> When I was first doing the performances, I was not directly concerned with the fantasy world of Disneyland. I was more concerned with B movies. Some of the poses were taken from B-movie stills, but I wasn't interested in entering the world of Hollywood. I was interested in mimicking Hollywood. The more overt interest in Disneyland and television happened in the early 1980s - not just Disneyland but in the whole artificial Shangri La of shopping malls - the commodity world.[16]

A similar concern with deconstructing media-based children's roles projected by Disney and his competitors is found in Joyce Pensato's black-and-white enamel paintings of discarded toys based on cartoon characters. Caricatures of humanity, these used and often misused toys, have achieved a state of disquietude at odds with the insistent and superficial joviality of Disneyesque conventions. Employing an abstract expressionist vocabulary of improvisatory brush strokes and liberal drips to connote spontaneity, Pensato parodies her handmade means at the same time that she reveals an unsettling substratum to the rigorously adopted benignity of industrially produced toys. These fetishized objects seem to have taken on the abjection of their former owners who rejected them together with the prescribed childhood roles they entail.

The shadowy nature of manufactured toys is the subject of other works in this exhibition. African-American Todd Gray establishes implicit homologies between his largely two-dimensional silhouettes of cartoon characters popular at mid-century and mainstream society's ordained roles for African Americans at that time. Janet Biggs' greatly enlarged *Nightlights* (1993) capture the potentially nightmarish visages of these seemingly innocent cartoon characters. And Daniel Oates' handmade *Cops* dramatizes the great disparity between these child-sized figures and their real-life equivalents. His *Glock*, named for a German weapons manufacturer, illuminates the subject of childhood violence by transforming it into a cogent icon that plays on the ambivalence of guns as toys and weapons, objects of desire and instruments far too large for children to handle. Both the playfulness of guns and their seriousness are manifested in Oates' piece.

More layered and consequently far more ambiguous than the above works are Aura Rosenberg's photographs of children whose faces have been painted by such well-known artists as Mike Kelley, Allan McCollum, Jim Shaw, and Kiki Smith. Recently, Rosenberg described the series in a short piece entitled *Who Am I, What Am I, Where Am I,* no doubt a transposition of the title of Gauguin's famous painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897) in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. In this piece she notes the origin of these photographs:

> Children love to have their faces painted. (So incidentally do adults - look at any issue of *Vogue* or *Vanity Fair* and in some guise you will find one.) Maybe children like to pretend, maybe

> their identities are more malleable, for whatever reason we like to decorate our bodies and face painting is a standard activity at most children's events. I've routinely taken photo portraits for the Winter Fair in my daughter's school. Many parents wait until their child's face has been painted to take the picture. Every portrait provides an opportunity to present ourselves as we would like others to see us; face painting literally adds another layer to this process. What distinguishes these portraits is the effort to balance disguise and authenticity combined with a childish delight in masquerade itself.[17]

Moving from the vernacular activity of painting faces at street fairs to the fine arts, Rosenberg relies on the commercial portrait studio style of closely cropped heads and neutral backgrounds to document these images on which artists and children have collaborated. Their negotiations depend on a number of prototypes, including children's ideas of the horrific and fantastic as well as the individual artists' signature styles. Usually the artists' conceptions dominate over childrens', but none of the pre-adolescents' faces can be considered blank canvases since they have had an opportunity to offer their input. Rosenberg's *Who Am I...* series thus develops out of dialectic propositions, poised on differences between nature and culture that were an important component of her series of nudes decoupaged on stones. In *Who Am I...*, the question of identity and place is a self-reflexive question asked most notably by the subject, but also by the face-painting artist, by Rosenberg herself, and by viewers who are presented with a series of overlapping social and artistic masks that they need to identify. This layering enacts a process of mediation similar to that enacted by mass culture which is capable of transforming any subject into an instant celebrity.

Rosenberg layers roles so that the contributions of each participant are distinct and none prevail. One might term her a realist who differs from earlier adherents of this approach in her refusal to look for a distinct and unequivocal language in which to cast reality. Instead, she focuses on ways that images of young people are mediated by both themselves and a host of elders, so that any attempt to come to terms with their essence would be deemed a ludicrous folly. Although Rosenberg's subject might be children, her art is about art. But differing from the nineteenth century *l'art pour l'art* sensibility that placed great premium on artists as self-proclaimed aristocrats of the senses, Rosenberg's is the popular, pervasive, and far too little-examined art of ideology.

Tracey Moffatt created in 1994 a series of photolithographs entitled *Scarred for Life* that exhibit a similar complexity.[18] Modeled after early issues of *Life* magazine, which intended to present a range of photo essays documenting contemporary values and historic events, Moffatt's series ironically plays with the fact that *Life's* reflections of the world became such pervasive simulacra that contemporary events began to imitate them. Her series of nine images in *Scarred for Life*, entitled *Job Hunt, 1976*; *Charm Alone, 1965; Useless, 1974*; *The Wizard of Oz, 1956*; *Doll Birth, 1972*; *Heart Attack, 1970*; *Mother's Day, 1975*; *Telecam Guys, 1977*; *Birth Certificate, 1962*, play with the double entendres of life mirroring *Life*, and present people who might even become willing victims in order to do so. Part of the power of her works arises from the conjunction of transgressive and often painful formative experiences with the validation offered by the *Life* magazine format. These images become occasions for viewers to recall their own difficult childhood experiences at the same time that they are forced to view them as mediated and thus legitimized roles.

Although Larry Clark's film *Kids* (1995)[19] has been disparaged as only a bleak tale of amorality among modern kids, Clark in fact chose a nineteen-year-old street-wise New Yorker named Harmony Korine to write the script for this film. The advantage of such a ploy is that *Kids* represents a late adolescent view of her own world. Since the morality of this cautionary tale about unsafe sex, drugs, date rape, and AIDS is the author's and not Clark's, he gives himself license to remain a tough and noncommittal director.[20] Far from simple reportage, Clark's film is a documentary in which youths act out a host of assigned and self-appointed roles. Korine's script represents a transition from her former adherence to a rigorously encoded street amorality to a conservatism more in line with the ineffectual parents in the film who are unable to censor, much less redirect, their children's profligate narcissism.

Despite the trenchant realism of Rosenberg's, Moffatt's, and Clark's views of childhood, all three have found ways to critique roles, ratified by society at large and the mass media, in which children have played a complicit part. While they cast an eye at the past and the immediate present, other artists are creating images of a posthuman future, *sauf* idealism, for us to consider.[21] The crystal ball of this new age is the subject of Taro Chiezo's *Three Fighters from Cyberspace* (1996), and its strange denizens are the subjects of Keith Cottingham's, Inez van Lamsweerde's, and Dinos and Jake Chapman's art.

Although most, but certainly not all, the artists' works discussed thus far can be explained in terms of abjection, which provides a psychoanalytic explanation for the constant leapfrogging of today's youth from one socially constructed role to another, digital photography enables artists to conceive a simulated humanity without humans or, to use a standard definition of simulacra, copies for which there are no originals. Held up as an unattainable ideal, this posthuman state may be a possible terminal point for the string of proliferating simulacra that have been embraced by youths on their mine-filled course to adulthood. It arrests, at least temporarily, this parade of simulacra by deconstructing their operative masks, and at the same time it offers a jumping-off point for the new millennium when the incipient field of biogenetic research may well transform the science fictional proposition of proliferating cyborgs into a posthuman truth.[22]

Simulacra are to digital forms of representation what abjection has been to analog. In order to understand this cleavage in representing the human subject, it is first necessary to return briefly to abjection, its way of positing the unfinished project of the self, and its alliances to analog forms of representation built on concrete similarities in contrast to the abstract equivalents of digital representation.

Abjection is a dynamic view of the self in terms of a recurring pattern of self-rejection and reformation. The overarching self of the abject subject, however, is not limited to any of its specific manifestations; instead it is found in the ongoing rituals of threatening oedipal initiations. Aspects of a greater, but never a unified and static, self are evidenced in this process of self-loathing and in a consequent ability to stop and then again start identifying with successive yet different self-induced bondings that turn into self-inflicted hostilities. Abjection theory implies that the self is never able to be fully realized, much less appreciated, because its integral dynamism is always held out as negative capability similar to that of modern artists who have defined their work through declarations of what it is not.

The abject self can be equated with analog forms of representation in its reliance on similar proportional relationships that become the basis of initial bonding and, in abjection, subsequent identity misalignment.[23] Analog computer systems, for example, rely on such variable physical quantities as electrical potential, fluid pressure, or mechanical motion to relate corresponding quantities to problems being solved. In Kristeva's system each oedipal initiation, or abjected self, however, results in a transformation, with a consequent loss of the defining outlines of an earlier misalignment, i.e., analogy. The abjecting self that rejects one set of bonds, i.e., an analogous situation, can also be considered a human counterpart to analog photographs which degrade with each successive generation of copies.

Differing from this analogical relationship between the self and the world is the realm of digital imagery in which signals are transformed into points referred to as "pixels." In *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era,* William J. Mitchell explains this process:

> Images are encoded digitally by uniformly subdividing the picture plane into a finite Cartesian grid of cells (known as pixels) and specifying the intensity or color of each cell by means of an integer drawn from some limited range. The resulting two-dimensional array of integers (the raster grid) can be stored in computer memory, transmitted electronically, and interpreted by various devices to produce displays and printed images.[24]

The advantage of the digital system, which is the basis for modern computers, over the analog one is its simplicity and reliability in processing information. Numbers, letters, and symbols in digital systems are expressed in terms of the two digits 0 and 1 of the binary code.

Digital imagery presents a totally different order of being based on pixels denominated through numbers. This radical shift, used for such programs as "Paintbox" and "Photoshop" in which pixels have mathematical values assigned to them, enables artists to change the very qualities of the individual pixels so that analog photographs scanned into a computer are equivalent to *plein air* sketches transformed by artists into paintings. In this system, photographic images are no longer indexical, i.e., motivated by causal links between signs and objects; instead they are manipulated at will by artists working as painters rather than photographers.[25] Their resultant mediated images mark a watershed in the ongoing deconstruction of photographic verism. When these images take the form of children, as they do in the work of both Keith Cottingham and Inez van Lamsweerde, these human forgeries signal the stillbirth of the postmodern self. This postmodern or posthuman self is registered in the art as a healthy disbelief in the grand metanarratives of childhood that are part of the French eighteenth-century enlightenment's legacy.

In 1992 Keith Cottingham used Photoshop to construct digital representations of young boys.[26] Consisting of related images of a single youth, twins, and triplets respectively, this triptych dramatizes the digital cloning that took place when the artist combined scans of anatomical drawings, modeled clay faces (based on over forty photographs of people of diverse ages, sex, and ethnic origins) and photographic samples of human features. These assimilations, which are all subsumed under the general rubric of the artist's photographic appearance as an adolescent, were completed a year before *Time* magazine presented on the cover of its special fall 1993 issue "The New Face of America," an image which became justifiably famous. Taking the form of an attractive young woman, this computer synthesis of the nation's ethnic groups depends on their relative percentages vis-à-vis the entire population. Cottingham's youths, however, veer away from this melting pot ideal. To a number of critics, they appear to be purposefully strange assimilations of their component parts.[27] Instead of using his art to disguise itself into a seamless vision of a new machine-generated humanity, Cottingham effects a slightly akimbo realm out of sync with such utopianism. "By creating a portrait as multiple personas," the artist has elucidated, "the 'Self' is exposed not as a solidified being, but as the movement and development of social and interior interaction; each expression a view of and onto itself."[28]

Although critics have not compared these images with their realist prototypes in the perspective initiated by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, the implicit comparison created by the parallels of intense spotlights, black backgrounds, and similarity of subject matter enriches the photographs' syntactical complexity, suggesting that posthuman realms in cyberspace are replacing the baroque paradigm of the grand theater of everyday life.[29] Their disquieting naturalism coupled with a conventionalized framework reinforces Cottingham's artistic ambition to replace realism with a metarealism:

> By mimicking representational photography, *Fictitious Portraits* demonstrates that as a label "realism" is remarkably elastic, and that just like painters, photographers invent rules and schemata for laying down visual signs. Electronic reproduction allows me to use and abuse photography's myth, its privileged claim to the real; to critique the most important invention of modern times - the subject, the Modern notion of personhood.[30]

A similar interest in deconstructing "the Modern notion of personhood" is evident in photographs by the Dutch artist Inez van Lamsweerde. This former high-fashion photographer has found that Paintbox allows her the freedom to establish arresting conjunctions of dissimilar types, such as the faces of little girls exhibiting leering mouths of grown men. Norman Bryson's term "discursive work," which connects individual works of art with the institutionalized discourses of particular sign systems, can be enlisted to describe the signifying power of van Lamsweerde's strange amalgamations.[31] Bryson has also originated the phrase "collisions of discursive forms" to describe Manet's *Olympia* as a "juxtaposition of Odalisque and Prostitute" and to underscore the transformation of meaning that important works of art enact.[32] A similar "collision of discursive forms" occurs in van Lamsweerde's *Kristen.* This digital photograph synthesizes adult and little girl features into the oxomoron of living death mask and recalls a similarly eerie combination in the carefully groomed persona of JonBenet Ramsey who was killed only a few months before it was made. Although some might argue with good reason that no image can compete with the coquettish photographs of this kindergarten beauty queen dressed in showgirl costume, wearing makeup, and sporting highlighted blonde hair, *Kristen* functions as sheer surface. No disconcerting eyes peer from beneath her partially closed lids to stifle a viewer's potential voyeuristic pleasure in the commodified ideals of glamour and innocence that have been projected onto it.

Posing as bad boys in the tradition of the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille, whom they quote liberally in their recently published catalogue designed as scripture and appropriatedly entitled *Unholy Libel: Six Feet Under,* the British artists Dinos and Jake Chapman use the freedom afforded by their trangressive behavior as a ruse.[33] In highly moral and critical statements about childhood innocence at the end of the twentieth century, the two brothers disregard the conventionally accepted distinction between public and private spheres of the human body so that foreheads of their sculptures sprout erect phalluses instead of horns and intimacy between their figures is signaled by vaginas. In the section of *Unholy Libel* titled "Revelations" the brothers admit that their sculptures are about "obsolete bodies" and they themselves "are interested in the redemptive value of transgression, and how morality is squeezed from sin."[34] Fully in league with such professed goals, their sculptures of children, who are half-human and half-mannequin, are locked in a posthuman Eden, even though censorious elders might try to brand them prurient and lascivious.

The Chapmans' cyborgs become an indictment of mainstream society which is plunging headlong into genetic research without considering its ethical ramifications. A case in point is the indiscriminate use of fetal tissue:

> Fetal tissue is an ideal research material because fetuses have a limited immune system, grow rapidly, and are extremely biologically plastic - all of which enable fetal tissue to be integrated physiologically into another organism with little or no adverse response from the host. Fetal tissue is also unlikely to be contaminated or pathological, and it can be preserved and then reanimated, as in cryopreservation where it is frozen and subsequently revived. For these reasons, fetal tissue is like Play-Doh for many scientists, easily manipulated and shaped into all sorts of baroque cyborganic configurations.[35]

From this citation one might regard fetal tissue as a synecdoche for childhood innocence in particular and life in general.

Instead of reviling the Chapman Brothers as mere sensationalists, one might better observe their end-of-the-millennium warnings about the obsolescence of humanity in its various guises, including their non-reproducible low-tech cyborgs. As they concluded about their exhibition *Six Feet Under*, "The show is going to be a mass grave. There'll be grass and trees and lots of mutated figures looking down into a pit [where gallery visitors, assuming the role of the already deceased, will be standing]."[36]

This essay, "Youth's Purgatory: Presumptions of Innocence and Other Childhood Roles," has undertaken an examination of childhood in terms of the perspectives offered by artists in this exhibition and their efforts to call attention to mass-media stereotyping. Instead of looking at youth as a naturalized state, this essay has considered it to be a time of rampant role-playing in which the sacred cow of innocence is only one of a number of possible parts that children try out. In the course of this investigation, Julia Kristeva's theories of abjection - a postmodern recurring oedipal insurrection against oneself - has been found to be a significant operative in artists' characterizations of the ongoing role switching beginning in childhood. After a consideration of readily available roles created by both society at large and children themselves, this study has considered the possibilities of the posthuman in terms of digital imagery and cyborg fantasies. While childhood is indeed a contended field as such media buzzwords as "battered children," "sexual molestation," "teen pregnancy," "the plight of the homeless," "teen violence and murder," "AIDS," "childhood alcoholism," and "safe sex" readily indicate, and as posthuman prophecies clearly suggest, it remains a dynamic arena for role-playing and an opportunity to see how humanity continues both to create and to deconstruct itself with alarming freneticism.

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Endnotes

1. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 73ff.

2. Henry A. Giroux, *Channel Surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of Today's Youth* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 35-63. The discussion of films and youth is both indebted to Giroux's discussion and an extension of it.

3. Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

4. "What Grown-ups Don't Understand: A Special Issue on Childhood in America," *The New York Times Magazine*, 8 October 1995, sec. 6, p. 81.

5. Ibid., pp. 82-83.

6. Consequent with this thinking, Oursler's other piece in this exhibition, *Flower Baby*, can be considered the metaphorical daughter, or possibly granddaughter, of a 1960s flower child. Oursler's piece has inherited the problems rather than benefits of alternative lifestyles and an unmitigated search for identity.

7. Robert Storr, "An Interview with Mike Kelley," *Art in America* 82 (June 1994): 92.

8. In the literature on Kelley, Jean Piaget's schematization of childhood appears to have been overlooked in reference to these pieces even though it appears crucial to their development.

9. Mike Kelley in Paul Taylor, "Mike Kelley: Toying with Second-Hand Souvenirs," *Flash Art* 23 (October 1990): 143, talks about doing a performance piece with Sonic Youth. Also Kelley's long-term friend Kim Gordon, who is a member of Sonic Youth, wrote, "When Sonic Youth chose Mike's series of stuffed animal portraits (the piece entitled *Ahh... Youth!*, as it appeared in *XXIst Century Magazine*) for the art work on our 1992 CD *Dirty*, we knew it would work visually. But we hadn't anticipated the charismatic, E.T.-emotional quality that the front cover image came to possess." Kim Gordon, "Is It My Body?" in Elizabeth Sussman, *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), pp. 177-180.

10. "Mike Kelley Interviewed by John Miller in Los Angeles on March 21, 1991," in *Mike Kelley* (New York: A.R.T. Press, n.d.), p. 51.

11. Storr, p. 92.

12. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

13. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

14. This cycle of death, rejection, and eventual rebirth parallels, in a far more graphic and psychoanalytic manner, Ralph Waldo Emerson's spiritualized essay on human development, "Circles," which delineates an ongoing pattern of a self rejecting its limited worldview in order to seek ever widening arenas of action.

15. "Artist's Choice: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, 1938 (cut-up edit, Paul McCarthy, 1975/96)" in Ralph Rugoff, Kristine Stiles, and Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, *Paul McCarthy* (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 101.

16. "[McCarthy,] Interview with Fereshteh Daftari (extract) 1995," in *Paul McCarthy*, p. 139.

17. Aura Rosenberg, "Who Am I, What Am I, Where Am I," enclosed in letter to Jean Crutchfield, 29 September 1997.

18. The most important publication on Tracey Moffatt to date is Gael Newton and Tracey Moffatt, *Tracey Moffatt: Fever Pitch* (Annandale, Australia: Piper Press, 1995).

19. Still photographs and the script of *Kids* are documented in *Kids: A Film by Larry Clark* (New York: Grove Press, 1995).

20. In the critical literature on Clark there has been a tendency to identify the director with the film to the extent that the script is viewed as his creation rather than Korine's. See particularly Giroux's discussion in *Channel Surfing*, pp. 47-58.

21. Jeffrey Deitch's *Post Human* (Pully/Lausanne: FAE Musée d'Art Contemporain, 1992) in terms of its cryptic means, aphoristic text, and recontextualized photographs makes us aware that we have been reworking the human and anticipating its post-condition for a number of decades. The statement "Our children's generation could very well be the last generation of 'pure' humans" is ominously prophetic.

22. There are indications that the posthuman is already a part of our world since 10% of the population in the United States qualifies as cyborgs, cybernetic organisms that meld the human and the machine.

23. I would be remiss not to acknowledge the enlightening and enjoyable conversations in the late 1980s with Mark Lindquist about the distinctions between analog and digital technology.

24. William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 4.

25. Peter Lunenfeld has provided an excellent discussion of digital photography that parallels and confirms a number of the ideas covered in this paragraph. Peter Lunenfeld, "ArtPost-History: Digital Photography & Electronic Semiotics" in Hubertus v. Ameluxen, Stefan Iglhaut, Florian Rotzer, in collaboration with Alexis Cassel and Nikolaus G. Schneider, editors, *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age* (Munich: Siemens Kulturprogramm, n.d.).

26. Keith Cottingham, telephone interview by Robert Hobbs, 1 December 1997.

27. In particular, please see Ronald J. Onorato, "The Ghost in the Machine," *The New England Journal of Photography* 14 (Fall 1994); Ron Platt, "Believing is Seeing," *Wired* 3 (October 1995); and Christine Temin, "A Concern with Humanity Unifies Trio of Shows at MIT," *The Boston Sunday Globe* (October 30, 1994).

28. Keith Cottingham, "Fictitious Portraits" in *Photography after Photography*, pp. 160ff.

29. Howard Hibbard, in *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983) notes, "If one were to try to reduce Caravaggio's contribution to the history of art to a single sentence, it might be said that he was the only Italian painter of his time to rely more on his own feelings than on artistic tradition, while somehow managing to remain within the great mainstream of the Renaissance."

30. Ibid., p. 162.

31. Norman Bryson, "Introduction," in Norman Bryson, ed., *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. xxvi.

32. Ibid., p. xxvii.

33. Jake Chapman, *Unholy Libel: Six Feet Under* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1997).

34. "Revelations: A Conversation between Robert Rosenblum and Dinos and Jake Chapman" in *Unholy Libel*, pp. 147 and 149.

35. Monica J. Casper, "Fetal Cyborgs and Technomoms on the Reproductive Frontier: Which Way to the Carnival?" in Chris Hables Gray, ed., *The Cyborg Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 191.

36. A. M. Homes, "Brothers in Arts," *Vanity Fair*, September 1997, p. 257.