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# WANGECHI MUTU: FEMINIST COLLAGE AND THE CYBORG

by

NICOLE R. SMITH

Under the Direction of Susan Richmond

## ABSTRACT

Wangechi Mutu is an internationally recognized Kenyan-born artist who lives and works in Brooklyn. She creates collaged female figures composed of human, animal, object, and machine parts. Mutu's constructions of the female body provide a transcultural critique on the female persona in Western culture. This paper contextualizes Mutu's work and artistic strategies within feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial narratives on collage, while exploring whether collage strategies are particularly useful for feminist artists. In their fusion of machine and organism, Mutu's characters are visual metaphors for feminist cyborgs, particularly those outlined by Donna Haraway. In this paper, I examine parallels between collage as an aesthetic strategy and the figure of the cyborg to suggest meaningful ways of approaching differences between women and how they experience life in contemporary Western culture.

**INDEX WORDS:** Wangechi Mutu, Collage, Feminist art, Cyborg, Donna Haraway, Western art, Postmodern art, Postcolonial art, Contemporary art, Machine, Organism, Kenya, Female persona, Assemblage, Photomontage, Constructed identity

WANGECHI MUTU: FEMINIST COLLAGE AND THE CYBORG

By

NICOLE R. SMITH

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

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2009

WANGECHI MUTU: FEMINIST COLLAGE AND THE CYBORG

by

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*For Nick*

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## **CHAPTER 1.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Wangechi Mutu is an internationally recognized Kenyan-born artist who lives and works in Brooklyn. She creates artworks ranging from sculptures to variously sized collages on paper and Mylar, site-specific installations, and videos. Regardless of the medium, collage and assemblage are important artistic strategies for the artist, who uses them to explore gendered and racialized identities as mapped onto the female body. Her collages on paper and Mylar often present female figures composed of human, animal, object, and machine parts. Among the sources for her mismatched fragments and decorative patterns are pornographic, fashion, travel, and automotive magazines, in addition to colorful coffee-table books on African art produced by and for Western audiences. Mutu fuses an assortment of body parts and extremities with hand-drawn and -painted elements. It is often the female body in an endless variety of new formations that she chooses to construct. In so doing, she provides a transcultural critique of the female persona as dramatized and represented in Western culture.

Mutu's choice of collage as a specific aesthetic strategy might seem insignificant—simply a reflection of the way collage is widespread within contemporary artistic practice. Collage and montage are perhaps taken for granted as part of everyday life in contemporary Western culture. Collage informs the way Westerners experience their image-saturated, consumer culture, with media outlets of all varieties adding to the cacophony of juxtaposed advertisements, commercials, and live news feeds available any time of day or night. Against this backdrop of contemporary culture, has collage become passé? Has it lost its subversive and critical potential due to its co-optation by mass consumer culture? What might it mean for Mutu,

a contemporary female artist addressing issues of gender, race, and the body, to employ collage as a specific method and aesthetic strategy? Do these choices limit her work, make it less forceful, in some way? Such questions ground my examination of Mutu's collage work.

This thesis first provides an overview of Mutu's works from the late 1990s through the present, focusing on a few of her more prominent series, including *Pin-Ups*, *Classic Profiles*, *Figures*, and *The Ark Collection*. The artist's comments and descriptions of both her motivating interests and her constructed figures themselves serve as the guiding voice in this overview. I begin with a close look at Mutu's early student sculptures of "fake" ethnographic specimens and artifacts. Her critical stance on gender and racial stereotypes, assumptions, and misconceptions, as well as her biting wit, are evident from the start. Her titles are at times ironic and provocative, teasing and pushing the viewer to look deeper into the collaged layers that comprise her figures. In addition to her predominantly small-scale series listed above, Mutu also began creating larger-scale collage figures around 2003. While the smaller collage series are often paper-based, the larger figures are generally created on a plastic film or Mylar substrate. In both formats, Mutu experiments with photographic-based collage elements intermixed with decorative or abstract patterns, which together fuse into simultaneously familiar and otherworldly beings framed within the artist's charged and sardonic titles.

Following this initial overview, the "Feminism and Collage" chapter contextualizes Mutu's work and her artistic strategies within various feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial narratives on collage. While accepted accounts of collage in art history situate its origin within modern art of the early twentieth century, feminist histories of collage tell a different story. The feminists of the late 1960s and 1970s, who were engaged in reclaiming lost female artistic traditions, offer revised histories of collage focused on women's domestic culture and creative

activities. Among them, Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro sought to expand the history of collage and what might count as collage in art discourse in the first place. Feminist writer and curator Lucy Lippard locates a kind of “positive fragmentation” in traditional women’s work and artistic practice that lends itself to collage, while Deena Metzger supports such views by conveying her personal experiences as a mother of small children who works from home. Though important in their efforts to reveal the patriarchal nature of much art historical discourse, the claims of early feminists run the risk of propagating essentializing views of women and a universal women’s aesthetic. In the end, reductivist notions of “women’s art” are neither liberating nor completely effective in radically contesting or redrawing the parameters of art history and discourse. Likewise, they do not offer the complexity or nuance required to fully consider art created by marginalized artists working in self-consciously critical modes. It is this type of art created by critically aware artists that both Lippard and Gwen Raaberg single out in further exploring why collage seems to resonate so deeply with many women artists. Similarly, Raaberg distinguishes between Frederic Jameson’s postmodern account of collage as “pastiche” and more profound varieties of collage practiced by some women artists. Charting the postmodern histories of collage by Jameson, Peter Burger, and Thomas Brockelman assists in fleshing out how anti-modern tendencies in some modern and postmodern uses of collage overlap or diverge from those of early feminist artists.

Placing Mutu’s work alongside her contemporaries Penny Siopis, Minette Vari, Candice Breitz, and Fatimah Tuggar serves to contextualize it within postcolonial histories of collage, offering another lens through which to view her collage strategies. For the purposes of this thesis, Mutu’s contemporaries are defined as fellow female artists of African descent working with collage within the international art world. Within this context, the manually constructed

collages of South African artist Candace Breitz—her *Rainbow Series*, in particular—and the digital montages of Nigerian-born Fatimah Tuggar provide the most useful comparisons among this group of artists. In some ways, Mutu and Breitz share basic techniques and aesthetics, while Tuggar's collage techniques contrast sharply with Mutu's. Yet Mutu's and Tuggar's works parallel each other in conceptual and critical ways. Both artists extract, deconstruct, reconstruct, and then re-insert the black female subject into new and sometimes unsettling or unexpected terrains. Mutu and Tuggar critique but also re-envision alternative constructions of the black female subjects they depict.

The final chapter in my thesis explores Mutu's female characters, with their fusion of machine and organism and their disobedience to taxonomy and strict boundaries, as potential visual metaphors for feminist cyborg figurations. Tracing feminist readings of cyborgs along with the uses and misuses of cyborgs within their popularized versions, this final section draws heavily on Donna Haraway's seminal essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" to gauge how Mutu's figures might fit into a cyborg world. If Haraway's cyborgs are the truly oppositional metaphors she relates to third world feminisms, are Mutu's cyborgian entities a visual translation of the ironic and political myth of the cyborg? In turn, what can feminist theories of the cyborg bring to the larger discussion of collage as either an effective feminist aesthetic strategy or an over-used and banal form of contemporary art?

## CHAPTER 2.

### WANGECHI MUTU, COMPLICIT RADICAL

Small and delicate, pornographic and exotic, bold and shimmering, larger-than-life and monstrous, mutilated and defiant: Mutu's female characters defy strict categorical order. Their layers merge drawing, painting, and the collage techniques of cutting, pasting, and grafting. They strike provocative poses like sexy pin-up girls or mimic the stereotypical squatting gestures of tribal women.<sup>1</sup> Mutu's work has exploded on the art scene over the past decade, its cast of glamorously mutated, alien-like figures by turns gorgeous and deformed. Her collaged re-creations of the female form deal with stereotypes and gender assumptions, playing on and with tropes of the feminine and the "other," while not necessarily debunking or dispensing with either.

Mutu's fascination with stereotypes—how they are collectively formed, persist over time, and are used against others—provides the foundation for much of her work.<sup>2</sup> Though her views on biographical readings of artworks are ambivalent at best, her own experiences as a young, Kenyan art student in the U.S. offer insight into her artistic reworkings of stereotypical images of black women in the West. While studying fine art, anthropology, and cultural studies in New York, first at Parsons School of Design and then at Cooper Union, Mutu quickly learned that her artwork was often read through select portions of her own biography and personal history. She recounts that, in classroom critiques, her peers often analyzed her art through stereotypes of rural

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<sup>1</sup> Though a problematic term in many ways, "tribal" is used in this context due to the artist's specific use of it.

<sup>2</sup> Wangechi Mutu and Lauri Firstenberg, "Perverse Anthropology: The Photomontage of Wangechi Mutu," in *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* (New York: Museum of African Art, 2003), 143.

African women, though she was in fact a “city girl” from Nairobi.<sup>3</sup> Rather than shedding or shunning them, Mutu began incorporating the stereotypes she encountered in the classroom into her work. According to the artist, “if a tribal, African woman is what these students perceive me to be, then why throw it off? Why not use it to the furthest degree?”<sup>4</sup>

Mutu’s studies in anthropology gave her an acute awareness of how artifacts are employed to construct historical and cultural narratives. Playing with this idea as a student, she began creating fake “African” artifacts out of detritus and found objects (Figures 1 and 2). She purposefully made them appear dirty and old, knowing these conditions would likely be interpreted as signs of authenticity, regardless of how contrived. The artist describes these early sculptures as a direct and irreverent response to those classroom critiques that always returned to the idea that she was from Africa, analyzing her work only in terms of how it related to her upbringing there.<sup>5</sup> Mutu’s interest in exploring the weaknesses and deceit of stereotypes, particularly those of feminine and ethnic others, and in problematizing questions of origin and authenticity is apparent in these early works and continues in her later collages of female figures.

According to the artist, it was during this time that she also became fixated on images of controversial, powerful, and iconic women like Josephine Baker and Grace Jones, who in some ways appropriated black female stereotypes, especially those of the hypersexualized and hyperglamorized black woman. Mutu often speaks of being influenced by Jean-Paul Goude’s photographs of Grace Jones from the late 1970s and 1980s. Goude is commonly credited with “creating” Jones, his one-time model and muse. Using a glossy, fashion and advertising aesthetic

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<sup>3</sup> Mutu, artist talk at *The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 26–27, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Mutu and Firstenberg 143; Wangechi Mutu, “Interview by Barbara Kruger,” *Interview* (April 2007): 119.



in his photographs, he presents Jones through her body, in some ways reducing her presence to her physical body alone. Two of his well-known photographs of Jones show her nearly naked with skin oiled to a high sheen (Figures 3 and 4). The muscles of her tall, lean body are enhanced through the use of oil, a technique commonly used on stage by competitive bodybuilders. Perhaps most telling is Goude's photograph of Jones down on hands and knees in a cage. The cage sits on a stage while Jones growls at the audience and viewer. Above her, posted on the cage, is a sign reading: "Do Not Feed the Animal." Though Jones seems a willing participant and performer in this theatrical set, Goude's photograph clearly presents the black female body in the guise of a ferocious, wild animal. The image implies that the black woman in the cage is unruly, unable to be tamed. She is a threat or danger to the "civilized" audience leering at the caged woman. The black female body is exoticized and eroticized in the photograph, as something to be controlled, restricted, and constricted. Jones appears powerful yet confined. The consummate performer, she clearly engages in a staged performance of her sexual prowess, yet despite this obvious play, the image does not readily suggest a critique of this representation of the black female body as animalized, eroticized, or dehumanized. Does Goude's photograph of Jones question or problematize such tropes of the black female body, or does it simply propagate them? Are these photographs Goude's visions alone, or is Jones a collaborator? Mutu's interest in Jones and similar controversial women rests precisely on the uneasy balance between their roles as transgressor and accomplice. Mutu locates the controversial quality of women like Jones in their seemingly contradictory stance between complete radicality and utter surrender.<sup>6</sup> It is this strange mix of incongruent qualities and traditionally perceived opposites with which the artist animates her female figures, enlivening them with a palpable tension and vitality.

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<sup>6</sup> Mutu, *The Feminist Future*.

After completing an M.F.A. at Yale University in 2000, Mutu returned to New York and began creating her pin-ups. These works set the stage for her later female figures on Mylar and mark the beginning of an intense visual exploration of the female body. The pin-up works are a paper-and-ink series of twenty-four postcard-size images divided into two separate grids of twelve (Figure 5). The number of discrete images within each grid and their arrangement suggest that the figures are sexy calendar girls, each posed for a different month of the year. From afar, their bodily positions and gestures fit the mold, yet closer inspection reveals a different story. These bodies are not the ones typically associated with sex symbols; rather, they are disabled, limbless bodies, some still bloody from the violence wrought on them. In effect, Mutu creates a calendar filled with portraits of amputees (Figures 6–8). Although the female figures lure viewers in with their provocative poses, their grotesque bodily injuries and the violent histories they suggest also repel the viewer. According to art historian and independent curator Isolde Brielmaier, the tension felt in Mutu’s work directly corresponds to the artist’s creative vision, which focuses on “the contradiction between life’s eloquent splendor and its grotesque aggression and futility.”<sup>7</sup> Mutu’s figures represent the collapse of the ideal into actuality, as well as the clash between the West and non-West.

Mutu speaks of her pin-ups in direct relation to political and social concerns, as well as in terms of their being meditations on the interplay of beauty and violence. While cultures may differ on how they define beauty, one culture’s ideals of the beautiful can have a quite negative impact on other cultures and locations. In a world with increasingly globalized markets, the longing for material objects associated with glamour and beauty, or simply with greed, has ever farther reaching consequences. Mutu’s series in many ways point to the “trading of one person’s

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<sup>7</sup> Isolde Brielmaier, “Wangechi Mutu: Re-Imagining the World,” *Parkett*, no. 74 (2005): 7.

well-being for another's beauty.”<sup>8</sup> In particular, these works find their inspiration in the illegal diamond trade in Sierra Leone and its devastating effects on local inhabitants, as recently dramatized in Hollywood films like *Blood Diamond*, 2006. The illicit trade of Sierra Leone's conflict diamonds is linked to the country's decade of civil unrest and rebel fighting, which came to the forefront of African politics in the late 1990s. During this period, rebel forces organized as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) controlled the mining areas, which essentially allowed the diamond trade to finance more violence.<sup>9</sup> Profits from the sale of conflict diamonds lined the pockets of arms dealers and helped stock the RUF's arsenal of weapons. Rebels in Sierra Leone were also particularly notorious for the gruesome acts and atrocities they committed against African civilians. Some of their well-known methods of spreading terror, and thus controlling the local population, included chopping off civilians' limbs with machetes or smashing their hands with hammers.<sup>10</sup> Mutu's dismembered figures evoke this practice.

While Mutu discusses and relates her pin-ups to a specific political and social context, her works are not always visually overt in their references, nor are they only political commentary. She acknowledges her inspiration from the maimed survivors in Sierra Leone. Men, women, and children were the victims of violent acts, yet Mutu chooses to depict only females in her pin-ups. Her visual interests remain firmly focused on the female body and its alteration. According to the artist, she is keenly interested in the ways femininity is a distortion:

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<sup>8</sup> Merrily Kerr, “Wangechi Mutu's Extreme Makeovers,” *Art on Paper* 8, no. 6 (July–August 2004): 29.

<sup>9</sup> “Sierra Leone rebels capture diamond town,” *BBC News World Edition* (December 20, 1998), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Africa/239378.stm>; “Africa Analysis: Sierra Leone's brutal rebellion,” Caroline Hawley for *BBC News World Edition* (January 7, 1999), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Africa/245657.stm>; “Blood diamonds,” Ishmahil Blagrove for *BBC News World Edition* (October 19, 2001), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/correspondent/1604165.stm>.

<sup>10</sup> According to reports from the Human Rights Watch, rebel forces attacked civilians for supporting the government but also at random. Women and children were systematically sexually abused, although men were victims of violent acts as well ([http://www.hrw.org/1999/sierra/SIERLE99-03.htm#P182\\_39824](http://www.hrw.org/1999/sierra/SIERLE99-03.htm#P182_39824)).

“how the female body is enhanced or contorted for historical and cultural purposes.”<sup>11</sup> While the pin-ups in this series, insofar as they represent victims of the conflict diamond trade, are altered, contorted, and mutilated, their continued existence through such atrocities is of great significance. Their bodies have been used against them—as a way to cause pain, instill fear, and control them—yet the pin-ups still somehow appear in command of their own bodies in the images Mutu creates. Like many of Mutu’s later figures, her pin-ups are survivors who persevere, altered but still alive. Mutu and her figures are invested in survival and in the future more than the past. The artist describes the figures in her paintings and collages as “the survivor[s] of all these moments in history that we’ve been through as a race.”<sup>12</sup> Though they are deformed in body, and possibly in mind and spirit as well, they live. They are damaged but not extinct. They are transformed by the violence they have endured, but through their sheer perseverance and resolve they have also transformed future possibilities by the very act of surviving. Mutu’s pin-ups suggest the severe costs of beauty but, in their deformed state, also emanate a redefined image of beauty, maimed limbs and all. For this reason, Mutu’s figures might be described as being continually “involved in a process of becoming, changing, and surviving.”<sup>13</sup>

Following her pin-ups, Mutu worked on a variety of other series. These works varied slightly in size but were predominantly no larger than a few feet in height or length. They all focus on the female form and use collage as a primary aesthetic, though some are constructed on paper and others on thin polyester sheets or Mylar. Within this body of work is Mutu’s *Classic Profiles, Figures, Creatures*, and *Fungus Series*, created in 2002 and 2003.

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<sup>11</sup> Kirsten Fricke, “Wangechi Mutu,” *Beautiful/Decay*, no. 50 (“Sex Sells” Issue): 64.

<sup>12</sup> Greg Tate, “Regal Depravities and Other Cavities,” *Code Z: Black Visual Culture Now*, August 6, 2006 [http://www.codezonline.com/featurearticle/2006/08/regal\\_depravities\\_and\\_other\\_ca.html](http://www.codezonline.com/featurearticle/2006/08/regal_depravities_and_other_ca.html).

<sup>13</sup> Brielmaier 7.

As many art historians and exhibition reviewers have noted, Mutu's *Figures* (Figure 9) visually call to mind Hannah Höch's Dadaist photomontages, particularly *The Sweet One*, 1926 (Figure 10) and *Strange Beauty*, 1929 (Figure 11), both in Höch's *From an Ethnographic Museum* Series. Mutu's and Höch's works sometimes share uncanny formal similarities. However, as Lauri Firstenberg points out, one should be wary of simple comparisons of the two artists, especially those that merely situate Mutu in the shadow of an avant-garde modern artist of European descent.<sup>14</sup> Höch's photomontages combine the bodies of her contemporaries—white German women—with non-Western masks and sculptures from ethnographic museums. They juxtapose representations of the traditional with the modern and the African with the European, relating to Höch's specific political critiques of the German Fascism of her era. Like Höch, Mutu's work touches on feminist issues and women's roles in society and culture. Yet Mutu, unlike Höch, also works within a postcolonial framework, which suggests quite different relationships and issues of power between the fragments she layers together in her collages. Mutu acknowledges her admiration for Höch's work and process but wishes to separate herself from the binary oppositions she finds central to Höch's photomontages in their simple pairing of “modern” white female bodies with traditional African or Oceanic masks and statues.<sup>15</sup> Mutu's collaged figures serve to complicate rather than reinforce simplistic oppositions and conventions of dualistic thinking as represented by the modern and traditional.

Mutu's *Classic Profiles* and *Figures* mark a shift from her mutilated but distinctly human pin-ups. The former, with their molten, colorful, and decorative skin, begin to confound easy identification of the figures as human. If these later series begin such a transition, Mutu's *Creatures* and *Fungus* Series dramatically advance it. While Mutu embraces interplanetary

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<sup>14</sup> Mutu and Firstenberg 137, 140.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 141.

species in her *Classic Profiles* (Figure 12), she plays geneticist with *Creatures* by creating human-animal recombinations, an artistic practice which can be traced back to her student sketchbooks. The role of hunter and hunted, predator and prey, and their associated power dynamics are illustrated in *The Hunt*, 2002 (Figure 13). The use of text and image together is uncommon in Mutu's mature work, though her student sketchbooks show this witty and incisive mixing. The text in *The Hunt* reads: "It's so much easier to hunt you ... now that you've admitted you're afraid of me." It names "fear" as a means of establishing and maintaining power and superiority over other creatures. Fear serves to potentially disadvantage the hunted while bolstering the power of the hunter. The image paired with the text visually supports this idea, with the feline hunter holding her victim across her shoulders after what we presume was a successful hunt.

Mutu's *Fungus Series* goes one further step beyond the animal realm. This series also deals in genetic recombination but does so this time with fungi and female figures, which are reformed into new species (Figures 14 and 15). That fungus finds its way into Mutu's collages is not surprising. Mutu's human-animal-plant beings defy phylogenetic matrices, and fungus itself has upset the phylogenetic order in years past. Taxonomists traditionally categorized fungi under the plant kingdom. As mycological research continued, fungi were found to share characteristics with both plants and animals. Taxonomies shifted, and the fungi kingdom was created to accommodate these difficult-to-classify organisms. Fungi are incredibly diverse, with varieties that subsist in almost every habitat, from terrestrial to aquatic. Some fungi have even survived the extreme conditions of outer space, having been sent there and returned intact. Fungi can exist in symbiotic or parasitic relationships with plants, animals (including the human variety), and other fungi. Some fungi are even genetically predisposed to reproduce according to

environmental conditions, which triggers the development of determined structures that lead to either asexual or sexual reproduction.<sup>16</sup>

Though fungi forced taxonomists to reconfigure their categories, they were eventually reabsorbed back into the taxonomical order. The fact that Mutu's figures cannot be accommodated by any traditional taxonomy is significant. Gaines and Segade argue that Mutu's collaged hybrids purposefully defy the tyranny of taxonomical order, as none offers a reliable body for consumption by such an order.<sup>17</sup> Mutu's collaged characters layer bits from different taxonomical orders, shape-shifting before our eyes on their filmy plastic substrate. She specifically creates figures that not only defy traditional taxonomies, but that attack the very nature of taxonomical ordering.

Mutu is perhaps most known for her larger-than-life spectacular figures on Mylar, which Brielmaier loosely arranges under the "hybrids" section in her recently published monograph *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise*.<sup>18</sup> Mutu has created these large "hybrids" alongside her smaller collaged works and series. Like much of her work, they often include a central female creature. Sometimes such figures are flanked by smaller and even more fantastical creatures—part fairy, puck, and insect. In some instances, they merely surround the main figure, while in others they take on a more sinister appearance, acting out in devilish ways. Following the work's title, *The Bourgeois is Banging on My Head*, 2003 (Figure 16), the insidious pressures of a society's common ideals, judgments, and assumptions manifest themselves in fantastical forms.

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<sup>16</sup> For general information on fungi and its taxonomical classification, see Thomas J. Volk, "The Kingdom Fungi," University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Department of Biology, <http://www.uwlax.edu/biology/volk/fungi3/> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fungus>.

<sup>17</sup> Malik Gaines and Alexandro Segade, "Tactical Collage," in *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2008), 146.

<sup>18</sup> Mutu's "hybrids" are not part of a named series in the way her *Classic Profiles* or *Figures* are. The term "hybrids" is a loose designation Brielmaier uses to signify the large-scale collages Mutu created beginning in 2003.

In conversation with Firstenberg in the exhibition catalogue for *Looking Both Ways*, Mutu acknowledges her fascination with stereotypes and even more so with how a collective consensus of a stereotype is reached and then used against others.<sup>19</sup> In the same interview, she articulates her strong belief that the female body is particularly vulnerable to social normatives. With these comments in mind, the small creatures committing violence against the central figure in *The Bourgeois is Banging on My Head* seem to align themselves with the social standards and norms of female beauty. These standards are often defined in ways that omit the majority of the female population. Standards of female beauty circulate ubiquitously in popular culture, creating an enormous pressure to modify one's appearance, whether as consumers of the latest fashions and beauty products or by more extreme measures. Some of Mutu's own source materials for her collages—specifically, fashion and pornographic magazines—proliferate and fuel such ideals of the beautiful, offering men and women a never-ending supply of digitally altered images by which to judge real female bodies as inferior. Incredibly thin and waif-like fashion models offer an ideal body type impossible for most women to achieve. Alternatively, but not dissimilar to fashion magazines, the pornography industry offers up females with body parts enhanced through surgery to provide greater sex appeal. In such a business, female bodies themselves become the commodity that is bought and sold.

The central figure's skin in *The Bourgeois is Banging on My Head* suggests evidence of past physical traumas with its colored pattern of bruises and lesions. However, the traces of physical violence and pain are somewhat glamorized as beautifully decorated skin. A small figure with a sharp, pointed object chisels away at the central figure's head, which spurts blood. Yet which figure instigates this action is unclear. Are we witnessing an attack, or is this incident

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<sup>19</sup> Mutu and Firstenberg 142–143.



a self-induced act of bodily alteration through plastic surgery? The ambiguity of who is orchestrating the blood-inducing and potentially body-altering act in this collage might allude to the contested opinions on women's cosmetic surgery in feminist literature.<sup>20</sup> The armless central figure does not seem to defend herself as much as simply cry out. It is unclear whether she is submitting to the act against her will or demonstrating agency through instigating it. Her cries might be a consequence of physical pain or even evidence of a psychological level of trauma perpetrated by social ideals of beauty and femininity. However, the reasons why women opt to undergo surgical alteration should not be oversimplified. As Kathy Davis's in-depth interviews with real women faced with decisions about cosmetic surgery show, these women are not always mere puppets of systems that order, rearrange, and change the female body. Davis describes cosmetic surgery as a complex dilemma, seeing it both as "problem and solution, symptom of oppression and act of empowerment, all in one."<sup>21</sup> And yet turning back to Mutu's *The Bourgeois is Banging on My Head*, the two large diamond rings appended to the left side of the main figure's head should not be ignored either. They complicate the reading of Mutu's image, perhaps suggesting vanity and insecurity, but also calling to mind Mutu's pin-ups and the interweaving of beauty and violence.

Mutu's clever, sharp-witted titles often allude to the objectification of female bodies and their eroticization in her works. *I Am Your Brokenhearted Fantasy*, 2003 (Figure 17), places a seated figure in the center of the composition. The figure sits with her back to the viewer amid what appear to be dancing and frolicking insect-like creatures. She twists her head to confront

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<sup>20</sup> See Ann Dally, *Women under the Knife* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1991); Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Kathryn Pauly Morgan, "Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women's Bodies," *Hypatia* 6, no. 3 (1991): 25–53.

<sup>21</sup> Kathy Davis, "'My Body Is My Art': Cosmetic Surgery as Feminist Utopia," in *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage, 1997), 169.

and return the viewer's gaze. She wears an icon of female sexuality—high heels—and folds her arm across her chest. Mutu's title suggests the objectification of women within male fantasies but also the accompanying heartbreak or sadness of a woman who finds herself in this predicament. A real woman always runs the risk of falling short of such fantasies, which deal in ideals and impossible perfection, as they exist beyond the order of the messy and imperfect material world. However, this analysis only points to one layer of meaning within Mutu's work. After all, the figure does not seem particularly sad or downtrodden. She boldly makes eye contact with the viewer. If the male gaze has imprisoned the female, objectifying her body and making her a victim, why do Mutu's females never quite appear as passive victims? The artist admits that she is not interested in simply pointing blame. Her figures are complicated because of the complex nature of the system within which they exist. Mutu casts the net of responsibility much wider, suggesting that we are all in some ways collectively complicit with the dynamics of our societies. For the artist, the figures are indicative of this situation, with all its positive and negative connotations. She notes:

They're very much about seeing yourself as being part of the problem while existing within it.... I see these goddesses as critiques that are very much embedded in the problematic. So some of them have issues that we haven't yet broken through, but they're also sincere about that and still strong.<sup>22</sup>

Like most of Mutu's figures, the goddess-like figure in *I Am Your Brokenhearted Fantasy* is damaged. Yet somehow this fact does not diminish her presence. This fantastical creature with an elegantly elongated head shimmers with iridescent beauty. She appears otherworldly, perhaps a mutated and transformed species that sits before us. The collaged clippings that compose her face, hands, and arms suggest distinctly human forms. Other areas of the figure Mutu finishes abstractly in paint and ink. Despite the artist's fluid melding and mixing

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<sup>22</sup> Tate.

of media, their coexistence in the same figure complicates our understanding of its identity, which seems simultaneously human and alien. Within the work itself, the figure occupies a space that looks foreign to our own. The large sheets of Mylar on which Mutu's figures are created are sometimes hung slightly apart from the wall. This particular installation method, in combination with the opaque and translucent quality of Mylar, can serve to animate the figures because the Mylar sheets are free to move slightly. As the figures flutter and float within the room, one might feel a certain shared immediacy and intimacy with them. Yet such intimacy does not hold the promise of fully understanding or knowing Mutu's figures. Looking only as deep as their skin illustrates this fact. Their skin in its decorative splendor appears almost camouflaged, compounding our inability to fully understand who or what they are. This fact adds to their mystery and allure while hinting at their changeling or protean nature.

Themes of evolutionary flux and transformation are not far-fetched for Mutu. Transformation, she confesses, is precisely one of her main fixations: "Camouflage and mutation are big themes in my work, but the idea that I'm most enamored with is the notion that transformation can help us transcend our predicament."<sup>23</sup> Camouflage and mutation offer methods for manipulating and navigating the situations and contexts in which we find ourselves in daily life. These are techniques of which Mutu says she is particularly aware due to her experiences as an immigrant. In some ways, they are survival strategies. Likewise, transformation as a means to manipulate one's limitations is also a matter of survival for Mutu. Though Mutu's pin-ups and hybrids offer radical images of transformation, we must all engage in such practices throughout our lives to remain well adapted. Just as our world is ever-changing, so must we be.

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<sup>23</sup> Mutu and Firstenberg 141.

Unsurprisingly, Mutu's work, like her figures, mutates and transforms. Some of her works of the past several years include even more explicitly sexualized figures. The summer 2006 survey of Mutu's work at Sikkema Jenkins & Company in New York featured *The Ark Collection*. This series consists of thirty-two postcard-sized works displayed in vitrines (Figures 18–20). The use of vitrines, in addition to the small, easily collectible size of the works, calls to mind ethnographic specimens collected, classified, and displayed within a natural history museum. Exploring the domain of ethnography, Mutu's collaged images feature African women posed in an overtly sexual manner. Combinations of colorful African textiles, jewelry, and sculptural objects overlap with portions of their bodies.

While Mutu's collages on Mylar seamlessly fuse diverse parts, patterns, and media within the same composition and often the same figure, *The Ark Collection*, 2006, departs slightly from this use of collage. The series evokes a more realistic and less otherworldly aesthetic with its predominant use of photographic materials and reproductions and an absence of painted and inked areas. The photographic emphasis imparts a documentary effect that is unlike that of the ethereal painted and collaged images that float on Mutu's large Mylar sheets. This style more closely mimics ethnographic and anthropological documents of other cultures and peoples. In conjunction with the documentary mode, titles of individual works in this series are straightforward and descriptive, ranging from *Afar Girl* and *Rashaida Woman Dancing* to simply *Mask* (Figure 21). Some observers have noted that, in addition to the jarring effect of juxtaposing overlapping realistic images of female bodies and African commodities, these titles purposefully point to the fictive nature underlying the West's representations of Africa.<sup>24</sup> In the

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<sup>24</sup> Laura Auricchio, Review of *Artists' Visions: Wangechi Mutu in New York*, *Art Papers* 60 (September/October 2006): 60.

West's historical attempts to represent Africa, it has likely concealed as much—or more—as it has revealed.

*Mask* veils the body of an African woman behind the facial features of an African mask or sculpture. The photomontage of the woman is in turn placed over a sculpted African head. The woman appears sandwiched between the two, her body camouflaged yet still sexually provocative. This work along with others from *The Ark Collection* raises issues of power and control in terms of the West and Africa. Sexualizing and eroticizing African bodies are means of controlling them. The Western legacy of control from the colonial period to the present also includes pseudo-scientific discourses and predatory economic policies. Mutu's series hints at the desire for and also the consumption of Africa, particularly in reference to women. *The Ark Collection* offers a visual metaphor of the various ways African women and African peoples in a larger sense have been subjugated to various power dynamics within the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Among Mutu's collage works, her large Mylar creations stand apart. Their ethereal figures, which seem to inhabit their own worlds yet also share ours, are strong and compelling. Although they take part precisely in what they attempt to critique, their otherworldly quality might offer another insight. Can the alternate space in which they partially reside provide an opening for our imaginations if we choose to follow Mutu in glimpsing other possibilities, regardless of how fleeting?<sup>25</sup> Elements of change and uncertainty are identifiable themes in Mutu's growing oeuvre. These elements inevitably bring with them moments of transition, which hopefully mix endings with new beginnings. From where Mutu's female figures have come is clear. After all, their histories, pasts, and stories are hinted at in the many layers of their

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<sup>25</sup> Brielmaier 7.

bodies. Yet where they are headed is unclear. Survival and transformation will be part of the journey, wherever these defiant and fierce figures travel from here. What new form these shape-shifters take along the way remains to be seen.



Figure 1. Wangechi Mutu, *Untitled*, 1997, mixed media sculpture, 17 x 5-3/4 x 3-1/4 inches, collection of the artist. Photo: Jerry L. Thompson.



Figure 2. Wangechi Mutu, *Untitled*, 1997, mixed media sculpture, dimensions vary, collection of Danny Simmons, NY (left and middle), collection of the artist (right).  
Photo: Jerry L. Thompson.



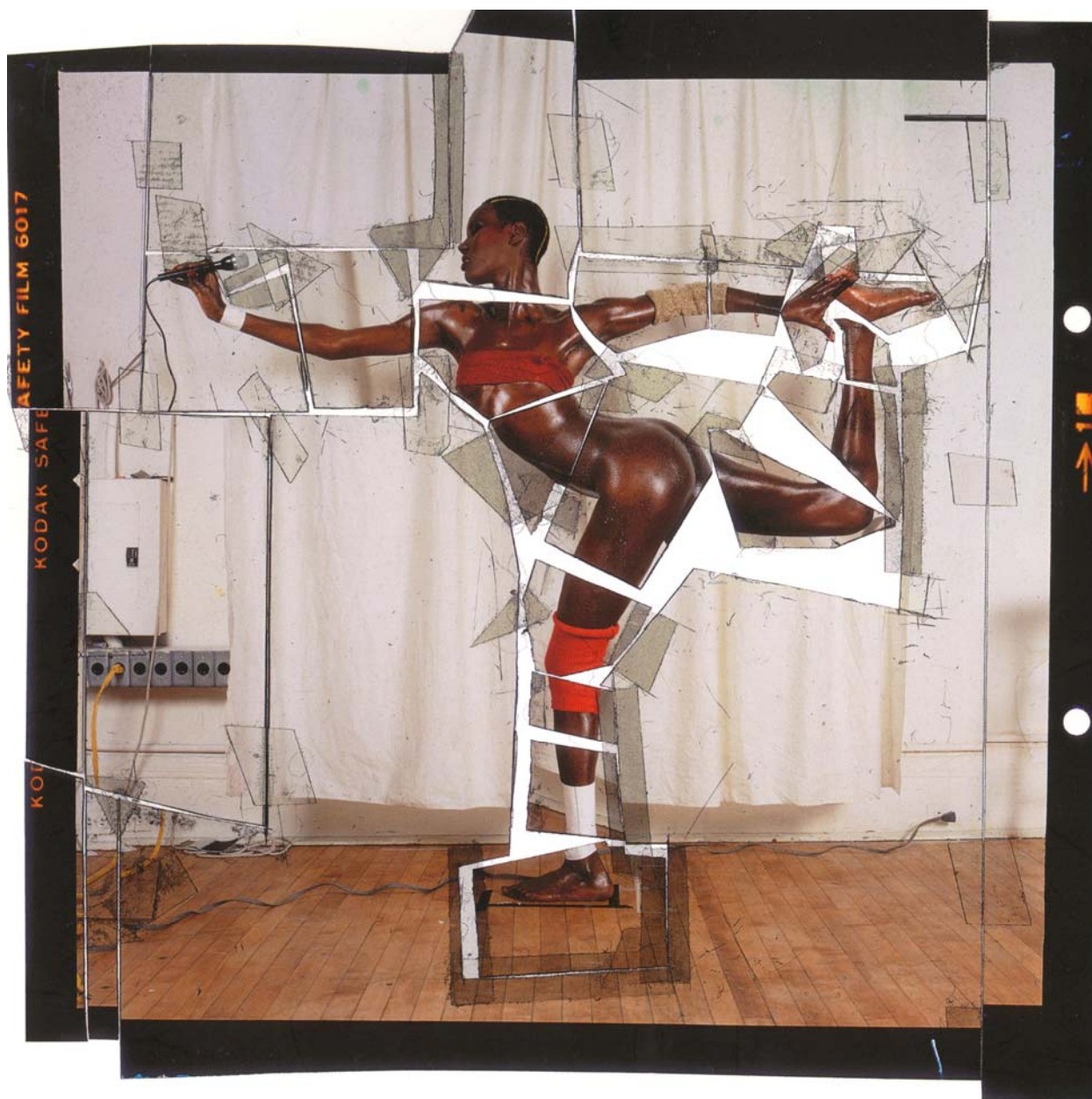


Figure 3. Jean-Paul Goude, *Grace Jones Revised and Updated, Cut-Up Ekta, New York, 1978*, digital C-print, 30 x 40 inches.



Figure 4. Jean-Paul Goude, *Grace Jones, Roseland Ballroom, New York, 1978*, digital C-print, 30 x 40 inches.



Figure 5. Installation of pin-ups at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2003.





Figure 6. Wangechi Mutu, *Pin-Up*, 2001, mixed media on paper, 13 x 10 inches.



Figure 7. Wangechi Mutu, *Pin-Up*, 2001, mixed media on paper, 13 x 10 inches.



Figure 8. Wangechi Mutu, *Pin-Up*, 2001, mixed media on paper, 13 x 10 inches.





Figure 9. Wangechi Mutu, *Figures*, 2003, mixed media on Mylar, 22 x 17 inches (left), 42-1/8 x 31-7/8 inches (right).

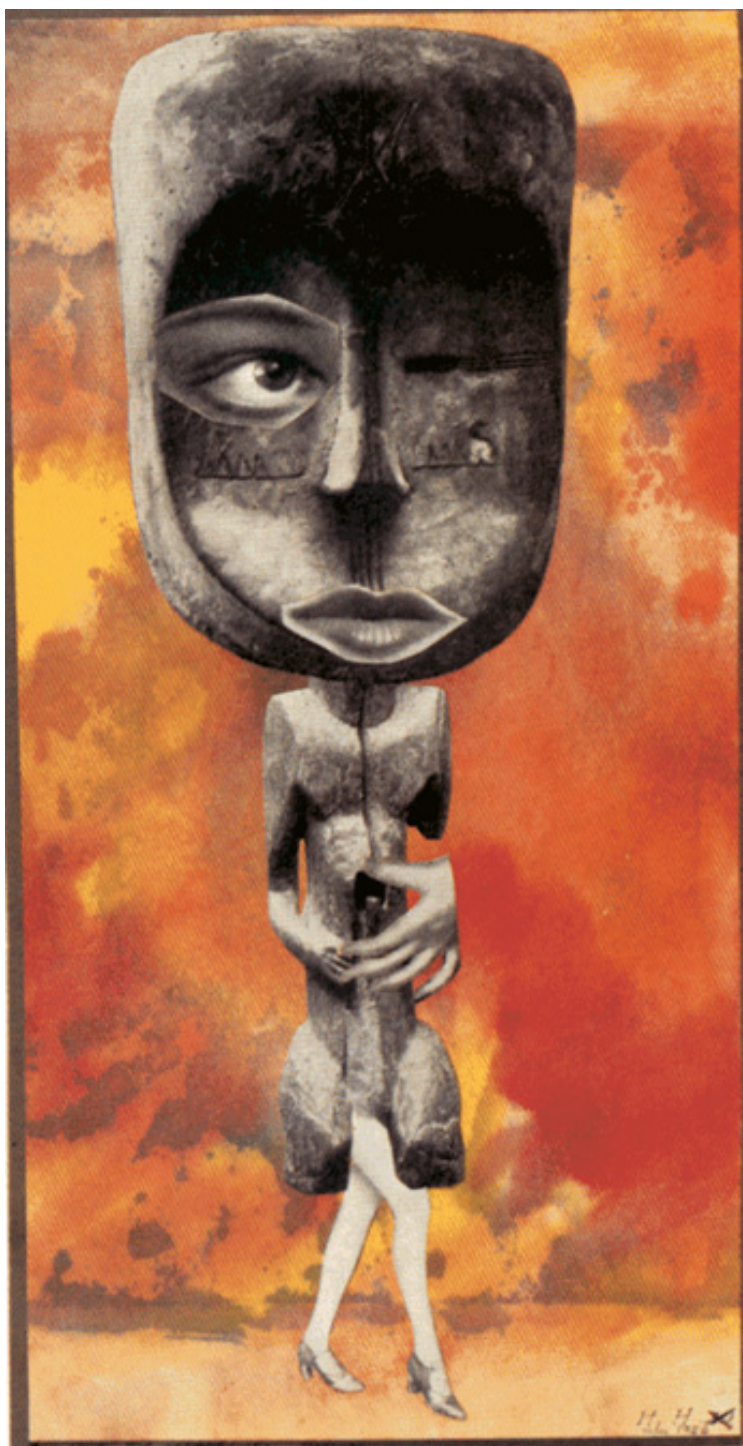


Figure 10. Hannah Höch, *The Sweet One*, from *From an Ethnographic Museum*, ca. 1926, photomontage with watercolor, 11-13/16 x 6-1/8 inches.



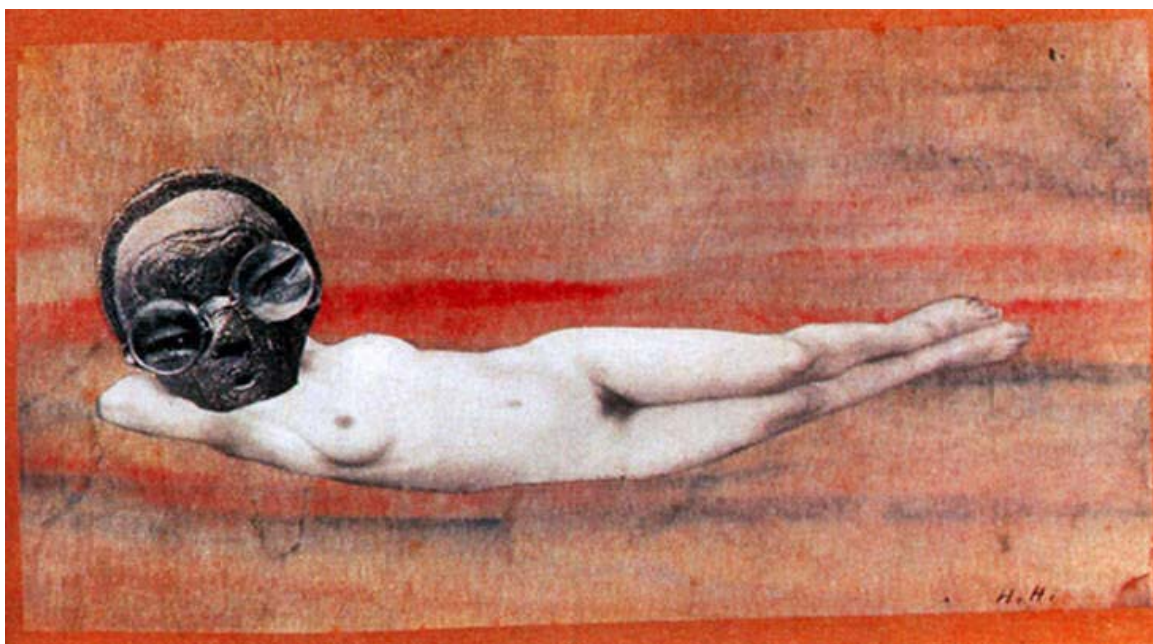


Figure 11. Hannah Höch, *Strange Beauty*, from *From an Ethnographic Museum*, 1929, photomontage with watercolor, dimensions unknown.



Figure 12. Wangechi Mutu, various from the *Classic Profile* series, 2002–2003. From left to right: *Classic Profile*, 2002–2003, mixed media on Mylar, 22 x 17 inches, collection of Stuart Roberts, NY; *Classic Profile*, 2002–2003, mixed media on Mylar, 22 x 17 inches; *Alien*, 2002, mixed media on paper, 11-3/4 x 9-7/8 inches, collection of Stuart Roberts, NY; and *Classic Profile*, 2002–2003, mixed media on Mylar, 22 x 17 inches.



Figure 13. Wangechi Mutu, *The Hunt*, from the *Creatures Series*, 2002, ink, acrylic, and collage on paper, 16-1/8 x 12 inches.



Figure 14. Wangechi Mutu, *Fungus*, 2003, mixed media on Mylar, 35 x 24 inches, commissioned by the Museum for African Art.



Figure 15. Wangechi Mutu, *Fungus*, 2003, mixed media on Mylar, 36-1/4 x 24 inches, commissioned by the Museum for African Art.





Figure 16. Wangechi Mutu, *The Bourgeois is Banging on My Head*, 2003, ink, collage, and contact paper on Mylar, 41-1/2 x 30 inches.



Figure 17. Wangechi Mutu, *I Am Your Brokenhearted Fantasy*, 2003, ink, acrylic, photo collage, and contact paper on Mylar, 43 x 45 inches.



Figure 18. Wangechi Mutu, installation detail of *The Ark Collection* at Sikkema Jenkins Gallery, New York, 2006.



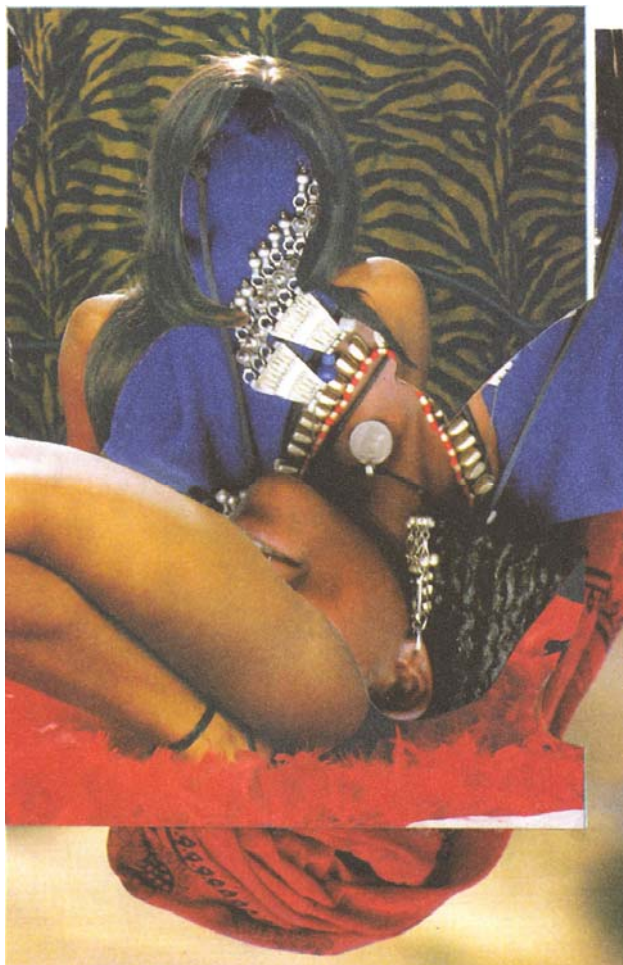


Figure 19. Wangechi Mutu, *Untitled*, from *The Ark Collection*, 2006, mixed media, 6-1/2 x 9-1/2 inches.



Figure 20. Wangechi Mutu, *Untitled*, from *The Ark Collection*, 2006, mixed media, 6-1/2 x 9-1/2 inches.

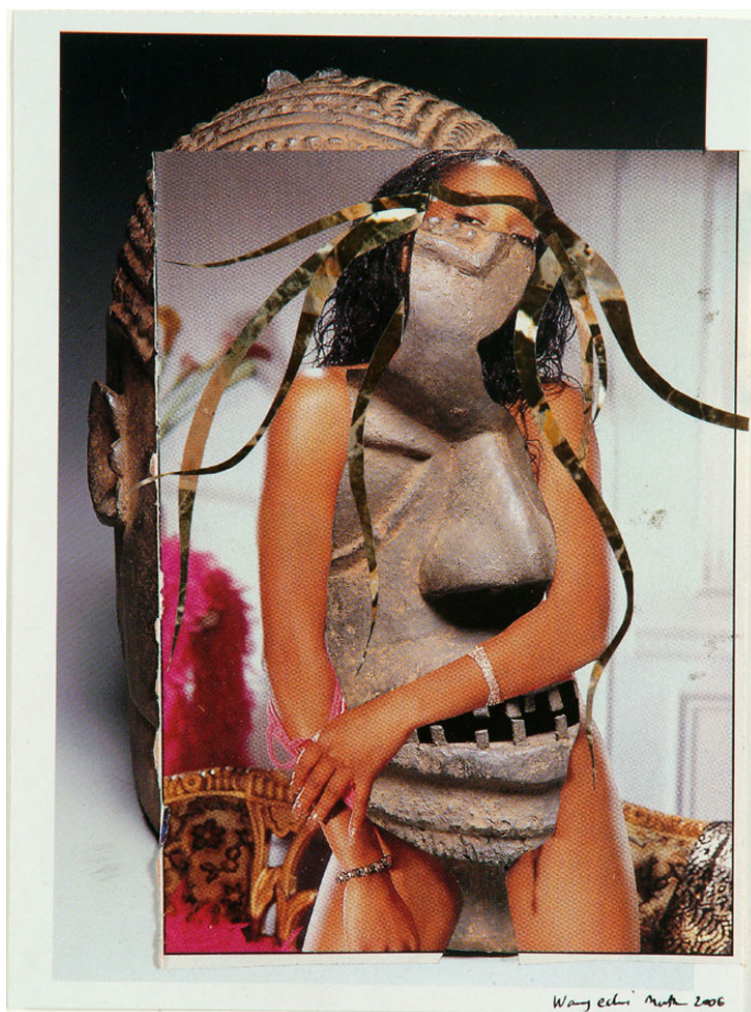


Figure 21. Wangechi Mutu, *Mask*, from *The Ark Collection*, 2006, mixed media, 6-1/2 x 9-1/2 inches.

### CHAPTER 3.

### FEMINISM AND COLLAGE

Across the many media with which Mutu works, collage is undoubtedly her central aesthetic strategy. Collage is not new to contemporary art, but it has become so ubiquitous as to border on the banal. This circumstance is underscored by the widespread presence of collage beyond the realm of fine arts. For these reasons, it is important to situate Mutu's work within various feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial conversations about collage. At the same time, a consideration of the potential effectiveness of collage as a particularly useful strategy for feminist artists, including Mutu, anchors this examination of collage's various histories.<sup>26</sup> Given Mutu's commentary on her hybrid female figures, what do these broader conversations contribute to our understanding of her use of collage?

While accepted accounts of collage in art history situate its origin in early twentieth-century Cubism, alternative narratives and feminist revisionists have reclaimed it as an aesthetic well established within women's cultural traditions—that is, long before Picasso or Braque created his first *papier collé*. In the late 1970s, Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro placed collage within the framework of women's domestic culture with their discussion of *femmage* in the feminist publication *Heresies*. In defining *femmage*, they extended collage beyond the confines of modern art to include women's activities such as sewing, piecing, hooking, cutting, and quilting.<sup>27</sup> In expanding collage's context, they also stressed the resourcefulness that often accompanied the practice of women's collage-making activities in the domestic sphere.

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<sup>26</sup> This chapter is largely indebted to Gwen Raaberg and her article "Beyond Fragmentation: Collage as Feminist Strategy in the Arts," *Mosaic* 31/3 (September 1998): 153–171.

<sup>27</sup> Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro, "Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into What Woman Saved and Assembled," *Heresies* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 67.

Traditionally restricted to the home, women were limited by what was readily available there. This situation often led them to adopt a strategy of “making do” with the materials on hand, of finding new ways to adapt a variety of resources.

Critical of the omission of *femmage* in the canons of art history, Meyer and Schapiro pointedly questioned the patriarchal nature of these canons. For them and other feminists, the omission of *femmage* underscored the biases of the traditional hierarchy of the fine arts as opposed to crafts, especially as women’s creations were historically classified as craft rather than fine art. Not only is this division problematic to maintain when considering its limitations in classifying actual objects, the hierarchy it upholds, as Schapiro argues, is a major obstacle to the greater appreciation of art produced by women. To simply label traditional art-making by women as craft obscures the way in which art institutions and access to them are socially and culturally mediated. As Linda Nochlin clearly delineates in her article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” if women were most often relegated to the domestic sphere, and to the roles of mothers and wives, these social conditions and the restrictions of their situations played a role in shaping their artistic methods and materials.<sup>28</sup>

Though Mutu’s artistic circumstances cannot be described in exactly the same terms as Western female artists of a previous generation, her early methods affirm discussions of *femmage* by Meyer and Schapiro.<sup>29</sup> Mutu explains that she came to collage-making in some ways by necessity. As a painting student, she did not identify with the language and theories of the studio, which often focused on the qualities of the medium itself. She compares listening to

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<sup>28</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989): 145–178.

<sup>29</sup> Along with her different background, Martha Rosler’s photomontages— particularly her *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* Series, 1966–1972, which deals with representations of women, the female body, and domesticity—could also provide an insightful comparison of early feminist collage with Mutu’s work.

her painting instructors pontificate on theory to being in religion class.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, she felt comfortable working with collage; it involved a process with which she was familiar. According to Mutu, she had always cut, pasted, and remade things as a child. She even included a few collages in her application to Cooper Union. Broke and living in New York, Mutu developed collage skills as a means of survival. Unlike expensive traditional art supplies, collage supplies were readily available and often free. Mutu found piles of magazines on the New York streets ready for recycling pick up. She describes rummaging through the trash to find source material for her work. Though she has her own magazine subscriptions today, her work still evinces a resourcefulness that employs strategies of “making do” and working with readily available materials. She even likens cutting for her collage pieces to knitting while talking, suggesting parallels between the traditional work of women and collage techniques.

Another feminist scholar who has written about collage, Lucy Lippard considers traditional women’s work as the classic *bricolage* activity that entails thrift, ingenuity, and often a restless creativity. Lippard observes that when women make things they often have a particular character, although she does not claim resolutely whether this occurs due to social conditioning or something inherent to women’s sensibilities. In describing this particular character of things made by women, she suggests that “the difference can often be defined as a kind of ‘positive fragmentation’ or as the collage aesthetic—the mixing and matching of fragments to provide a new whole.”<sup>31</sup> Guarding against essentializing arguments that might link the collage aesthetic with *all* female art-making, one should be wary of invocations of some timeless or inherent nature of “woman,” irrespective of class, race, and gender. Yet, at the same time, we might

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<sup>30</sup> John Makeni, “Apologise for provocative art? Not me, says Wangechi Mutu,” *Daily Nation*, December 13, 2008, <http://www.nation.co.ke/magazines/lifestyle/-/1214/501458/-/8xktvez/-/index.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 136.



question what common experiences or predispositions among many women lend themselves to creative expression through the gathering and arranging of fragments. Lippard offers one way to approach this question when she states, “collage is born of interruption.”<sup>32</sup>

In line with Lippard’s characterization of collage and its link to interruption, Deena Metzger provides her own insights in her 1977 *Heresies* article “In Her Image.” She grounds her discussion on woman’s culture, or more accurately, women’s cultures, which she construes as “the complex expression of a woman’s sensibility, the interaction of knowledge, values, rituals, organizations and attitudes resulting from the interaction of role, biology, historical conditions and memory.”<sup>33</sup> Considering women’s work and cultures in relation to women’s traditional social and biological roles, Metzger identifies their sensitivity to fluctuation, cyclic movement, and the transitory. In one sense, women’s work in the home involves a cyclical and repetitive domestic routine as the same chores are completed regularly. On a somewhat reductive and essentializing biological level, women’s reproductive patterns are also experienced as cycles. To the extent that their bodies provide a framework for relating to and understanding the world around them, women share an awareness of the above elements. Metzger points out that “the cycle is a concept which coordinates repetition and change.”<sup>34</sup> It involves a sense of continuity and connectedness, all the while involving perpetual motion, which imparts a layered effect and the possibility of new beginnings. Consequently, a woman’s cyclic experiences might engender a certain familiarity or comfort with the unfinished and open-ended, with disruption and interruption, and with the constant negotiations and renegotiations of life, as opposed to more discrete or linear perspectives and perceptions of time and movement. Quoting feminist artist

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 168.

<sup>33</sup> Deena Metzger, “In Her Image,” *Heresies* 1, no. 2 (May 1977): 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 5.

and educator Sheila de Bretteville, Metzger brings to our attention these feminine sensibilities within aesthetic forms.

The organization of material in fragments, multiple peaks rather than a single climactic moment, has a quality and rhythm which may parallel woman's ontological experience, particularly their experience of time.... There are several genres of women's work, quilts and blankets, for example, which are assemblages of fragments generated whenever there is time, which are in their method of creation as well in their aesthetic forms, visually organized into many centers.<sup>35</sup>

De Bretteville points to types of women's ontological experiences that often reverberate with a fragmentary and rhythmic aesthetic but also to one that is de-centered or multi-centered.

While not all women choose to be nor are biologically able to be mothers, Metzger identifies motherhood as a common experience that many women share. In her estimation, interruption is a basic condition mothers encounter daily. Her own experiences while writing a novel showed that a mother's work, especially in the home, and also her art, may reflect the nature of interruption so common to this realm. The physical demands of families and young children imply an immediacy that does not often allow for continuous attention to one activity or a sustained level of separation from family to pursue unrelated activities. Through disruption, this immediacy can impart a fragmentary effect with multiple stops and starts that impede finality or ever reaching a neat and tidy conclusion. As Metzger phrases it, "women know that life has a terrible habit of asserting itself."<sup>36</sup> Though they were all writing in the late 1970s, Meyer, Schapiro, Lippard, and Metzger provide commentary and observations relevant today. Many women still engage in traditional domestic routines, though they may also work outside the home or share these duties and routines with their spouses or partners. However, to the extent that women work from home and are also the main people raising small children, Metzger's

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<sup>35</sup> De Bretteville, quoted in Metzger 5.

<sup>36</sup> Metzger 4.



observations on life's interruptions and intrusions still hold true to a large degree. Today, women's experiences and roles both within and outside the home are likely more diversified, making us question the relevance of Lippard's identification of a "positive fragmentation" with the particular character of things made by women. Yet perhaps this diversification of experiences in fact reinforces and even intensifies this fractured and fragmented effect as women are now more prone to divide themselves between domestic and professional realms, crossing back and forth and shifting roles as necessary.

More recent discussions of collage and its potential for "positive fragmentation" also help elucidate why it might be a particularly effective strategy for contemporary female artists. Some critics of collage as a specific aesthetic strategy have maintained that it cannot be effective for the creation of truly oppositional or critical art.<sup>37</sup> Peter Burger, discussing collage as an artistic strategy of the early twentieth-century avant-garde, credited it with shattering the modernist understanding of art as an autonomous realm separate from the reality of everyday life. For Burger, the avant-garde's uses of collage allowed "reality in its concrete variety [to] penetrate the work of art" while also making it possible for the work to engage with that reality.<sup>38</sup> Yet Burger does not concede that avant-garde collage revolutionized art's ability to bring about meaningful or direct political engagement, especially in its co-optation by mass culture. Consequently, in his estimation, avant-garde collage was only partially successful in reaching its goals. Given most feminists' concerns with political or social engagement and the desire to bring about change in their local and global communities, Burger's conclusions about collage could certainly prove problematic for many feminist artists. Interestingly, avant-garde collage artists

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<sup>37</sup> See Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), and Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> Burger 92.

and early feminist artists shared an anti-modern stance. If Burger concedes that avant-garde collage shattered modernist conceptions of art, Christine Poggi asserts that “the invention of collage ... founded an alternative to the modernist tradition of twentieth-century art.”<sup>39</sup> In terms of an alternate tradition or anti-modern stance, early feminist artists were extremely critical of modernism, particularly its formalist and minimalist strains. In contrast to formalist and minimalist aesthetics, early feminist artists in general supported a vision of art that allowed for the personal, everyday, and also the theatrical in the visual arts, as well as the decorative and utilitarian.<sup>40</sup> Modernists, on the other hand, denigrated these elements.

To the extent that collage is anti-modern, serving to undermine modernist ideas of art, it might be considered postmodern. However, this conceit relies heavily on one’s definition of postmodernism and whether one places it chronologically after modernism or somehow contemporaneous with it. Thomas P. Brockelman questions the typical periodization of postmodernism in his book *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern*, opting to situate the origin of postmodern art with Cubist collage. He shifts postmodern art from the mid- or late-twentieth century to the early decades of the twentieth century, placing it alongside early modern art and within early collage practices. “With collage we have a postmodern intertwined with the modern, a postmodern as crisis of the modern announced from within modernity.”<sup>41</sup>

Whether one agrees with Brockelman’s reperiodization of postmodernism and his claim that Cubist collage is postmodern, the ubiquity of collage in contemporary art and visual culture

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<sup>39</sup> Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 257.

<sup>40</sup> Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 114–115.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas P. Brockelman, *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 6.

is a much less contentious claim. One need only flip through a magazine or turn on the television to see how collage aesthetics infiltrate Western culture. Following Frederic Jameson's view of collage as pastiche, its co-optation by mass consumer culture arguably has led to a loss of its subversive potential. Focusing primarily on postmodern architecture in his seminal *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson argues that collage is symptomatic of a fragmented postmodern world. As pastiche, collage amounts merely to a loose collection of deracinated and thus unintelligible parts. Jameson compares pastiche, and by default collage, to the mimicry of parody but explains that, unlike parody, it is blank and neutral.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, Jameson's analysis lumps together all postmodern art, and so all collage. Thus, when Jameson concedes that pastiche is void of any true oppositional force, Craig Owens rightly takes him to task for only considering mainstream postmodern art, and particularly only postmodern architecture, without seriously addressing artists who consciously work outside the mainstream, creating works of art that engage critically with their subject matter.<sup>43</sup>

Gwen Raaberg succinctly traces this scholarly disagreement and discussion between Burger, Jameson, and Owens in her article "Beyond Fragmentation," and it is precisely Jameson's understanding of collage that she addresses within the framework of feminist art.<sup>44</sup> She is quick to state that collage does not necessarily have a unique power for cultural critique, but following Lippard and other feminist artists and writers, Raaberg finds collage as "rife with possibilities," particularly in its use of fragmentation and relational strategies by artists who

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<sup>42</sup> Jameson 17.

<sup>43</sup> Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992): 300.

<sup>44</sup> Raaberg 155–157.

specifically adopt such strategies out of an awareness of their marginal position.<sup>45</sup> She does not align either the recuperative uses of collage by feminists in the 1970s or feminists' later uses of it with mere reflections of a fragmented, postmodern world. Echoing Lippard, Raaberg reminds us that collage is related to interruption but that it may also attempt to envision new orders and formations.<sup>46</sup> Lippard characterizes collage as "an aesthetic that willfully takes apart what is or is supposed to be and rearranges it in ways that suggest what it could be."<sup>47</sup> At its heart, then, lies both a deconstructive and reconstructive impetus with the latter enabling glimpses of new possibilities, even if only fleetingly. Whether only chimerical or more substantive, envisioning new possibilities offers a multiplicity of different and potentially conflicting arrangements and rearrangements, though without necessarily concealing either the constructed, or even sometimes random, nature of these new orders. It is the simultaneous focus on this reconstructive impulse that Raaberg says marks feminist collage of the past two decades. She states that this impulse is "based not on a totalizing perspective but on a collage strategy that utilizes fragmentation, discontinuity, and dialectical oppositions to stage multiple, fluid relationships."<sup>48</sup>

Continuing with the theme of multiplicity and fluidity but transitioning to topics of identity politics, feminist authors find both problems and insights in discussions of identity. Identity as it is experienced is relevant to an analysis of collage's effectiveness as an aesthetic strategy for feminist artists. Lippard claims that women and sociopolitical artists experience life in capitalist societies as a collage. Understanding identity itself as a collage might reinforce the idea that marginalized groups within a dominant culture often experience their own identities as unstable, fluid, and relationally defined. Mutu has touched on this idea when talking about her

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 157.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 157; Lippard 168.

<sup>47</sup> Lippard 25.

<sup>48</sup> Raaberg 169.

choice to depict the body through collage. As an artist, an immigrant, and a woman, she is aware of the multiple identities and masks she dons in different contexts, masks we all rely on to represent different private and public presentations and understandings of our selves.<sup>49</sup> Although her works are not strictly autobiographical, Mutu acknowledges the relevance of the personal within her work. She also values her work as the place where the complexities and contradictions of identity may be addressed, though not neatly explained, revealed, nor dispelled. Her use of the personal and biographical cannot be understood in a simple or straightforward manner. For Mutu, the ways in which the biographical can work against our assumptions about an artist or her work is perhaps even more interesting for the problems it can highlight.<sup>50</sup> She speaks of her collages coming about through a compiling and combining of her own story and the stories of other women—a collage of their experiences but also of their survival strategies and techniques, visually mapped onto the body.

Mutu's 2006 work *Le Noble Savage* (Figure 22) offers an example of how this mingling of experiences and survival strategies might play out visually. This large collage on Mylar was featured in a reprisal of the Brooklyn Museum's *Global Feminisms* exhibition at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. The central subject is a figure kneeling in tall grass, wearing a raffia skirt, and holding up a palm tree. One arm rests on her hip while the other extends above her head, holding the tree. Birds perch on its branches while others circle it in flight. Animals typically associated with the wild are placed on or around the kneeling female figure. Lions and a water buffalo roam within her skirt. A long, green snake wraps itself around her head, while a cheetah sits on her shoulder. The woman's skin is molten brown and pink, her torso decorated with wood-grain patterns interspersed with flowers and animals. Mutu has described this work as

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<sup>49</sup> Mutu, "Interview by Barbara Kruger" 119.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 119–120.

somewhat of a self-portrait, reflecting her own experiences as an African woman now living in New York. Within the work, one finds references to the Statue of Liberty, emigration, and elements of African landscapes.<sup>51</sup> The wild animals refer to both a real and imagined Africa. As an African immigrant in a large Western city, Mutu faces misconceptions about her homeland. Misconceptions also arise from the fact that she grew up in a city rather than a rural village. Many Westerners are still surprised to learn that Africa has urban areas and is not some “wild” or uncivilized land.

The title of this work is noteworthy, especially from a former anthropology student. Mutu’s title refers to the idea of the noble savage, an idealized view of the so-called uncivilized peoples of non-Western cultures. Fundamental to the idea of the noble savage is the myth of a primeval state in which humankind once existed in unity with nature but from which we have since fallen. While perhaps most associated with Romanticism and the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the idea of the noble savage appeared in European travel writings from roughly the same period and later in various guises in anthropological and art historical discourse regarding the “primitive.” Disregarding historical evidence of extensive ancient civilizations throughout the world, proponents of the noble savage idea equated “civilization” with Western culture alone.<sup>52</sup> Humankind devoid of the corrupting influences of civilization was believed to be noble, attesting to the innate goodness and innocence of humanity in a “pre-civilized” state. The idea of the noble savage was developed in support of racial equality as opposed to less ennobling and more overtly racist views of non-Western peoples as

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<sup>51</sup> Carly Berwick, “Jungle-Punk Princesses Populate Wangechi Mutu’s Solo NYC Debut,” *Bloomberg News* (May 31, 2006).

<sup>52</sup> For example, in West Africa alone, the Empire of Ghana founded by the Soninke, the Empire of Mali founded by the Mandinke, and the Empire of the Songhay existed, as did the Kingdoms of Dahomey and Benin among the Fon and Yoruba.

somehow naturally inferior, which of course helped to legitimize their domination in the minds of the colonizers. However, the idea of the noble savage also stemmed from racist presuppositions. At best, the noble savage offers a patronizing form of racism as a European construction based on the imagined lives of non-Western peoples. It ignores the real, lived experiences of so-called “primitive” people across the globe. The innocence and innate wisdom ascribed to the noble savage denies intelligence and agency in one’s own culturally specific context and continues to use Western standards to measure non-Western cultures.

Given Mutu’s general commentary on her work and her desire to examine stereotypes, *Le Noble Savage* might also point to the contradictions and complexities within the promise of the American dream, which harbors patronizing and paternalistic assumptions that an immigrant’s life always improves, and almost instantly, once on America’s shores. Immigrants come to the U.S. from a wide variety of circumstances and for a multitude of reasons, and the difficulties of life in a new country are numerous, with different languages, cultures, and other barriers to overcome or negotiate. According to Mutu, “you’re very aware—especially when you first get to the country of exile, your new home—that you’ve infested or invaded a place where you don’t belong.”<sup>53</sup> She singles out movement and constant mutation as methods by which to adapt to one’s new surroundings but as also a means to escape the attention and questions that circle around the “other” in a new place.

Speaking about her work, Mutu has discussed the ways materials and objects carry their baggage and background with them. Her own background in sculpture and her experience of frequently migrating from place to place—Nairobi, London, New York—influences what materials she chooses to bring into her collages and installations. Just as the objects and

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<sup>53</sup> Mutu, “Interview by Barbara Kruger” 119.

materials Mutu uses migrate from their original contexts, she strongly believes people should do the same. She singles out travel and the dislocation it brings as important elements to disrupt one's perspective. Through travel, one comes into contact with other perspectives in order to "self-invent and conjure up deviant and radical solutions to life."<sup>54</sup> Not only are simultaneous and multiple perspectives important to Mutu, so are the themes of movement and mutation through self-invention, which she reiterates here. As she brings together materials and objects from different contexts, each with its own history, she also brings together myriad perspectives from her own multiple and shifting identities and from those of other women.

In the publication accompanying Mutu's 2005 solo exhibition *Problematica* at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Christopher Miles describes what he terms the "visual voice" running through her work:

It is ... a sensibility tuned by broad cultural experience, and attuned to many sensibilities involved in a complexity the artist does not presume to contain or solve, but which she seems well equipped to probe and illuminate ... by pointing to and exemplifying aspects of it as it perpetually changes, and as she grasps it in pieces, installments.<sup>55</sup>

Though he speaks of the artist's sensibilities and attunement to complexity, he admits finding it difficult when standing before one of Mutu's collages to remember that it is the creation of a single artist. He rather thinks of them as the result of multiple artists collaborating, freed from the "limitations of their lone subjectivity" and employing production methods like the Surrealists used to create their "exquisite corpses."<sup>56</sup> However, comparing Mutu's collages to the exquisite corpses of the Surrealists reinscribes her work back into Western, patriarchal discourses on art rather than alternative discourses on collage and female aesthetic practices. Miles also suggests

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<sup>54</sup> Fricke 64.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Miles, "Frightful Must It Be: Wangechi Mutu's Exquisite Corpses," in *Wangechi Mutu* (Los Angeles: Capitol Press & Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, 2005), 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 2.



that Mutu “seems to channel multiple subjectivities or points of views,” bringing up the question of why Mutu must resort to “channeling” these in the first place. Is she not capable of having these multiple points of views or varied subjectivities herself? In his analogy of the exquisite corpse, Miles offers Mutu’s figures up as corpses themselves, lumping them together with zombies, the undead, monsters, and cyborgs.<sup>57</sup> Yet her figures do not seem as if they are lifeless corpses. They appear quite alive and animated. Mutu calls the collages that never make it out of her studio her “stillborns,” but the collages the public sees are filled with life, though perhaps with a type of life partially unknowable and unrecognizable to us.<sup>58</sup> Despite Miles’s overplayed analogy of the corpse, he does find in his own response to her work a glimpse of its nature. He senses the fragility of each figure’s unified presence, as fragments bound together only by a tense cohesion. In turn, this tension might itself reflect the fluid, evolving, and constructed nature of its and our own identities, but also the inability to pin “women” down to any single classification or category. As a visual metaphor for the nature of identity and for the complexities in speaking of “women” as a collective term, one finds within Mutu’s collaged characters multiplicity and distortion. Although composed of disparate elements, they in some way also hold together, all the while threatening to mutate, morph, or reconstitute before our eyes.

In *Misguided Little Unforgivable Hierarchies* (Figure 23) from 2005, Mutu perches a small hybrid animal/machine/human figure atop two humanoid creatures of increasing size. The top figure “rides” the middle one, which stands on the back of a third while bending backward to confront it face-to-face with tongue extended. The bottom figure squats amid tall blades of grass,

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<sup>57</sup> As opposed to mere corpses, Miles’s mention of monsters and cyborgs offers a more interesting comparison to Mutu’s collage figures and a topic the next chapter will address.

<sup>58</sup> Makeni.

looking up toward the others with open mouth. Her torso is covered by silhouetted shapes reminiscent of sagging breasts that hang down over her chest and back. In keeping with Mutu's comments that femininity is an accepted form of distortion, the image registers her desire to "emphasize the problems in the impulse to associate the feminine as natural and bring out what is fictional and constructed about it."<sup>59</sup> Mutu speaks of women's bodies as the site upon which various social hierarchies are inscribed and as the place most vulnerable to changing social norms. Mutu's work thus conjures images of violence, both psychologically and physically, noting the great extremes women undergo to achieve idealized forms of beauty. As highlighted in the last chapter, Mutu's sutured figures suggest cosmetic surgery while hinting at its monstrous side. After all, women who "attack themselves in search of a perfect image, and to assuage the imperfections around them," are to a degree also attacking other women by feeding into unhealthy images of perfection.<sup>60</sup> In addition, they also help to perpetuate this type of behavior as acceptable. Again, we find in Mutu's figures the way they are both part of and complicit with problematic systems and hierarchies while suggesting transformative strength and hopeful futures.

Mutu's collages and techniques might usefully be contextualized alongside those of her contemporaries, particularly other female African artists working in similar styles. The works of South African artists Penny Siopis, Minnette Vari, and Candice Breitz provide a useful point of comparison for feminist assemblage, collage, and photomontage strategies. Siopis and Vari touch on both gendered and racialized identities and narratives in their installation and video works. Siopis's assembled installations of found and collected objects relate to both specific memories of individuals and to wider social and cultural events. She plays with the way that

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<sup>59</sup> Fricke 66.

<sup>60</sup> Mutu and Firstenberg 142.

objects themselves hold traces of their past owners' experiences and how these objects come to be left behind due to forced or voluntary migrations on the personal and global level. Vari's photographic and video works use digital manipulation to explore gender and race through the female body. Her controversial 1995 *Self-Portrait*, which she displayed on a billboard in Pretoria, is a digital print on aluminum that distorts her white African facial features to more closely resemble a black African face. Her video *Alien* from 1998 employs digital manipulation as well, projecting images of bald, naked women as shape-shifting and distorted entities, allowing for meditations on both female identity and representations of the female body.

More so than Siopis's or Vari's, Breitz's figurative collage works and her reasons for employing collage and photomontage techniques coincide with Mutu's work and Raaberg's discussion of feminist strategies. Some of Mutu's works, particularly her *Ark Collection* (see Figures 18–20), bear a striking resemblance to Breitz's earlier *Rainbow Series* from 1996. *Rainbow Series* (Figures 24 and 25) features photomontages comprising white female body parts from porn magazines and black female body parts from ethnographic tourist postcards. They combine existing stereotypical representations of women, setting them against the social and political context of post-apartheid South Africa and its image as a Rainbow Nation.<sup>61</sup> Like Mutu, Breitz represents only women's bodies in this series, though the metaphor of a Rainbow Nation she evokes was meant to be an all-encompassing and inclusive new national image for post-apartheid South Africa. Breitz's focus on female bodies is something she links to her "constant awareness of just how many women are getting cut up out there."<sup>62</sup> During the 1990s when

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<sup>61</sup> Used by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and then Nelson Mandela to describe South Africa as a fledgling democracy embracing all its multicultural peoples, the term "Rainbow Nation" has been heavily criticized in its political usage. This criticism rests on its use as a homogenizing myth of peace and reconciliation that fails to account for the lasting legacies of racism and crime in post-apartheid South Africa.

<sup>62</sup> Brenda Atkinson, "Rethinking Pornography, Imaging Desire (Candice Breitz Interviewed by Brenda Atkinson)," *Camera Austria*, no. 56 (1996): 6.

Breitz created *Rainbow Series*, South Africa, and specifically inner Johannesburg, was one of the rape and murder capitals of the world. As a woman, Breitz speaks of symbolically “stealing” the act of crudely cutting up women. Yet rather than conducting a simple symbolic inversion by cutting up men, she instead violently pieces together women who are, in her own words, “fragmented and scarred by their multiple identities.”<sup>63</sup> In speaking about her techniques for the series, the artist comments on the tendency for both photography and video to be accepted as having some connection to what is real. Rather than playing into that tendency, she consciously chooses to use montage as a strategy, doing so with a very manual application: re-photographing photomontages created by hand, without any computer manipulation or animated blending of her source images. She explains, “I want to hold onto visible ruptures and seams” and thus foreground the very constructed nature of representation.<sup>64</sup>

Breitz also makes a connection between censorship and the basic techniques of collage and montage, which involve the acts of adding onto an image or object but also cutting away, erasing. Yet the very attempt at erasure leaves a trace: “The gap or scar left where the erasure was performed always reminds us that something was there, and I think it is ... a process of addition in the very moment that it tries to exercise negation.”<sup>65</sup> The bits and scraps of images making up the collage are then like the objects and materials that Mutu feels carry their own baggage and background with them. It is in this way that Mutu’s collaged figures and hybrids emit an immediacy and presence that somehow seem more than the sum of their visible parts, laden as they are with the traces of the complex matrix of visual references and source materials from which they are taken.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 17.

Like Mutu and Breitz, Nigerian-born Fatimah Tuggar is a female African artist working abroad. In line with Breitz, Tuggar highlights the visual seams in her photographic and video collages and assemblages. However, unlike Mutu and Breitz, Tuggar uses digital manipulation and technology to do so, finding it still possible to hold onto a critical visual disjuncture through making visible the cutting, splicing, and compositing of images from different temporal and geographic sources. Tuggar's video collages combine advertising and commercial footage aimed at American housewives of the 1950s with her own more recent ethnographic footage of women in domestic settings in Nigeria. Works from 2000 and 2001 like *Fusion Cuisine* (Figure 26) and *Robo Makes Dinner* (Figure 27) offer examples of how Tuggar mixes advertising and fine art to examine the power dynamics, as well as cultural implications, of technology and its uneven distribution and accessibility around the globe. As she states in a 2002 fellowship statement, "media is both a subject and the medium of the work," and we might consider technology as both subject and medium for her as well.<sup>66</sup> According to Nicole Fleetwood, Tuggar makes visible the seams in her fused images as a way of de-centering normative subjective positions and narrative, thus inserting the black female subject into seemingly inappropriate places.<sup>67</sup> Fleetwood contrasts Tuggar's use of visible digital seams with Kaja Silverman's psychoanalytical film theory of suture, which in classic cinematic narrative allows for the binding together of character and viewer. It establishes an overriding white male subjective perspective while concealing its construction and identification as such through a variety of complex editorial and production techniques.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> [http://www.civitella.org/fellows\\_personal.aspx?fellowid=174](http://www.civitella.org/fellows_personal.aspx?fellowid=174).

<sup>67</sup> Nicole Fleetwood, "Visible Seams: Gender, Race, Technology and the Media Art of Fatimah Tuggar," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 30, no. 1 (Autumn 2004): 1431.

<sup>68</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Tuggar's technological methods of creating works differ significantly from that of Mutu's and Breitz's, yet the jarring effects of Tuggar's collage aesthetics are similar. She accomplishes this with quick cuts and composites of 1950s-era advertising for kitchen gadgetry and machines promising to modernize and simplify the domestic life of American housewives along with images of Nigerian women and their outdoor kitchens filled with large pots over open fires. As Tuggar expressed in an interview with Greg Sullivan, her aim is not to lament some unwelcome or inevitable intrusion of technology into African life, as if all African societies were somehow unspoiled and pure and in need of preservation.<sup>69</sup> Like Mutu, who does not wish to replicate simple binary oppositions in her work, neither is Tuggar interested in merely creating or showing oppositions between America and Nigeria or between first and third worlds. However, what Tuggar is interested in showing, and does so quite well through her use of visible digital seams, is the way technology is used to create and maintain representations of racialized and gendered others. As Fleetwood convincingly concludes, Tuggar's work and the subject positions it highlights illustrate the interdependence of the global and the local rather than their mere opposition, and also that "new tools are used to maintain old imbalances and [that] certain geographies remain marginal to these emerging developments and narratives."<sup>70</sup> Olu Oguibe highlights the blind spots and deficiencies of beliefs in cyberspace as the "new, free global democracy," noting that in actuality it is a privileged territory with restricted accessibility that requires computer literacy and the computer itself as entry point.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Greg Sullivan, *Interview with Fatimah Tuggar*, November 4, 2000, <http://home.jps.net/~nada/tuggar.htm>

<sup>70</sup> Fleetwood 1451.

<sup>71</sup> Olu Oguibe, "Forsaken Geographies: Cyberspace and the New World 'Other,'" presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Cyberspace Conference, Madrid, June 1996 (<http://internet.eserver.org/oguibe>).

Through their work, both Mutu and Tuggar show their awareness of their gendered and racialized identities as African artists circulating within an art-world system accessible predominantly to the West. Using collage or digital assemblage, they open up new spaces that acknowledge, contest, and revise such identities. Tuggar does this through her inclusion of technological products and narratives of technological progress typically associated with the American domestic realm, or the West in general, in rural African settings. The contrast of women's spaces across cultures, within the home in American contexts and outside the home in African ones, also underscores the way these accepted spaces for women are demarcated in different cultures and societies. Tuggar's digital assemblages achieve their impact with humor but also through the use of visible ruptures and seams, while Mutu's collaged female figures are glamorized but also somewhat horrific. Mutu's collaged figures offer a more seamless and perhaps thus more seductive alternative, which brings with it a promise of imaginative and new transformations. However, whether her figures are better off or worse from this transformation remains to be seen.

Mutu's collage works are an example of Raaberg's description of feminist collage that incorporates both the impetus to "deconstruct cultural representations and discourses but also ... include, along with gender issues, a full range of social, political, and cultural concerns" and "a reconstructive impulse, based not on a totalizing perspective but on a collage strategy that utilizes fragmentation, discontinuity, and dialectical oppositions to stage multiple, fluid relationships."<sup>72</sup> These ideas speak to the artist's own claim that mutation and transformation are central to her work, while reflecting on both as methods to transcend the situations and contexts

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<sup>72</sup> Raaberg 169.

in which we find ourselves.<sup>73</sup> Collage serves as an effective strategy for Mutu to experiment with transformations, as a way of rewriting history but also reclaiming imagined futures.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Mutu and Firstenberg 141.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 141–142.





Figure 22. Wangechi Mutu, *Le Noble Savage*, 2006, mixed media on Mylar, 91-3/4 x 54 inches.



Figure 23. Wangechi Mutu, *Misguided Little Unforgiveable Hierarchies*, 2005, ink, acrylic, collage, and contact paper on Mylar, 81 x 52 inches.

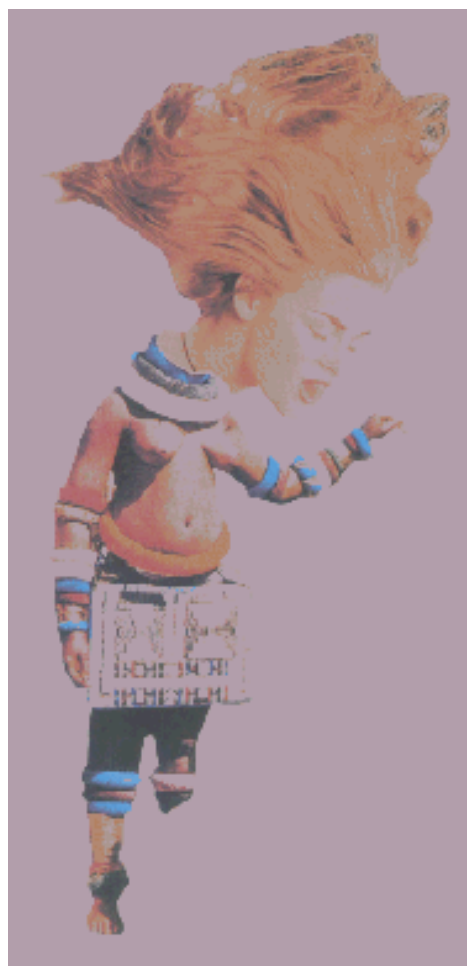


Figure 24. Candice Breitz, *Rainbow Series #1*, 1996, Cibachrome photograph, 60 x 40 inches.



Figure 25. Candice Breitz, *Rainbow Series #6*, 1996, Cibachrome photograph, 60 x 40 inches.



Figure 26. Fatimah Tuggar, *Fusion Cuisine*, 2000, video still, produced at the Kitchen, New York.





Figure 27. Fatimah Tuggar, *Robo Makes Dinner*, 2001, photomontage.

## CHAPTER 4.

### RETHINKING CYBORGS

*“A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.”<sup>75</sup>*

Blurring the boundaries between machine and organism, Mutu’s collaged figures fit squarely within feminist discussions of the cyborg. These discussions have predominantly focused on the cyborg as a potential metaphor for thinking difference, but also for imagining new transnational coalitions among women that are not based on essentializing identities or characteristics. In order to understand how Mutu’s figures mesh with or stand apart from these entities, this chapter analyzes the figure of the cyborg, as outlined by Donna Haraway in her seminal essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” and various reactions to it by other feminist scholars.

Haraway sets out to “build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism.”<sup>76</sup> Her choice of irony as a rhetorical approach is telling as to the type of political myth she wishes to construct: “Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true.”<sup>77</sup> This description also holds true for the cyborg figure around which she weaves her political myth. Haraway’s cyborg is both fictional and real, imagined and material. Cyborgs are found everywhere, from science fiction novels, mainstream Hollywood movies, and Japanimation to modern medicine, military warfare, and advanced

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<sup>75</sup> Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, New York: Routledge, 1990, pp. 149–181, originally published in *Socialist Review*, no. 80 (1985): 65–107.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 149.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

communication technologies. What was once the stuff of science fiction is now more than ever crossing over into reality. Examples of human/animal and human/machine couplings abound today. For decades, researchers and doctors have experimented with xenotransplantation, inserting the organs and cells of primates and pigs into human patients, in their search for solutions to organ donor shortages and breakthroughs in treating human diseases.<sup>78</sup> Intersections of the human and machine are evident in inventions like the DEKA arm, a bionic arm developed by Dean Kamen, inventor of the Segway and numerous medical devices, and funded by the U.S. Defense Department in an effort to improve the lives of amputees who have lost limbs in military combat. The DEKA arm uses much of the technology already employed for bionic legs and knees. With its approximately two dozen circuit boards and handful of motors, the DEKA arm connects directly with the amputee's nervous system and is controlled by electrical impulses generated from the mere thought of moving it. In this way, learning to use the DEKA arm amounts more to the computerized arm's learning how to interpret, decode, and respond to the impulses it picks up than to the amputee's learning how to use it.<sup>79</sup>

Such realities lead Haraway to reflect on the type of world in which cyborgs can and do exist and also to the type of identities they entail. Though the DEKA arm is conceived in terms of physically completing the damaged human to which it is appended, as giving something back to amputees, it also signals the impossibility of one's ever returning to some organic or natural whole self, whether physically or psychologically. The amputee must adapt new methods of interfacing with his or her surroundings using a new technological limb, which never completely

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<sup>78</sup> For an extensive overview of the history and development of xenotransplantation and the associated scientific, moral, and ethical controversies surrounding it, see [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/organfarm](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/organfarm). This website was created in conjunction with the PBS special on xenotransplantation (Frank Simmonds, *Organ Farm*, PBS Frontline, March 27, 2001).

<sup>79</sup> Scott Pelley, "The Pentagon's Bionic Arm," *60 Minutes* segment, aired April 13, 2009, [http://news.cnet.com/8301-11386\\_3-10217855-76.html](http://news.cnet.com/8301-11386_3-10217855-76.html).



replaces what was lost but which certainly augments the newly configured body. Much in the way that xenotransplantation violates strict borders demarcating the human and animal, inventions of modern medicine and military research, like the DEKA arm, carry with them the fear of fluid boundaries and blurred distinctions between human and machine. The classic dualism of the “natural” and “artificial” no longer seems as ironclad as it once did. The fierce political, ethical, and moral debates about xenotransplantation between medical experts, conservative religious groups, and animal rights activists parallel similar controversies around human/machine fusions and testify to the extreme and passionate reactions such “leaky boundaries” elicit. However, in the type of cyborg world that Haraway describes, “people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.”<sup>80</sup> Consequently, we may not yet have reached Haraway’s visionary cyborg world and might stand to learn something useful from her instructive cyborg myth. Politically speaking, she states that the privileging of these partial standpoints opens multiple and simultaneous perspectives, bringing the challenge of seeing from each of them, such that each perspective reveals what is perhaps invisible or unknowable from the other ones. For this reason, Haraway maintains that “the cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity.”<sup>81</sup>

Though Haraway’s ironic political myth of the cyborg remains a powerful metaphor in feminist studies, critical assessments of it provide further suggestions on the most productive ways to consider feminist cyborg figurations. In one of the better-known critical assessments of the cyborg, Anne Balsamo offers an ironic ethnographic reading. Balsamo follows Haraway’s lead in reading the cyborg as a figure that can potentially disrupt concepts of the “other” in terms

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 154.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 151.

of human/machine and natural/artificial binaries.<sup>82</sup> However, Balsamo finds that the cyborg of popular culture does not completely follow through on this disruptive promise in terms of gender binaries. She points out that popularized versions of cyborgs in literature and film do not exist in a post-gendered or utopian world but are instead highly gendered entities. On the one hand, female-gendered cyborgs, as fusions of the female with machines and technology, challenge traditional gender assumptions due to the way femininity has historically been associated with the emotional or sexual, as masculinity has with the rational, scientific, and technological. Yet according to Balsamo, “female cyborgs, while challenging the relationship between femaleness and technology, actually perpetuate oppressive gender stereotypes.”<sup>83</sup> Balsamo singles out Rachel in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* and Helva in Anne McCaffrey’s science-fiction novel *The Ship that Sang* as examples of how popular images of cyborgs reinforce the feminine as emotional, nurturing, or sexually objectified.<sup>84</sup> Sara Cohen Shabot adds William Gibson’s cyberpunk novels and the films *Robocop*, *The Terminator*, and *Total Recall* as examples that further entrench normative views on male and female gendered identities.<sup>85</sup> Ultimately, both Balsamo and Shabot argue that the cyborg of popular culture falls short of Haraway’s vision of the cyborg as a figure capable of subverting patriarchal power structures and essentializing views on gender.

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<sup>82</sup> Anne Balsamo, “Reading Cyborgs, Writing Feminism,” In *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2000, 148–158.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 151.

<sup>84</sup> To these examples I would add the character Trinity from *The Matrix*. Throughout the film, she is one of the most determined and strongest rebels in the post-apocalyptic world following the war between the ruling machines and the humans they harvest and incubate as a power source. Yet toward the film’s end, it is only through Trinity’s “emotional” awakening and realization of her love for Neo that she saves him. This act, in turn, enables him to recognize himself as “the One,” the potential savior of the human race.

<sup>85</sup> Sara Cohen Shabot, “Grotesque Bodies: A Response to Disembodied Cyborgs,” *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3 (November 2006): 223–235. The anthology *Cybersexuality, A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), offers a variety of critiques of the cyborg, especially in its popularized variety, as a truly liberating figure.

In similar fashion, Shabot also finds problematic the hyper-sexualized body found in popular versions of female cyborgs. This body is configured as an ideal body type in its hyper-reality. Consequently, she expresses concern that the cyborg body, as popularly configured, risks abandoning the “flesh and blood body.”<sup>86</sup> Shabot sees this loss as tantamount to a loss of embodied existence. She places great emphasis on the need to retain an embodied subject, for to lose the experience of our bodies is to lose the very difference that our own meaningful life experiences and sensations impart: “We are ... ambiguous beings regarding our ways of existing: our gender, our looks and our thoughts, constitute an ever-changing flux that can never be absolutely defined or contained by an abstract, purely conceptual, incorporeal subjectivity.”<sup>87</sup> Shabot finds the tendency toward a disembodied subjectivity in popular images of cyborgs dangerous in the way that such an abstraction can appear impartial while upholding traditional hierarchies, conceptions, and dualisms. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin, Shabot offers the grotesque and monstrous body as an alternate figure to the cyborg.<sup>88</sup> She argues that the grotesque body cannot be disembodied. In many ways, the grotesque body is actually defined and identified through the physical body. It is excessive, unable to be contained, closed, or limited—a self-transgressing, fragmented figure intertwined and interlaced with the world around it.<sup>89</sup> However, Shabot does not suggest the grotesque as a means to evade technology and its impact on the body, which she recognizes as nearly impossible to avoid. Today, the cyborg seems almost inescapable, which highlights the cogency of her insistence on foregrounding the embodied subjective position and, thus, partial and imperfect subjectivities.

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<sup>86</sup> Shabot 226.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 228.

<sup>88</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965.

<sup>89</sup> Shabot 223–235.

The disconnection between Haraway's cyborgs and popularized versions of them underscores the ways in which cyborgs as metaphors and oppositional figurations can lose their radical potential when co-opted by mass culture but also the ways in which Haraway has been misinterpreted. While Balsamo's and Shabot's points are certainly important, their critiques of the cyborg stem more from their wariness of its popularized images than those Haraway envisions or advocates. Yet Haraway's own comments on the cyborg are admittedly confusing when taken out of context. Within the broader perspective of her writings, the cyborg is only one of the figurations within her "menagerie," which includes monsters, tricksters, and vampires. Through Shabot's arguments we are reminded that the radical cyborg, if it is to be an oppositional figure, carries with it the specter of the grotesque and monstrous. Haraway does not disagree. She speaks of the cyborg as a monstrous entity, especially to the extent that it has defined the very limits of Western imagination.<sup>90</sup> Haraway's cyborg is neither an innocent nor unified subject.<sup>91</sup> It is an argument against dualisms of all kinds, including machine/organism, human/animal, natural/artificial, mind/body, and female/male, to name a few. According to Haraway, "cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the dualism in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves."<sup>92</sup> This statement, along with her essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," offers a more nuanced interpretation of her perhaps initially misleading comment that cyborgs inhabit a post-gendered world. Haraway's cyborg is not the disembodied cyborg of popular culture that Shabot indicts, nor is her post-gendered cyborg world one that privileges disembodied subjects freed

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<sup>90</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" 180.

<sup>91</sup> "... bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception. A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends); it takes irony for granted." Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" 180.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 181.

from the specificity of a body. For Haraway, that type of positionality offers only a “false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibilities.”<sup>93</sup> In contrast, in its commitment to permanent partiality, her cyborg is more akin to the “split and contradictory self.” It is “the one who can interrogate positioning and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history.”<sup>94</sup> Haraway’s cyborg thus departs from those popular science-fiction and cyberpunk versions that fetishize the cyborg body as an escape from the limitations of the human body.<sup>95</sup> Haraway’s radicalized cyborg pushes us to rethink our bodies and imagine new kinds of embodiment but also to examine our kinship and connections to what was formerly outside or beyond these bodies.<sup>96</sup> As Haraway states, “the cyborg is in this curious set of family relationships with sibling species of various kinds” and with the inorganic and mechanical as well.<sup>97</sup>

Cyborgs are not just the physical hybridization of machine and organism for Haraway. They are also those individuals operating within the contemporary world network of technological communication systems. Haraway’s use of metaphors and her method of theorizing begin with specific, literal examples in the world rather than an espousal of theoretical rhetoric to which real-world examples must be molded to fit.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, she uses cyborg identity as a means to “redescribe” women’s identities as experienced within this world network. As Haraway explicitly states, “the actual situation of women is their integration/exploitation into

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<sup>93</sup> Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, New York: Routledge, 1991, 190.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 193.

<sup>95</sup> See Thomas Foster’s “Meat Puppets or Robopaths? Cyberpunk and the Question of Embodiment,” in *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs, and Cyberspace*, for an analysis of how cyberpunk devalues the human body.

<sup>96</sup> “Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” (Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” 178.)

<sup>97</sup> Haraway, *How Like a Leaf, An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve*, New York: Routledge, 2000, 128.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 108.

a world system of production/reproduction and communication called the informatics of domination.”<sup>99</sup> This point underscores an important aspect of the cyborg world Haraway describes and attempts to envision. This aspect is Haraway’s “double vision” of the cyborg world, as Chela Sandoval calls it.<sup>100</sup> The cyborgian world might be read as the pinnacle of Euro-American white domination, or it could be an opportunity for emerging and oppositional U.S. third world feminisms, which Haraway interprets as cyborg feminisms and Sandoval identifies with the methodology of the oppressed.<sup>101</sup>

As women’s cyborgian identities are integrated, reconstructed, and deployed within this new web of interactions determined by science and communications technologies, so are their bodies. The constructed nature of both is paramount to Haraway and Balsamo, and it requires feminist readings and re-readings of women’s identities and bodies in order to find new ways of relating to and also reshaping their current positions within technological and scientific domains. One such reading situates the cyborg as the fractured, constructed, and constantly changing female self. No longer is a unified sense of self intact, but in its place is one defined and redefined through shifting interactions, participations, and relations at the psychological and social levels. Such a fractured self stands in opposition to the idea of a unified category of “female” or “woman”: “There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices.”<sup>102</sup> While this fragmentation and loss of a unified self might also be a critical aspect of postmodern identity, feminists are faced with the practicality of trying to actively build coalitions from this

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<sup>99</sup> Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” 163.

<sup>100</sup> Chela Sandoval, “New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed,” in *Cybersexuality*, 253.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 249–250.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 155.

de-centering and destabilizing loss of a secure foundation of action. As a political myth for feminists, the cyborg must still be capable of inspiring real and engaging political and social change in the world.

Michelle Bastian calls attention to this underlying concern in Haraway's work and "her interest in finding ways of allowing heterogenous actors to work productively together."<sup>103</sup> Bastian maps out Haraway's "cyborg theory of coalition," an element of her work that Bastian feels has long been neglected. At the same time, however, Bastian also acknowledges the very painful experience of constantly reworking one's subjective position and bringing this process face-to-face with real-world applications of transversal politics. In light of the failings of hegemonic strains of feminism predominantly centered on normative perspectives of white, first world feminists, cyborgs and the type of coalitions they proffer are best understood when brought into conversation with Haraway's later writings on modes of knowledge gathering and production.<sup>104</sup> The cyborg subject is complemented and elaborated through Haraway's Modest Witness, a figure linked to the ideals of scientific objectivity. Her formulation of a new Modest Witness rejects the unattainable and impossible objectivity hailed by scientific methodologies, subscribing instead to epistemological groundings that are always situated from a location, a perspective, and a biased subjective position. When relating such a view back to the real-world tasks of making decisions and taking action based on one's available knowledge base, problems arise. However, Bastian guides us to understanding that the lack of certainty in Haraway's visions of knowledge need not be translated into an inability or lack of responsibility to make decisions or to act. She writes:

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<sup>103</sup> Michelle Bastian, "Haraway's Lost Cyborg and the Possibilities of Transversalism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 4, 2006: 1027.

<sup>104</sup> Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan<sup>®</sup>\_Meets\_OncoMouse<sup>TM</sup>: Feminism and Technoscience*, New York: Routledge, 1997.

... the absence of guarantees does not mean that one must not make decisions but rather that they must be made with caution and concern for accountability. Consequently ... [it] requires one to remain in critical dialogue with both those we hope to act with and those whom we are confronting.<sup>105</sup>

In other words, the lack of complete certainty in both one's knowledge and the correctness of one's perspective necessitates even greater responsibility in one's decision-making processes and actions. Such a model of knowledge production calls for continual dialogue and a deep commitment to finding alternative methods for relating to one another through building alliances and solidarities rather than through exclusivist notions of identity.

Bastian offers concrete examples of such coalition-building methods based on transversalism as theorized by Nira Yural-Davis and Cynthia Cockburn in their work with feminist peace groups like Women in Black and Women against Fundamentalism. Both groups focus on goals they hope to achieve rather than on members' identities, yet they do not completely ignore identity, instead seeking ways to challenge how it is experienced.<sup>106</sup> Individual backgrounds are considered, and sharing these is even encouraged but not such that one individual is made to represent any larger groups of which they might be a part, whether in regard to religion, race, or otherwise. "Within these coalitions, then, one's situatedness does not need to be forgotten or minimized. Rather, it provides the inspiration and commitment that are required to engage in the difficult work of forming coalitions for peace."<sup>107</sup> Reflecting back on Haraway and her insistence on the heterogeneity of each individual, Bastian refutes claims that Haraway supports a changing of identities at will in her call for the complexity of specificity and

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<sup>105</sup> Bastian 1032.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 1040.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.



difference. What she actually argues for is a type of specificity for individuals that does not require being static in order to be both located and situated.<sup>108</sup>

Many of Mutu's female figures visually index Haraway's radical cyborg, which itself serves as a guiding entity for such feminist coalitions. Mutu's figures evoke a similar tension in their uneasy layering of shifting identities, which hold together in a way that seems simultaneously to threaten to dissolve or morph at any moment. *Try Dismantling the Little Empire Inside of You* (Figure 28), created specifically for the Brooklyn Museum's 2007 *Global Feminisms* exhibition, is one example. Like many of Mutu's works, it combines ink, photocollage, and paint on a large Mylar sheet. The composition includes a main figure to the viewer's right standing amid tall blades of grass. The figure faces a tangled mass of various body parts interspersed with lines drawn in rudimentary asterisk or star-like patterns to her left. The long strands of wavy grass in the lower section of the image echo the brown, frayed extensions flowing from the figure's ankles, arms, and waist. What at first might seem to be raffia from a skirt and other garments worn by the figure is complicated when considering its dual-headed nature. A human-like head sits atop the figure's shoulders, yet rearing back from it is the head of a horse with mane splayed in all directions. Is the viewer to read the extensions as raffia or animal hair and fur? Is this a human or animal form or, more likely, some combination of the two? The figure's ambiguity is further intensified by the addition of mechanical elements: wheels and motorcycle parts for its hands, feet, shoulders, and knees. And what is one to make of the explosion of various limbs, heads, and debris that takes place almost as if under the control of the cyborg figure?

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid. 1035.

Reflecting on the work's title and its inclusion in the *Global Feminisms* exhibition, we might align "empire" and its dismantling with the various targets of feminist critiques. At various moments, feminist critiques have been and continue to be aimed at all forms of patriarchy, imperialism, militarism, racism, colonialism, neocolonialism, neoliberalism, and capitalism, among the most obvious. Yet feminists are most often a part of the very systems and modalities they critique by the sheer fact of their concrete, lived social and political realities, complicit and implicated though critical and aware. This fact does not negate all their critical efforts but reminds us that, as part of these systems, we can easily internalize what is not questioned, sometimes even what is. Mutu has acknowledged this circumstance yet does not allow it to innervate her figures, which lose neither their strength nor their critical power from where they stand, both within and in some ways apart from their own situated contexts.

As the figure within *Try Dismantling the Little Empire Inside of You* attempts to dismantle the problematic within, feminism must rise to a similar challenge. Audre Lorde elegantly states that, "as women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change."<sup>109</sup> Lorde locates real revolutionary change in identifying "that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us," rather than merely attempting to escape the oppressive situations within which we find ourselves.<sup>110</sup> Borrowing Cynthia Enloe's term, our "feminist curiosity" must be tireless and relentless in its questioning of all that surrounds us and also of what we might take for granted, yet this curiosity must not only be directed outwardly.<sup>111</sup> This same curiosity must

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<sup>109</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984, 2007, 122.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 123.

<sup>111</sup> Cynthia Enloe, "Crafting a Global 'Feminist Curiosity' to Make Sense of Globalized Militarism," in *Globalization & Militarism: Feminists Make the Link*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, 1, 11.

be turned inward as a tool of self-reflection and analysis. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has charged first world feminists with this challenge, but feminism in all its guises requires this type of continual self-evaluation. Feminists must acknowledge and explore not only their place within systems of which they are critical, but also their possible complicity with forms of neocolonialism and imperialism—those “little empires” they outwardly seek to uncover yet that they may serve to replicate in their own well-meaning efforts. Mohanty faults some first world feminists for their failure to conduct this self-questioning, which could reveal the problematic in subscribing to essentializing categories of “woman.” Failing to foreground the many constructions of women in various contexts leaves female subjects defined by gender difference alone.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, as Mohanty argues, this equation reinforces simple gender binaries, which fall short of effectively contributing to strategies against varying forms of oppression. As a consequence, simple gender binaries replicate the same binaries within power struggles. Within a binary system of power, revolutionary struggle loses its dynamic potential, becoming flattened. Such a binary consists of the powerless and the powerful with struggles to gain more power as mapped out by movement from the former to the latter, resulting in a simple inversion of the previous formation.<sup>113</sup> The formerly powerless become those in power without radically changing the overall power structure or offering new possibilities for more democratic distributions of power.

Remembering that the cyborg figure in Mutu’s work embodies the ability to scatter and rearrange—or more accurately, to dismember—those “little empires,” both internally and hopefully externally as well, a further investigation of the artist’s figures is warranted in the

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<sup>112</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001, 31.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 39.

rethinking of new forms of feminisms. At the time of catalogue publication for *Global Feminisms*, Mutu had not yet finished *Try Dismantling the Little Empire Inside of You*.

Illustrated in its place is a work from 2006 titled *Preying Mantra* (Figure 29). Again one notes a composite cyborgian figure, at once human and animal, although this time less machine.

Reclining in a watchful yet relaxed pose, the figure is clearly comfortable with her kinship to the animal kingdom, the so-called “natural” realm. A green snake weaves through her graceful fingers. What resembles bird feathers extend from the back of her head. An amalgam of chicken feet, insect legs and pinchers, and plant-like forms hang from her left earlobe. She sits leaning against a mosaic-patterned hill bounded by trees. Her molten and blotched skin, with its pink, purple, and brown hues, appears almost camouflaged within the artificially constructed nature scene.

Again, Mutu’s witty title proves thought-provoking. With *Preying Mantra*, she plays with the idea of the praying mantis, an insect named for the way it folds its front legs as if praying when standing at rest on its back legs. The insect’s common name suggests both religious rituals and a connection to that which lies beyond the human realm. Building on the initial part of the insect’s common name, *mantis* derives from the Greek word meaning “prophet” or “diviner.” The insect’s name thus calls to mind the act of communicating with divine forces or whatever might lie outside strictly human experience, but it also invokes the role of those who have special access to the next world. Anyone who has encountered a praying mantis or observed one can likely attest to how odd and almost alien they seem, both in their physical appearance and for the mannerisms they display. They are fascinating and arresting while also slightly mysterious in what has been interpreted as a mocking of human religious behaviors. While humans value mantes largely due to their eating patterns, the praying mantis

has a large number of enemies within the animal kingdom. They are carnivorous, eating other insects and even small vertebrae like mice and hummingbirds, but also cannibalistic, sometimes eating other praying mantes. Camouflage plays a very important role in their survival. Their ability to blend in with their surroundings aids them in remaining hidden from their predators but also in luring their prey. Some African varieties of praying mantes so closely resemble flowers that other insects often land directly on them.

Mutu's choice of title highlights the simultaneous roles of predator and prey, power and its lack. She also alludes to religious practices within Buddhism and Hinduism in her use of the term mantra. A mantra is believed to possess power, which it invokes through repetition and prayer. A sacred formula of sounds and words, mantras serve to concentrate the mind and aid in one's journey to ultimate realization. With these associations in mind, the viewer can sense both power, as predator, and fragility, as prey, emanating from Mutu's figure but also a more mystical or otherworldly force. The power emanating from all of Mutu's figures rests in their links to forms or realms beyond the human and animal, whether spiritual or not, but also in their status as survivors. Mutu envisions her figures as being damaged by the world and their experiences but not defeated: "All of their history is written on their bodies and in their hair. It's very clear where they've been. Some of them are missing parts, or have gained a new part, be it an animal part or a machine part, as they've gone along. These are images of triumph and transgression."<sup>114</sup>

Mutu's cyborg figures are survivors through mutation and also the regeneration common to certain animal species when appendages are lost and regrown. Her figures are certainly not idealized, nor are they images of some perfect harmony in their melding of human, animal, and machine. However, as survivors, they offer glimpses of future possibilities without erasing the

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<sup>114</sup> Mutu, quoted in Tate.

histories through which they have arrived. Just as Haraway's cyborgs have "layers of histories," so too do Mutu's collaged figures. As Haraway speaks of her cyborgs, and we might easily extend to Mutu's figures, "it wasn't born in a garden, but it certainly was born in history."<sup>115</sup>

Mutu is part artist, archaeologist, and biogenetic engineer, unearthing fragments of the past while projecting them into future stories as she manipulates genetic codes to create transgenic creatures. As a feminist creator of cyborgs, she recodes female bodies to subvert myths of origin and weaves partial, but highly situated, new myths aimed at survival. Her figures resemble the cyborgs of feminist imaginings in both their failings and also their successful reconfigurings of historical, situated, and embodied creatures. They also resemble the monstrous in their protean inability to be contained and restricted. Mutu's monstrous cyborgs uphold the promise of the feminist cyborg, far surpassing its more popularized configurations.

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<sup>115</sup> Haraway, *How Like a Leaf* 128–129.



Figure 28. Wangechi Mutu, *Try Dismantling the Little Empire Inside of You*, 2007, ink, Mylar, pigment, and photocollage with mixed media on Mylar and wall, installation view at The Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2007, 95-1/2 x 104 inches.

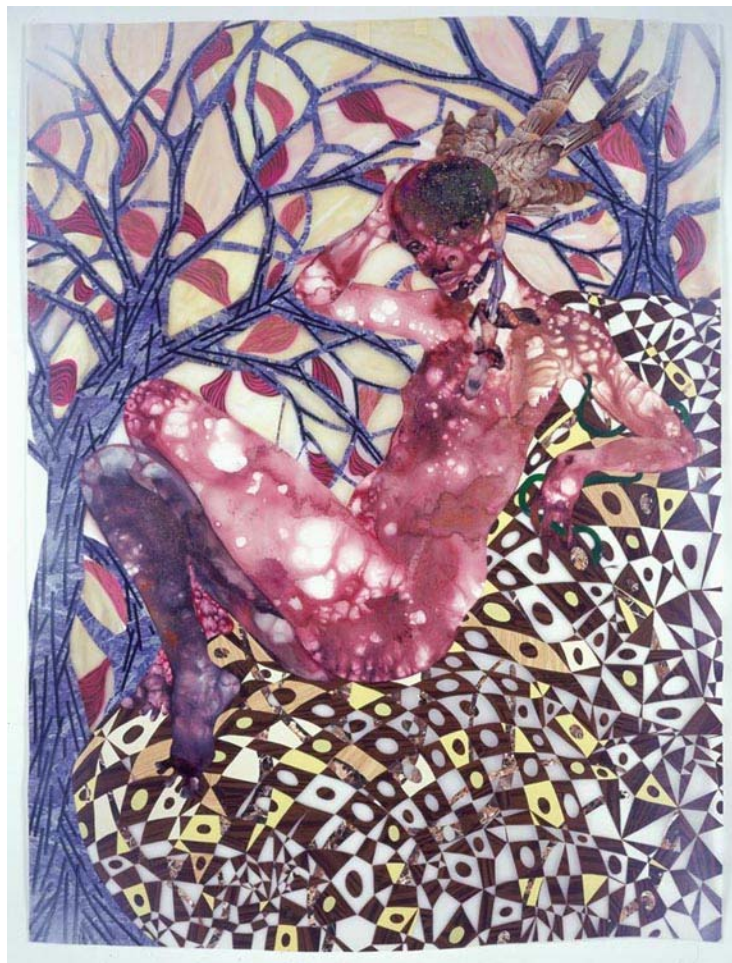


Figure 29. Wangechi Mutu, *Preying Mantra*, 2006, mixed media on Mylar, 73-1/4 x 54-1/4 inches.



## CHAPTER 5.

### CONCLUSION

Returning to the initial issues raised in the introduction, how might questions regarding collage's potential as a particularly useful aesthetic strategy for feminist artists benefit from framing these issues within a discussion of the cyborg? Collage strategies and the figure of the cyborg, as detailed by Haraway, share parallels with one another. Both involve a layering of multiple and contesting fragments and a commitment to partiality. In the cases of both collage and the cyborg, these different elements suggest kinships, alliances, and connections with the histories and contexts from which the fragments came. As a result, they can affect "our expectations of forms of political organization and participation. We do not need a totality in order to work well."<sup>116</sup>

Collage is an aesthetic strategy, and the cyborg is a figuration that re-describes how many women experience life in contemporary culture, but both also offer meaningful examples and modes for finding new ways to approach differences between women without reducing or glossing over those differences. Both collage and the cyborg suggest ways of connecting without simply replicating old power struggles in new formations, as some universalizing modes of first world feminisms have. Rethinking collage and cyborg figures assists feminists to rethink ways of relating transnationally and building solidarities against various localized forms of domination within the webs of a science- and technology-dominated world.

In response to claims that collage and the cyborg have little radical potential due to their co-optation by mass consumer culture, we might take a cue from Haraway. When asked if the abundance of cyborg figures in popular culture has lessened her interest in these figures as

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<sup>116</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" 173.

important or useful metaphors for feminism, she essentially says that this fact only makes her want to dig deeper and explore cyborgs more. Instead of giving up on a term or figure like the cyborg when it is used so often, she explains, “such uses just make me want to push ... the cyborg harder.”<sup>117</sup> In other words, the popularity of collage or the cyborg should not result in an evasion of them or mere acceptance either. We must maintain a critical stance, interrogating the implications of their appropriations but not necessarily abandoning them.

Perhaps this explains why Mutu continues to create her collaged cyborgian figures, but also why they appear so powerful, as implicated and complicit while still filled with a radical tension. In Haraway’s terms, Mutu is a cyborg author of sorts. Though with a visual-arts vocabulary, Mutu engages in the type of cyborg writing that Haraway aligns with liminal transformations:

Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin myths of Western culture.<sup>118</sup>

As they project their own trajectories of survival and transformation, Mutu’s figures visually offer feminist recodings of the collaged cyborg body.

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<sup>117</sup> Haraway, *How Like a Leaf* 136.

<sup>118</sup> Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” 175.

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