

The Flowers of Hell and the Magic of the Screen
by Marc Lenot

There is no more Hell.
No more hell?

Hell was, until 1969, the section of the Bibliothèque nationale de France¹ where works contrary to common decency were kept: books, engravings and pornographic and/or erotic photographs—depending on your definition. But there is little today that can be decreed to be contrary to common decency, little capable of shocking, even if a certain militant, conservative censorship is still at times on the watch. Sex has almost become a normal consumer object; and the sexual organs, masculine and feminine, are visible everywhere, or nearly so, without causing practically anyone to raise an eyebrow. Discreet appearances, hidden or masked behind art historical pretexts, have given way to an omnipresence affirmed without complexes. The sex—feminine because here we will speak from this point on almost exclusively of it—has been in all eras the object of celebration, homage, and glorification. And, first of all, it has been named; from Aretino to Brassens (and as well both before them and after them) it has received poetic names and vulgar names, tender names and insulting names. In order to designate it, to adore it or sing its praises, the most beautiful periphrases and the crudest things have been invented. It has been at the summit, or rather the center, of art of the emblem of the female body. The long list of names given to the feminine sex unfolds in our dictionaries, echoes on the playgrounds of our schools and fills the slum areas of our ports. Besides that, one finds that a good number of these names have colorations which are horticultural, floral, vegetal, and agricultural: it is sometimes a question of a garden (as in the “garden enclosed” of the Song of Songs), of ploughing the earth, of a bush (even the burning bush), or of a bud (swollen, obviously). Our poets and our outlaws, who are sometimes the same people, have never lacked for imagination in this matter.

What’s more, not satisfied with naming it, they show it, they draw it, they paint it, they sculpt it. The history of the representation of the female sex begins, no doubt, with the symbolic representation of prehistoric mother-goddesses, provided with a simple slit at the center of a triangle. It continues with the chaste and smooth image, as if idealized, that ancient sculptors give to the sexes of goddesses as well as to those of mortals. After the medieval eclipse, the painters of modern times return to representation in the ancient manner, more or less conforming to anatomy, but always hairless under the influence of the taboo of representing pubic hair. The first realistic representations that I know (at least in the West, for one finds them quite a bit earlier in Japan, far from Judeo-Christian Puritanism) are those of a designer of visionary architecture of the end of the 18th century, Jean-Jacques Lequeu, who, when his architectural drawings allowed him the leisure to do so, committed to paper some surprising “Lascivious Figures,” the anatomical precision of which leaves nothing to envy from the plates of a medical dictionary. It is from the middle of the 19th century that realism triumphs in this matter:

¹ See the BnF exhibition catalog: Marie-Françoise Quignard and Raymond-Josué Seckel, editors, *L’Enfer de la Bibliothèque. Eros au secret [Hell in the Library. Eros in Secret]*, Paris, Éditions de la BnF, 2007. The exhibition was on view from December 4, 2007 to March 2, 2008.

numerous artists, liberated from all complexes, happily give themselves up to the glorification of the vulva, and, with Courbet, Rodin, Schiele, Klimt and many others up to the current day, write a new chapter in the history of the female sex.

At the very moment of this “liberation,” photography appears, at first the “most humble servant of the arts” (Baudelaire). We will not here enter in to the old debate between painting and photography, between the idealization and the representation of the real. But it is certain that the invention of photography also encouraged a voyeuristic drive, which was translated into an ample production of images, situated between eroticism and pornography (and into their clandestine commercial distribution). The pioneer seems to have been the French-American Alexis-Louis-Charles Gouin who executed the first daguerreotypes of the female sex. Among his emulators, the best known in the 19th century was doubtless Auguste Belloc, who made marvelous use of stereoscopic vision, offering us the illusion of relief in his sexualized visions, apt to give rise to the irresistible desire to move one’s hand towards the object of desire and to touch it. Today, innumerable photographers have grasped within their viewfinder the sex of their model, sometimes to the point of obsession; we will content ourselves with mentioning Henri Maccheroni and his series of two thousand photographs of the sex of a woman.

Before arriving at the proper subject of this exhibition, I would like to offer a few words on flowers and the sex, the flowers of evil, perhaps, flowers of hell, flowers of desire. Since Georgia O’Keeffe painted large sensual flowers, which, in the eyes of everyone (even if she always refused this interpretation), seem explicitly sexual, ornamented with damp petals like lips and with a pistil like a clitoris. Nobuyoshi Araki, by way of inversion, photographed the sexes of women as if they were flowers. I recently met a British artist, who interested me because she had made with her mouth what Paolo Gioli did with his fist, that is, pinhole photographs; while telling me the artistic narrative² of her life, she confided that, when she was younger, she had made several performances where she transformed herself into a bud vase: naked, walking evenly on her hands in front of the audience, with a lily planted in her vagina, turned upwards towards the sky. This encounter of a flower and a female sex, this transformation of a sex into a vase, this crossing of a still largely unexplored frontier came to mind when standing before Paolo Gioli’s photographs that we can see here, on these gallery walls or on these pages.

Let’s look at them together. What strikes one first of all, is the tight framing, the frontal view of these larger-than-life female sexes. It is a total visual shock: we are there, as close as possible, with our nose in it, as it were, surrounded on all sides, constrained to look, without being able to escape, except by refusing to see, by shutting one’s eyes; however, even in this way, in an attitude of refusal, of denial, of fear, the image of it remains imprinted on our retina—it will even rise up again in our dreams. I cannot remember having felt, as an adult, a comparable discomfort, with the possible exception of the discomfort I felt in 2005 in the Jeu de Paume in a gallery with photographs of the prostitutes of Amsterdam on display by Jean-Luc Moulène³; but Moulène was making a political work and not a poetic one; he was showing instruments of labor and not [sacred] altars

² See Lindsay Seers, *Human Camera*, Birmingham, Article Press, 2007.

³ See Nathalie Delbard, *Jean-Luc Moulène*, Paris, Éditions Petra, 2009.

Perhaps, before looking at the photographs of Paolo Gioli, their center, their subject, one should, first of all, whether curious, prudent, or disturbed, allow one's gaze to run along the margins, the borders. As always in Gioli's Polaroids, the frame seems cut out, torn apart, non finite, not completed. One can detect traces of chemistry, or alchemy perhaps: Gioli preserves what one throws away from a Polaroid ordinarily, imperfect borders, the spent pods of reagents from within the film. Showing the "cooking up" of the photograph, unveiling the process at the same time as the finished product, hiding nothing of the lacks, of the imperfections, of the errors is to position oneself at the antipodes of slick photography, "well made" photography, photography too well made. As Gioli himself transfers the image from the Polaroid film to the paper by means of a handheld roller, and does not apply it with even pressure, one can see, at the bottom of the proofs, small white spaces, blank, pointed indentations, traces of a lack, imprints of a void. I perceived this visual detour along the borders as a way of sharpening our eyes, of preparing us for the confrontation with these women, with these sexes; we are put on notice in some way, discreetly warned: don't forget that what you're looking at there is not a sex, but the photograph of a sex, made by a human hand. Don't let yourself be taken in, carried away, mistaken: an artist is there, was there, a demiurge who acts hidden in the shadow.

But let's come around without further delay to the women, to their sexes. It is indeed women in the flesh one sees there, part-time models, peasants or working women of the Po valley, whose age is difficult to guess, adolescents or mature women, with rounded thighs, the white of whose flesh emerges from the shadow. Sometimes the very material of the photograph seems to create an effect of wetness, to render the flesh damp, with pearls of moisture, to the point of making one want to touch it, but it's only a photographic illusion, a mirage. One has the impression of making out little veins, the mottling of the flesh, but their disposition seems surprising, artificial: the reason is that it's actually the finger prints of the photographer on the Polaroid film, the chemical reaction of his skin and of his sweat with the photographic salts. One also sees yellowish coloration, orange streaks: these are not female humors which have stained the film, as one might at first think, but rather, traces of the assembly of several sheets of photographic paper which have been cut out. Even there, the hand of the photographer is present.

These women are neither goddesses, nor sylvan nymphs (besides, looking at a goddess in this state of nudity would have exposed us, as it did Actaeon, to the greatest dangers); they are ordinary women whose bodies are not always perfect: the close up betrays here and there small red irritations of the skin, traces of incomplete removal of hair. But our gaze renders them beautiful and attractive. We see neither their heads, nor breasts, nor hands, nor feet, only the lap from the navel to the thighs, with the sex in the center. No eyes, no gaze in response to ours. We know nothing of them, of their stories, of their joys, their burdens, their personalities; we see only their flesh, their skin, their hair, their vulva, repeated 25 times, always identical and always different. For each is different. The youngest, one seem to be able to guess, present sexes with the hair completely removed, at once childish and brutal, self-apparent, too self-apparent; their mothers or their older sisters exhibit black hairiness, curly, abundant or thin, which from the first moment divert

the gaze from an immediate fixation on the lips. And in the background, always, the black mystery of the space between the legs.

Against this black background, the flowers stand out. Strange flowers, if ever there were, that the best informed botanist would be at pains to recognize; one imagines here the flower of a lily, royal, and there the petal of an Anthurium, tropical. There would be as well that kind of iris which in Latin is called *Hermodactylus tuberosus*, Hermes's finger, in which Paul-Armand Gette⁴, an artist with a keen interest in botany and the female body, took his pleasure. I don't think so; Hermes's finger (or Mercury's rather) would have been quite pertinent for titillating the sex of a young Italian woman, all the same. The majority of the flowers are unrecognizable, impossible to identify: they are botanical chimeras, flowers composed by the artist (if not by the model herself?) assembling like a vegetal alchemist a bit of one and the stem of the other, in this way creating monsters of nature unseen elsewhere. Certain flowers are barely visible, emerging only by half in the penumbra, others display themselves proudly. There are pointed flowers, which one would imagine to be hard, tense, violent, penile, and others round, soft, tender, open, which delicately offer their pistil in the hollow of a welcoming corolla. The shadow of a pistil, red and shining like the sex of a dog in heat, projects itself onto a thigh, emerging like a sign of demonic possession, like the mark of an owner. But no flower here is either aggressive or violent; there are no thorns of roses which might have caused a droplet of blood to spurt out like a pearl, no poisonous, nor carnivorous flowers: is that because they would have created the dangerous phantasm of the *vagina dentata*?

Of course, one thinks of pleasure next, feminine pleasure, which may have actually been aroused by this floral penetration (but that, no one will ever know), or more likely, allusive masturbatory pleasure suggested by these flowers, the appearance of which, evokes a giant clitoris or a colored dildo. But it would be too simple to satisfy oneself with this too obvious vision: for my part, no doubt too much conditioned, at first I thought I saw a penile graft there, a botanical response to the penis envy theorized by Sigmund Freud. But here it might rather be a question of ambiguity, of androgyny: these women-who-are-flowers⁵ seem gifted with sexes more complete, more perfect than their fellow humans—sexes which would permit them to achieve a sexual self-sufficiency from which man and his penis would be excluded, an ideal parthenogenesis thanks to fertile pollen. Nadar's photograph of an hermaphrodite⁶ came to mind, a medical curiosity of the era that the photographer carefully documented, but as well the work of the American transgender artist Melsen Carlsen, a young man endowed with a vagina that he used as a *camera obscura*, as Paolo Gioli used his hand and Lindsay Seers her mouth.

But is it here solely a question of pleasure? Does femininity not rather manifest itself through its bodily fluids, urine perhaps (micturation is a rare subject in art, apart from Rembrandt's *The Pissing Woman*), or, more likely, menses, which had suddenly become fixed, gelled, solidified. There, as well, the taboo is strong, its representation extremely

⁴ Paul-Armand Gette, *Les Mythologies Apprivoisées [Personalized Mythologies]*, Sète, Éditions Villa Saint-Clair, 2005.

⁵ "Femmes-fleurs" in the original. [Trans.]

⁶ Magali Le Mens et Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Hermaphrodite de Nadar [Nadar's Hermaphrodite]*, Grane, Éditions Créaphis, 2009.

rare, and discomfort is at its height. At the very beginnings of feminism, the Austrian VALIE EXPORT was no doubt the first to dare to affirm the presence of her menstrual periods in her art, heralding the “cunt art” of Judy Chicago in the 70s⁷. Since then, Paul-Armand Gette has realized, with means of strawberries and crushed raspberries, his series of the Menstruations of the Goddess Diana, or Venus. But Gioli’s flowers hardly belong to this register; they are more resistant to such imaginative interpretations.

So perhaps there is a birth, perhaps these women are giving birth to a flower, expressing it from their bodies painlessly; perhaps Gioli’s women are in this world to bring flowers into the world. Their race will thus gradually modify itself genetically; we will see, from mother to daughter, the emergence of women-who-are-flowers, the fusion of the human and the vegetal. From that point, it is possible for the imagination to take flight to the splendid Daphne of Bernini, whose fingers become branches, whose limbs become boughs, whose body becomes a laurel tree. Are we here before Daphne’s sex, the object of Apollo’s desire?

But there is no Apollo to be seen here, no masculine presence other than those of the onlookers, who, reflected in the glass which protects the photographs hung on the walls, become participants as well. Paolo Gioli, at another time, in his *Autoanatomie* [*Autoanatomies*]⁸ allowed his own hand to enter the field of view, to venture near the coveted body, to manifest his presence and his desire; but here he remains invisible. The only hand one will see in this exhibition is the one on the poster at the entrance, a less explicit image, more brown in tone, but it is the hand of the model folding a reddish piece of cloth over her belly. Paolo Gioli’s hand remains outside the field of view; it is not like the others, visible, active, making interventions; it is here, but an invisible instrument—but oh how present: it is the hand which transfers the photos with this temperamental roller, it is his hand which, touching the film rather than the flesh, leaves on it a purplish mottling, it is his hand finally which has held a broad brush and a fine brush and has repainted certain of these photographs.

For half of the photographs presented here are embellished with a double: a mask, a screen, a veil masking the top part of the image, leaving quite precisely the flowering pubis ultimately to flower forth—and flower⁹ is indeed the precise word for this arrangement. These composed images are full of mystery, at once veiling the body and doubling it, they bring it into view like an inverted reflection, like a mirror in the repainted screen. In these scratches, these shadows, one discovers a depth which is other, one perceives the shudder of the material, pictorial as well as photographic, like an echo of the shudder of the flesh itself. The filaments of paint spread out by brush on the screen echo the pubic hair below them; the painted patches could be splatters, which might have suddenly spurted forth from a pleasure fountain, the fluid would have generously splattered the canvas, contaminating it, as painting has contaminated photography, since Gioli calls certain compositions “Contaminazioni” [“contaminations”]. In this gesture of the hand, handling the fine brush and the broad brush, Gioli affirms even there his

⁷ Thanks to Émilie Bouvard for having shared with me her research on this subject.

⁸ Paolo Gioli, *Autoanatomie. Ritratto di memoria* [*Autoanatomies. Portrait off/from Memory*], Florence, Alinari, 2010. This title also puns on “self-analyses”.

⁹ An untranslatable linguistic echo: *affleurer* means: to caress, to touch, to tickle, and to appear, as well as to level. [Trans.]

physical presence, his existence as an artist beyond the photographic recording of the real. This is a constant in his overall artistic approach: thus, in his work with pinhole photography, he chose a form of illumination, which involved his body as no photographer had previously done, transforming it into a *camera obscura*, using his closed fist as a photographic camera. This importance of the gesture, this engagement of his own body permits him here to reconcile photography and painting, distilling them in order to better marry them. In the same fashion, in his series of *Persons Unknown*,¹⁰ he brings to the fore the retouching work on the found portraits. He reveals the pictorial work of the hand of the photographer-retoucher beyond a simple photographic recording.

In this marriage of the two mediums, it is on a screen that we see this manifestation by the hand of the artist, a screen which partially hides the photograph: the belly and the bellybutton—what seems most innocuous. Not at all the most scandalous part of the body, the most ob-scene, which from that point on, will be off-scene. It is a screen, which incites, which makes it possible for one to see and not a censoring mask. When Khalil Bey commissioned *L'Origine du Monde* [*The Origin of the World*], from Gustave Courbet, he hung it in his bathroom and had a rod rigged up and furnished with a green curtain in front of the painting, which he could open and close at his pleasure; if the Baron de Havatny preferred another canvas of Courbet, *Le Château de Blonay* [*The Château de Blonay*] in order to hide this sex which he wouldn't think of exhibiting, Jacques and Sylvia Lacan, when they acquired the work of Courbet, asked their friend André Masson for an echo-screen: in order to cover over the painting, Masson realized another canvas (*Terre érotique* [*Erotic Land*]) representing the same subject in the same position but in a less realistic fashion, more linear and less sculptural, a double and a mask at once, a magic screen in some sense. It is a doubling of the same nature, which seems to me to be at work in these painted screens of Paolo Gioli. They incite us to see and not to mask: they seem to me to have the same function as the two eyeholes in the dilapidated wooden door, which in the Philadelphia Museum of Art control the gaze of the single spectator of *Étant Donnés : 1° la chute d'eau 2° le gaz d'éclairage* [*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*] by Marcel Duchamp, another feminine body without a head, another sex on exhibition, and, there too, some plants, if not flowers of the fields. In sum, there is in these *Naturae*, between flowers of hell and the magic screen, what Gioli shows and what he hides, what is obvious and what is implicit, and it is up to us to put it all into perspective¹¹.

¹⁰ Paolo Gioli, *Sconosciuti* [*Persons Unknown*], Udine, Art&, 1995.

¹¹ Thanks to Francesca Spanò for her suggestions.