CARMEN WINANT

TOUCHING AND TRAINING
ELENA HARVEY COLLINS & CARMEN WINANT

Carmen Winant's artistic practice is informed by her past training as a long-distance runner, in which self-discipline, endurance, repetition, and management of the body were key elements. Her work considers the ways in which images of women are consumed, for what audience they are produced, and the ways in which identity and self can become torn from such images over time and through repeated exposure. *How to Remain Human* features a selection of Winant's works, including *A World Without Men* (2015), a massive wall collage constructed from an archive of Playboy, We magazine, and puberty-book clippings. The title calls back to Feminist Separatist movements of the 1970s, when some women advocated for female-only societies. I sat down to talk Winant during a site visit to MOCA Cleveland in April 2015.

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EHC

Can you tell me about your background as a runner?

CW

I was a long distance runner at UCLA, the longer the better. I ran the longest track and field events you could run--5,000 and 10,000 meters, as well as cross country, where I ran 6 kilometers. Competitions were year round; my life was in training, running once a day, twice a day, three times a day, and keeping running logs, which I still have. I recorded everything I ate, every run I went on, how long I stretched for. It's so funny, because for so long I tried to hide that part of myself. I would go from practice to class and bring a change of clothes so I can change in the bathroom so people wouldn't know that I had this other jock status. It wasn't until much later that I saw how those two worlds can meet or what one could offer the other. As an athlete, my life was about body, and management of body. Long distance running is all about pain management, measuring how much you can take, and how efficient your body can be. It's also about time spent--there are runs that are two, three hours long.

EHC

Tell me about your approach to collage. How do the elements of practice, endurance, repetition, and time find their way in?

CW

So much of how I live and work in the studio is about repetition, exhaustion, and performance anxiety. Training as an athlete is a series of failures--the mini failures during practice, where we tease out the inadequacies, and the big failures like not crossing the finish line first I was incredibly tough in practice, and I lived for practice, really, but I was a terrible racer. I had a lot of performance anxiety, but I was also more interested in pushing my body and figuring out what the edge of my body was, where the limit was, and I couldn't do that while racing in the same way as practice.

The repeated gestures of touching an image, and placing it, connect to the idea of practice. When I make these sprawling wall collages all the images start out on the floor, there is no hierarchy. Once arranged, the process of transferring the collage to the wall becomes intuitive and automatic. I respond with my body, squatting and working on the floor, then reaching and stretching, stepping forward and stepping back. I spend a long time sourcing and collecting printed matter, sometimes years, and keep them until I have the right use for them. I'll find that one crazy person, who has thirty boxes of magazines. So there is a patience and timing to that too.

EHC

How did *A World Without Men* come about?

CW

At some point I realized that I was only collecting images of women. I was almost building this narrative when I was asleep. I woke up and I had five thousand images of women. The images of men were mostly in relation to women, or had a hand around a woman's neck, or a women was reaching out to kiss them, they sort of existed as women's proxies. At the same time coincidentally I was talking to somebody who had been a member of a lesbian separatist commune in the 1970's. I'm particularly interested in the ones in the 1970's because that was at a moment when people actually felt they could refashion the world. It was a short term solution, as opposed to a long term solution. And thinking about, as they described it, the violence that had been done to their bodies, or their sort of emotional status, to the point where they didn't even want boy children.

EHC

The way you work with images of women––collecting, repeated touching, selecting and trimming down, reori-

enting––changes the image, sometimes beyond recognition, especially in *61 Minutes in Heaven* (2012). Can you tell me about the process of making that piece, and why it is important for you to handle the image?

CW

I work with a lot of found magazines from the 60's to the early-to-mid-80's. In magazines after that time, the pages are thinner, they're slicker, glossier. I prefer something thicker, more matte, where the ink can literally rub off on your fingers as you trace them across the page.

I've worked with images of Linda Lovelace, the star of the porn film *Deep Throat* (1972), for years, and I was interested in her because she represented such a multi-valiant sexual identity, but also because she has such different kinds of agency. At one point she was a sex star, at another point she renounced that and became a feminist, then she was a victim; she wrote five different autobiographies that all contest each other. And I thought that it was so wild, that one woman could occupy all of these really specific positions. For *61 Minutes in Heaven*, I continuously touched an image of her found in a Play Boy magazine from the year the movie came out, for the duration of the film. I had two images of her, so I watched the film two times in a row. One of them is worn almost entirely away. That idea of erasing someone with a tender touch comes up often for me. It's the idea that you can undo somebody, that they could be so fragile that you could undo them with an embrace. There's also a real desperation, on both ends. Someone such as Lovelace who's posing in Play Boy, desperate for attention, money, or something else. I am also desperate to touch her, through a copy of a magazine that however many hundreds of thousands of people looked at or cared about or masturbated to. I want that desperation to read in the work, that it in fact ruins people on both ends. An image can come to mirror or echo that desperation and the ultimate undoing that can spring from it.

Carmen Winant
61 Minutes in Heaven, 2012
Found centerfolds of Linda Lovelace,
each 13 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the artist

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Soviet filmmaker and teacher Lev Kuleshov described the physical and conceptual processes of filmmaking by means of an allusion to masonry. Just as "a poet places one word after another in definite rhythm," so too, he wrote, do filmmakers by laying out their basic units, "shot-signs, like bricks… one brick after another."[1] One builds a film as one builds a wall: with regular tiles, cemented together, one after the other in rows. For the Soviet filmmakers the essence of filmmaking was in the edit not the shot. It was how one brought images together that created art and narrative, not what was in the frame itself. One made film in the cutting room and on the editing table, not on the set or in the camera.

Sergei Eisenstein, however, did not see things quite as his colleague Kuleshov did. One image did not flow into the next, leading the viewer easily into narrative and emotion. No, the edit––*montage*––was disjunctive; it was a collision, an impact. "Montage is conflict," Eisenstein proclaimed: "What then characterizes montage and, consequently, its embryo, the shot? Collision. Conflict between two neighboring fragments. Conflict. Collision."[2] Conflict of scales, directions, levels, lights, volumes, spaces, masses. From the juxtaposition of stock images, a concept is born. Meaning is not in either image, but in their meeting. Composition is dialectic act: thesis–antithesis–synthesis.

Let's watch a film, a film of an uncommon kind. It has a title: "A World without Men." It has the requisite "cinematic" scale, filling an entire wall and our complete field of vision. Brick-by-brick, Carmen Winant has built a wall. It is composed, like the Soviets described, of adjacent bits, taped and pasted. What kind of wall is this? What kind of film? This is a film without movement; it is montage in space not in time. It comes to us all at once as a great expanse of mosaic paper tile. But it does not lead us so easily from one brick to another as in Kuleshov's neat rows, cemented tight. Like the jigsaw puzzle walls at Sacsahuaman, where the ancient Incas perfectly wedged together their many-sided stones, Winant forces the viewer's eye to follow many zigzag lines, and frame-by-frame *we* edit. We trace a path, new each time. Our skittering glances across the surface produce the narratives. The story happens in the edits. All paths are present; all are options. The images rest against one another in tectonic tension. We see Eisenstein's collisions radiate in all directions. There are collisions, conflict, and rings of collateral contact. The irregular polygons create multiple points of

exchange between the images so that they do not form straight lines, but constellations and clusters of images--images of all one thing: women. We see their parts, their wholes; legs and leotards; torsos and teeth; limber bodies; limbs bent and broken; cracks and parts; skin and eyes and hair--lots of hair. Patterns appear. Images repeat, or seem to: it is easy to forget one's place in the jumble. It is impossible to retrace one's exact path across the steppingstones. We lose linearity. We lose narrative. Everything is uniform in its difference. The girls become almost identical. Pictures of pleasure are indistinguishable from pictures of pain. Affect and association jump across the gaps. It is all thesis: this is a world without men.

The Peruvian masons fit their polyhedron stones so tightly that no mortar was needed, and not even a sheet of paper could slip between the joints. Winant borrows their geometric tension but gives us the gaps. It is in the seams that everything seems to happen here. The regular distance between the images, which traces irregular, winding channels, becomes the invisible mortar that suspends the women and their autonomous parts in this static cinema. The spacing, not the pacing, gives this film its poetic rattling rhythm. Winant pushes the ground forward to subsume the figure of figures in a logic of fissures. She shows us the spaces in-between that hold the image together by holding it apart. Another collision: montage and collage, of ascending in time versus anchoring in space. The story is not in any of the images or in their adjacent meetings, but in the space in-between. This is a world with men: antithesis. They are the negative space--the ground that makes the figure visible.

Step back. Stop editing. Stop following the narrative chains of connection and repetition. Take it in. See the figures and see the ground; see forking network of negative space. Let them oscillate and flicker. Let foreground and background switch places. This is an art of fragments, a theory of fragments. And this is an essay of fragments. I will not try to close the gaps: not between the images, not between Kuleshov and Eisenstein, not between women and men. It is the space in-between the images-- both in Winant's still cinema and in the conventional kind--that lets us see the whole picture. Critical flicker fusion: that property of the psychophysics of vision that marks the frequency at which light and dark, emptiness and fullness, movement and stasis merge into an illusion of continuity and coherence, which is achieved only through radical, rapid fluctuation of difference. Synthesis.

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1. Lev Kuleshov, "The Art of Cinema" in *Kuleshov on Film: Writings* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1974), 91.

2. Sergei Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot [The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram]," *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19.

Carmen Winant
LEFT: *A World Without Men*, 2015
Collage on wall
14 x 18 feet
RIGHT: detail
Courtesy of the artist