

Bellmer's Legs: Adolescent Pornography and Uncanny Eroticism in the Photographs of Hans Bellmer and Anna Gaskell

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Abstract

Hans Bellmer's photographs of his two dolls from the 1930s have become classic surrealist images. Bellmer said of his motives in making the two dolls: 'I shall construct an artificial girl whose anatomy will make it possible physically to re-create the dizzying heights of passion and to do so to the extent of inventing new desires.' By reading Bellmer's photographs alongside those of the contemporary American photographer Anna Gaskell, this article argues that the 'new desires' invented are ones which confuse binaries of identification and desire, circulating around the body of the adolescent girl/doll. To think through the significance of the adolescent girl/doll as a shared trope by both artists, the concept put forward by Julia Kristeva of 'adolescent pornography' (in her essay 'The Adolescent Novel') will be used to inflect the focus on the uncanny that has dominated discussions of both artists. This paper will argue that the doubling between self and other, animate and inanimate, creates a queered eroticism in the work of Bellmer and Gaskell, overlaying narcissism and homoeroticism in these images of proliferating female body parts that deny any straightforward reading of subjecthood or desire.

In her essay 'The Adolescent Novel,' Julia Kristeva concludes with a brief discussion of 'adolescent pornography.' She describes this term in relation to modern novels that take the adolescent or adolescence as their theme, novels such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, 1955. She asks if an adolescent pornography could 'constitute a desire to name, to bring to light a wavering meaning that lies upon the boundaries of words and drives?'¹ For Kristeva, this adolescent pornography 'relies on adolescent erotic games. There is no obscenity, nothing scandalous, and not even any explicit behaviour.'² She explains how 'the narrator's identification with his seductress or seducer is an important element, especially since adolescents supersede the categories of codified perversion. They impose themselves onto novelists like metaphors of that which is not yet formed – a mirage of pre-language or an indecisive body.'³

There are key ideas here which I will relate to the photographs of Hans Bellmer's doll, particularly the focus on 'adolescent erotic games,' on 'the indecisive body' and 'the boundaries of words and drives.' These seem to echo Bellmer's own statement: 'I shall construct an artificial girl whose anatomy will make it possible physically to re-create the dizzying heights of passion and to do so to the extent of inventing new desires.'⁴ To explore the 'uncanny eroticism' of Bellmer's photographs, something which is re-worked in the photographs by the contemporary American artist Anna Gaskell, I will use Kristeva's idea of an 'adolescent pornography' to bring to the surface issues of narcissism, identification and non-normative sexuality that circulate around the disarticulated body of the adolescent doll/girl. Key to Kristeva's notion of adolescent pornography is the way in which 'adolescents



supersede the categories of codified perversion,' allowing for a queering of desires and bodies that does not rely on binaries of homo or heterosexuality. In using Kristeva's notion of 'adolescent pornography,' I am following her definition of the pornographic as a use of sexualised body that utilises the 'illicit' quality of pornography without necessarily being explicit.⁵ For Kristeva, 'adolescent pornography' foregrounds a use of perverse eroticism as resistance to patriarchal authority, reconfiguring the sexualised body of the adolescent to contest normative conceptions of gendered identity.⁶

Through this discussion of Bellmer, the legacies of his surreal bodily recombinations can be seen in the work of Gaskell, who reanimates his doll in her use of adolescent girl models, and extends his disruption of the normative girl-body. Since 1997, with the exhibition of her *wonder* series, based on Alice in Wonderland, Gaskell has been seen as one of the main protagonists in the mid-1990s generation of artists using photography in a directorial mode, with her photographs of adolescent girls based on narratives culled from children's classics, fairytales, newspaper snippets and ghost stories. As a graduate of Gregory Crewdson's Yale MFA, Gaskell is often interpreted as following on from his staged, cinematic scenes.⁷ However, this framing of her work does not pay close attention to her manipulation of both the source material drawn on, and the bodies of her models in her large-scale photographic installations. By reading Gaskell's work through the legacy of Bellmer's obsessive engagement with his girl-doll, a more nuanced understanding of Gaskell's interrogation of the adolescent body comes into focus. Proclaimed as the 'Cindy Sherman of her generation,' Gaskell herself has kept away from allying herself with any group of artists, frustrated at the assimilation of her practice with the derogatorily titled 'girl art.'⁸ The grouping of a number of women artists who photograph girls under this umbrella was compounded by the exhibition *Another Girl, Another Planet*, 1999, which was co-curated by Gregory Crewdson, and although Gaskell did not participate, one of her images was reproduced in the catalogue. Talking about this exhibition she says: 'I didn't want to be a part of it, not because I didn't think that there were obvious associations, but I don't think my work is about adolescence, it's a metaphor for something else, I play with it much more, it's not about teenage girls hanging out.'⁹ By reading her series through both the theorisation of Bellmer's photographs and Kristeva's concept of adolescent pornography, this analysis of her 'girl art' argues that it is much more than simply 'teenage girls hanging out,' but equally sees the use of the adolescent girl as central to understanding her work.

Bellmer's work has been extensively discussed, with some of the most influential accounts focusing on issues of castration and fetishism – as in Rosalind Krauss's reading.¹⁰ This has been extended in the work of Hal Foster and Therese Lichtenstein to consider the ways in which Bellmer's dolls represent a challenge to the perfected Aryan body, providing a social dimension to their perverse eroticism.¹¹ In this essay, I will look at the significance of the doll's re-assembled body within a logic that borrows from Bataille – with the body seen within a metonymic chain rather than circulating around the missing phallus. This links with



Kristeva's ideas of adolescence being 'an open psychic structure,'¹² one in which identity is created through 'interacting with another identity.'¹³ This interaction does not follow a normative set of identifications, as 'the adolescent structure opens itself to that which has been repressed.'¹⁴ This allows for a questioning of sexual identity, with the adolescent standing in as 'a symbol of a subjectivity in crisis.'¹⁵ This notion of 'an open psychic structure' frames her discussion of adolescent pornography, as a mode of interrogating sexuality that is resistant to normative structures of heterosexuality and sexual difference.

Kristeva's formulation of adolescence also fits with Juliet Mitchell's conception of gender as being distinct from sexual difference: "Gender," which is now used indiscriminately, has been deployed unwittingly to express a sexuality which is not primarily or predominantly procreative.¹⁶ In her argument for a sexuality based on lateral, or sibling relations, Mitchell theorises a non-reproductive sexuality, one in which seriality is privileged and identification and desire are brought together rather than held in opposition. As she puts it:

Lateral desire does not involve the symbolisation that comes through the absence of the phallus (or womb); it involves seriality. As part of a series, girls and boys are 'equilateral,' in other words, they are not defined by what is missing. Girls and boys explore what is *there*, not what is not.¹⁷

By following this serial logic and attending to lateral relations – between siblings or peers rather than between parents and children – a conception of both Bellmer and Gaskell's use of the doll/girl can be formulated which does not rely solely on the phallic logic of castration.

Bataille's novel *Story of the Eye* (1929), whilst comprised of many scandalous scenes, also follows Kristeva's conception of adolescent pornography and Mitchell's emphasis on seriality in its first half: up to the point of Marcelle's death and the consummation of the relationship between the narrator and Simone. Until this point, their adolescent erotic games have circulated around the bodies of the three main protagonists, with Marcelle and Simone often doubled. Indeed, when the narrator tries to have sex with Simone in her bed, she cries: "You're totally insane, little man" ... "I'm not interested – here, in a bed like this, like a housewife or mother! I'll only do it with Marcelle!"¹⁸

By focusing on these serial relationships and the queer potential of an 'adolescent pornography,' the uncanniness often attributed to both artists' work can be read as exceeding the Freudian focus on castration. Instead, the importance of the double and narcissism in relation to the figure of the adolescent/doll will complicate this focus. I will explore the ways in which both artists gradually move from the whole body of the model, to a voyeuristic engagement with the model's bodies, to a dismembering and remaking of their models.

In Freud's essay on 'The "Uncanny,"' he famously discusses ETA Hoffmann's story 'The Sandman.' This story is the source of one of Gaskell's series that I will be discussing later, *resemblance*, as well as being one of the often-quoted inspirations for Bellmer's dolls – in the form of the opera *The Tales of Hoffmann*. In Freud's account, he dismisses the uncanny effect of the automata Olympia, instead seeing the story's uncanny focus to be on



the character of 'The Sandman.' Whilst Freud acknowledges the uncanny effect of the double, the role of Olympia is reduced to being the hero's 'feminine attitude towards his father in his infancy.'¹⁹ This interpretation echoes many comments on Bellmer's own relationship with his father, which he himself describes as feminised in his essay 'The Father.'²⁰ As Hélène Cixous comments on Freud's blindness for Olympia, 'the beautiful Olympia is effaced by what she represents, for Freud has no eyes for her.'²¹ This contrasts with one of Freud's definitions of the uncanny: 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises, and so on.'²² This blurring of distinction between imagination and reality would appear to feature strongly in the lure of the automata, and begins to define the oscillation that occurs in the photographs of Bellmer and Gaskell. Bellmer's dolls and Gaskell's adolescent models operate in an uncanny space that places them between animate and inanimate, self and other, child and adult. This oscillation also accounts for a reading of them as not simply a projection of castration anxiety, but moving between this projection and a fantasy of the doll/girl as an autonomous being. To unpack this enfolding of categories, I will briefly explore the role of Olympia in Hoffman's story.

As Mladen Dolar notes: 'Olympia is both the Other to whom Nathaniel addresses his love and his amatory discourse (like the Lady of courtly love) and his narcissistic supplement (love can after all be seen as the attempt to make the Other the same, to reconcile it with narcissism).'²³ As has often been discussed, the story revolves around the hero Nathaniel mistaking the automata Olympia for a real woman, something that occurs once he gazes at her through the telescope he buys from Coppola – who may be also be the evil Coppelius who contributes to Nathaniel's father's death at the beginning of the story.²⁴ Once he looks through the telescope, '[f]or the first time could he see the wondrous beauty in the form of her face; – only the eyes seemed to him singularly stiff and dead.'²⁵ Falling desperately in love with Olympia he speaks to her at a festival that the Professor Spalanzani prepares in order to present his creation, and still believes that she is a real woman. The illusion is shattered when he sees the professor and Coppola arguing, pulling the doll Olympia between them, as Coppola had provided the doll's eyes and wanted them back: 'Nathaniel stood paralysed; he had seen but too plainly that Olympia's waxen, deadly pale countenance had no eyes, but black holes instead – she was, indeed, a lifeless doll.'²⁶ The trauma of the event, combined with mistaking his beloved Clara for Olympia once again, compels Nathaniel to throw himself over the railing of a steeple.²⁷ The story turns on Coppola's telescope, which provides Nathaniel the lens through which to 'see' Olympia. Her passivity is translated by Nathaniel as acquiescence, her beauty appearing to him to both mirror that of his love, Clara, and of himself. Here the double is figured in a number of combinations throughout the text, with the most obvious being the pairing of Coppelius/Coppola, who is also featured as an evil double of Nathaniel's father. The doll Olympia is both a double of a real woman, and the narcissistic



screen for the projections of Nathaniel. This doubling is also made clear in a different manner in the opera that Bellmer watched, in which Olympia is played by two women (one singing, one dancing) and a doll. Here the merging of Olympia as alive and dead, projection site and subject, is made clear. The emphasis on the lateral relations between Olympia, Nathaniel and Clara underlined by the multiplying of actresses to play Olympia, as well as Bellmer attending the opera with his cousin Ursula, who is often cited as one of the key inspirations for his dolls.

In Freud's discussion of this story, the focus is on the equation between the eyes/sight/blindness – both in the magic telescope that Nathaniel buys from Coppola and the blinding of Olympia – and castration. I want to instead focus on Freud's equation of Nathaniel with Olympia:

This automatic doll can be nothing else than a materialisation of Nathaniel's feminine attitude towards his father in his infancy. Her fathers, Spalanzani and Coppola, are, after all, nothing but new editions, reincarnations of Nathaniel's pair of fathers [his biological father and Coppelius]. Spalanzani's otherwise incomprehensible statement that the optician has stolen Nathaniel's eyes, so as to set them in the doll, now becomes significant as supplying evidence of the identity of Olympia and Nathaniel.²⁸

Here desire for the other is collapsed into desire for the self, with the doll providing the site at which this occurs. Here the double appears as a troubling of the heterosexual narrative, an insertion of narcissism and homoeroticism played out on the body of the adolescent doll. Laura Mulvey points out how the story also disavows the maternal body: 'An eviscerated, mechanised, femininity masks and marks disavowal of both the site of castration anxiety and the womb, the "first home."²⁹ The element of uncertainty emanates not only from the blurred distinction between the inorganic and the organic but also from the uncertain nature of femininity itself.'³⁰ This disavowal of the maternal body is something that I will return to later in relation to Gaskell's work.

The Curiosity of the Doll

Refocusing on the figure of Olympia in 'The Sandman' allows for a consideration of the dynamic that takes place between the story's characters as exceeding that of Freud's focus on castration.³¹ However, to extend the argument that Bellmer's doll and Gaskell's girls present a more varied range of eroticised identities than that of sexual object for a male spectator, the topic of curiosity is needed, linking back to Kristeva's interest in adolescent pornography as an exploratory endeavour. Bellmer's idea for his first doll involved a panorama in its belly, making clear his intention to reveal its interior secrets. This intention is pictured differently in the drawing *Rose ouverte la nuit* (1935/6), in which a little girl is shown peeling back her skin to reveal her insides.³² Here it is the girl who becomes the curious investigator, rather than the voyeur. This uncanny image, of the girl looking at her own insides, conflates the physical interior with the psychic interior, something which reflects Bellmer's idea of a physical unconscious. The body becomes the site on which identity can be



explored in a way that blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy. In Kristeva's discussion of adolescent pornography, she states that the impetus to write in this mode arises when writers wish to rebel against patriarchal authority: 'When modern novels question either themselves or their inevitably patriarchal values (which stem from an inevitably adult society), their writers often claim to be directly seduced by the adolescent or by adolescence.'³³ This identification with the adolescent is one that blurs sexual difference, so that male and female become related in a serial, rather than oppositional manner. This matches with Bellmer's own denial of his identification both with his father and the Nazi regime, preferring instead to inhabit the ambiguously sexualised arena of the doll. For Kristeva, adolescence is an 'open psychic structure,' one in which reproductive sexuality is denied. To explore this taking up of an adolescent position in relation to the doll, I will take up questions posed by Helene Cixous in her discussion of Freud's elision of Olympia:

the beautiful Olympia is effaced by what she represents, for Freud has no eyes for her. This woman appears obscene because she emerges there where 'one' did not expect her to appear, and she thus causes Freud to take a detour. And what if the doll became a woman? What if she were alive? What if, in looking at her, we animated her?³⁴

By taking seriously the animation of Bellmer's doll, and the curiosity about sexual identity that is performed in his photographs and drawings, the viewer is provided with a way into the uncanny eroticism enacted in the work of Anna Gaskell, focusing on the ways in which the double becomes multiple, serial.

Gaskell's curiosity

In Gaskell's drawings, which are done as preparation for her photographs, the motif of curiosity is often present, with girls looking into each other's mouths, up skirts and into dark interiors formed by orifices and clothing (Fig. 1). This is also present in her photographs, with series such as *override*, based on *Alice in Wonderland*, played by a group of seven girls who pull at each others' clothing, hair and limbs, as if trying to physically reveal the secrets of each others' bodies (Fig. 2). I want to consider two series, *hide* (1998) and *resemblance* (2001), to see how her work can be seen to extend the uncanny eroticism of Bellmer's photographs, moving more firmly away from a phallic base for the desires presented.





Fig. 1: Anna Gaskell, *Untitled*, 1996. © Anna Gaskell.



Fig. 2: Anna Gaskell, *Untitled #24 (override)* 1997. © Anna Gaskell.

The doll is both a site of identification for Bellmer and a site of total otherness, an untouchable inanimate object. The title of this article, 'Bellmer's Legs,' points to this doubling: the legs of the doll are both Bellmer's in terms of a voyeuristic possession, and are Bellmer's



in his identification with the doll. It is interesting to note similarities in the development of Bellmer and Gaskell's practice, with an emptying out and re-symbolising of the model's body occurring in both their photographs. As has been often noted, the sources for Bellmer's doll are seen as the receipt of childhood toys from his mother, his attraction to his adolescent cousin Ursula, which took place whilst his wife was ill with tuberculosis, seeing the opera *The Tales of Hoffmann*, with his brother, wife and Ursula, and his decision to give up work with the rise of the Nazis. These various events combine elements that Kristeva describes as instigating the creation of adolescent pornography: the questioning of patriarchal values, the interest in the indecisive body, one in which the self and other are ambiguously engaged, and an interest in adolescent erotic games. During this period, Bellmer also drew a series of portraits of girls from a local orphanage.³⁵ These portraits present the body of the girls as complete and individual, but also part of a series, indicating the way in which the multiplied body allows for Bellmer to play with the signification of the doll as self and other, fantasy and reality. This series has a parallel in Gaskell's early photographs *The Alice Portraits* (1996), which seem to be a similar attempt to empty out the models of their individual personalities through repetition (Figs. 3-4).



Fig. 3: *As the serpent*, 1996 (*The Alice Portraits*) © Anna Gaskell. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York.

Fig. 4: *She was She and I Was I*, 1996 (*The Alice Portraits*) © Anna Gaskell. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York.

Gaskell's decision to photograph these girls came after she was unsatisfied at her attempts to use herself as the model for the character of Alice.³⁶ The girls that Gaskell used in this early series are all posed in the same blouse, against a black background, the age of the



girls appearing to be around eight to ten years old. Describing the genesis of this series, Carol Squiers (presumably from a conversation with Gaskell) says:

She queried various agencies for child models who could play the role of Alice. Over a period of eight months she took about 30 portraits of the girls who responded. Dressed in a blouse provided by Gaskell, they were lit like some kind of pre-Raphaelite heroines and posed to resemble Julia Margaret Cameron's vision of Lewis Carroll's original muse, four-year-old Alice Liddell.³⁷

In another essay, Gaskell is said to have been intrigued by the way the pre-Raphaelites used the same model in for different paintings, with her series reversing this, using many models for one persona.³⁸ Both explanations point to a need to empty the model of a coherent identity – something that did not seem to happen when Gaskell used herself as the model. In this initial configuration of Alices, the model becomes an empty space, an interchangeable unit, styled to provoke visual references but ultimately vacuous, replicating the blank space that the Romantic child has represented. Whilst these portraits do not have the implied violence and narrative drive of her subsequent photographs, there is still an unsettling, eroticised atmosphere, created by the too glossed lips of the girls, a cool stare in one image, the light falling too caressingly on a cheek in another. Individually the images appear pretty, if bland, but in a series the repetition and relentlessly close framing draws attention to the details in each, fetishising each model. As with Bellmer, the girl stands in for an ambiguous fulfilment of identity, a projection space for desire that is also a space for identification.

Bellmer's Dolls

For both Gaskell and Bellmer, their depiction of individual girls in series then progressed to more fragmented depictions of the adolescent girl/doll. In this way the concern with finding out about the body and desires of their models is made more explicit, and mines the uncanny space of the girl/doll for its serial, queered sexuality. In photographs of Bellmer's first doll, there is a tension between images which show a voyeuristic or sadistic engagement with the doll as an object of desire, and images in which Bellmer appears to identify as the doll's double. In the photographs of the first doll, its construction is foregrounded, as in the photograph in which the doll is placed in front of a large blue-print and Bellmer appears, ghost-like, standing next to his creation (Fig. 5). Here the oscillation between the doll as a construction of Bellmer and as a completed object onto which fantasies can be projected is presented simultaneously. The importance of photographing his creation perhaps can be seen to parallel Nathaniel's falling in love with Olympia once he looks at her through the telescope. Seen through the lens, the obviously inanimate doll is uncannily animated and engaged with, as Bellmer becomes both the constructor and courtier of this strange character. She becomes the material for the interplay of 'adolescent erotic games,' ones in which she at first seems to have little part.



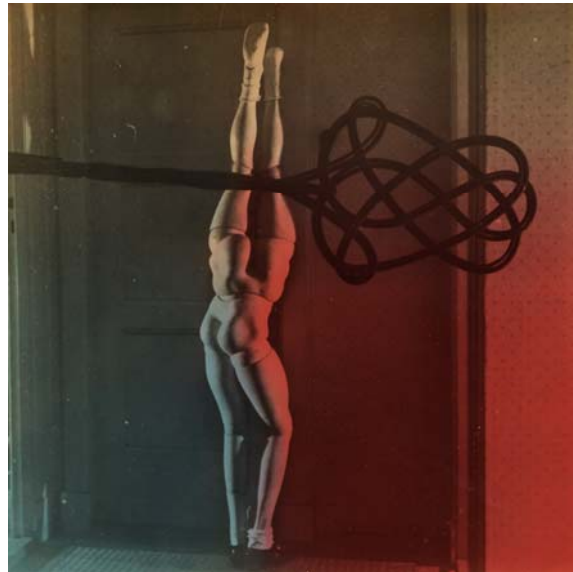


Fig. 5: Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934. Ubu Gallery, New York & Galerie Berinson, Berlin. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2010.

Fig. 6: From *Les Jeux de la Poupée (The Games of the Doll)*, 1938, published 1949. Ubu Gallery, New York & Galerie Berinson, Berlin. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2010.

The photographs of the second doll continue to reveal the two modes of sadistic voyeurism and uncertain identification. Alongside one of his photographs in the book 'The Games of the Doll,' a poem by Paul Eluard reads: 'It's a girl! – Where are her eyes? – It's a girl! – Where are her breasts? – It's a girl! – What is she saying? – It's a girl! – What is she playing? It's a girl, it is my desire!'³⁹ (Fig. 6) Here the overlay of the carpet beater on the image stands in for the voyeuristic spectator or photographer, equating looking with the beginnings of a sexual game. Whilst this would seem to be a very sadistic, misogynistic image, there is something so obvious about the carpet beater as to render it in the realm of impotent fantasy.⁴⁰ That the carpet beater is just one variation on a range of engagements with the doll is shown in a second image of the same scene, this time with a woman's shoe suspended in front of the camera. Here again we have the overlaying of masculine and feminine, active and passive, circulating around an autoeroticism that is neither straightforwardly heterosexual, nor homosexual. With the doubling of the doll's legs, there is even a question as to the gender of the doll's body in these images, which is no longer fixed as female. Here the playing of 'adolescent erotic games,' with a focus on 'the indecisive body,' presents Kristeva's notion of an adolescent pornography. But still, in these images, there is a sense of the artist controlling the scene, with the doll under his strict control.

In some of the photographs of the second doll, Bellmer appears to present it as more autonomous and ambiguously related to the photographer/spectator, particularly in the



images of the doubled legs. Rather than remaining a symbol of Bellmer's desire – however we might theorise that – there is an increasing animation of the doll in the range of poses in which it is presented. At times the doll, with its strange quadrupled form, appears at home in the various domestic settings – as in an image with the legs placed demurely across two chairs – or appears as the actor in a sexualised scene that no longer reads from a recognisable voyeuristic script; as in an image where the legs hang from a hook, another plaything discarded, like the spinning top shown on the ground (Figs. 7-8). It is here that the reading of the doll as a fetishistic disavowal of castration appears too limited.



Figs. 7 and 8: Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée (The Doll)*, 1935. Ubu Gallery, New York & Galerie Berinson, Berlin. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2010.

Therese Lichtenstein has argued that these images present a hysterical body, one which echoes Bellmer's own ideas of a physical unconscious, in which the body plays out symptoms that often displace their source: 'Through the "hysterical" poses of his dolls, Bellmer attempted to investigate the adolescent identity crisis.'⁴¹ This displacement of sensation or symptom points to the Bataille logic of Bellmer's eroticism, in which a leg is not simply a penis, but is part of a signifying chain that incorporates a wide range of body parts. However, there is a phallic base for Bellmer, as he explores in his essay 'The Anatomy of the Image:'

By analogy, one may surmise that the woman's vagina can likewise determine her own overall image, that her sex can be found between her thumb and index finger, between her hands, her feet when pressed together, in the folds of her armpit; that it is her ear, her smile or the tears that fall from her closed eyelids. But in order for the woman's image to be progressively and categorically subsumed under the sign 'vagina,' the vagina, we repeat, would first need to have been 'simulated' by the male organism ...⁴²

This is at odds with Bellmer's interest in a hermaphroditic body, one which is often presented in his photographs and drawings, one which is similar to the chains of association in Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, in which, as already mentioned, 'adolescent erotic games' rarely involve



heterosexual penetration, but instead circulate around eroticised associations between the bodies and identities of the three main adolescent characters. In his text, Bellmer seems to both embrace the serial logic of the body, merging categories, identities and sexualities, whilst still insisting on a phallogocentrism that is at odds with this seriality.

Hide

This oscillation between a phallic and serial logic is disrupted more clearly in Gaskell's photographs. Returning to the theme of curiosity, in Gaskell's subsequent photographic series to *The Alice Portraits*, the girls interact with each other in a way that merges their identities in a similar manner to Bellmer's dolls. Whereas Bellmer's drawings often merge the little girl with the phallus, either morphing body parts into huge penises or endowing the girl with her own penis, in Gaskell's drawings the focus is on the cavern of insatiable mouths and the dark cave created by the underneath of her model's skirts. Bellmer maps onto his models his own ambiguous masculinity, so that he becomes both the adult male voyeur and the young female model in an uncanny oscillating identification. Gaskell's relationship to her young models is less certain, as she constructs a serial, vaginal sexual vocabulary which imagines the interior of her girls by displacing the genitals onto other body parts and clothing such as the mouth or skirt. As with Bellmer's dolls the eroticism is combined with an attempt to take the body apart, with many of the images showing girls twisting, peering and pulling at each other.⁴³ What is instructive in the similarities between their work is the complex relationship between the fantasies constructed within the drawings and the photographed performance that are developed from them. The use of photography places the viewer in a position in which s/he is compelled to engage with the scene of viewing as an eroticised and aggressive act, with the drawings acting as indicators of the initial fantasised encounter.

Gaskell's series *hide* draws on a fairytale in which a King tries to marry his daughter, after being compelled by his wife on her deathbed to only marry someone more beautiful than she is (Figs. 9-10). Only the Queen's daughter fulfils this requirement, which leads to her fleeing from the castle and disguising herself in a donkeyskin. Gaskell took up this incestuous tale turning on the doubling of mother and daughter after she watched the film *Peu d'âne* by Jacques Demy (1970), in which Catherine Deneuve plays both mother and daughter. Like Bellmer's infatuation with his cousin Ursula, the King falls in love with his kin, merging the lateral with the vertical. Rather than embracing her father's desire for her, the princess refuses this Oedipal scene. In *hide*, the photographing of these staged scenes of implied and feared sexual violation resonates with Bellmer's images of his first doll, constructed to generate a similar voyeuristic, fragmented narrative in which the viewer is implicated in the presentation of sexualised, disturbing scenarios. The story of the girl escaping her father's advances is doubled, so that in some images the fear of the father's advances is produced by the voyeuristic perspective, as in the image of two girls trying to get into one pair of tights, as if trying to escape the gaze of the camera, and in others, the pair of girls appear to be



investigating each other, ambiguously taking on the position of dead mother and violating father.



Fig. 9: *Untitled #45 (hide)*, 1998 © Anna Gaskell. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York.

Fig. 10: *Untitled #47 (hide)*, 1998 © Anna Gaskell. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York.

There is an obvious difference between Bellmer's photographs of the dolls and Gaskell's photographs, which is her use of actual girls. Rather than animating the inanimate, Gaskell emphasises the inanimate and doubled presence of her models – are they to be seen as two different people, or manifestations of the psyche? Another version of Bellmer's physical unconscious, perhaps. This is compounded by the use of clothing, with tights and underwear focused on as the boundary of interior and exterior. In some images, a second pair of tights appears to stand in for the imagined doubling of the daughter, who tries to maintain her identity in the face of her father's mistaken desire, so that she becomes, like Olympia, the site of projection for desire and identification.

Gaskell's images of girls struggling with each other can be seen as a performance of the fight to create an individual identity, which in part is a struggle to form a coherent sexual identity, spatialising and eroticising the linear story of the adolescent coming to adulthood, as played out in her literary sources. In Gaskell's work, the presentation of a series of photographs to be read simultaneously frustrates any resolution, suspending the narrative at the point of conflict, aggression and desire. Gaskell can be seen to be both identifying with her models, and replaying their voyeuristic presentation, overlaying the heterosexual voyeuristic mode with an aggressive and queer exchange between the models in her photographs and her position in relation to their sexualised performances.

Just as the King in the 'Donkey-skin' stories appears as both the actual man attempting to seduce his daughter, and the patriarch attempting to assert his will over all others, the doll and the persona of Bellmer as the photographer and participant in the photographs appear both as players in personal erotic dramas and as symbols of resistance against extreme societal dictates (Bellmer's resistance to the Nazi regime and to also more



generally to paternal and patriarchal expectations). I would argue that Gaskell uses her models in a similar way – using the implication of narrative to seduce the viewer into reading the scene as 'real,' whilst constantly reminding the viewer through the use of doubling, multiple models, mannered lighting and camera angles, that what is actually being viewed is an uncanny performance. Gaskell's doubled models and use of photography to depict an ambiguously 'real' or fantasised scene returns to Freud's definition of the uncanny as the oscillation between the familiar and strange, and imagination and reality. His other definition, as previously discussed – 'when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises' – links with Juliet Mitchell's discussion of hysteria, complicating a fetishistic reading of the work, as already discussed in relation to Lichtenstein's argument.⁴⁴ Mitchell has noted about the hysteric's relationship to the identity/idea that s/he acts out: 'This presentation of another in acting treats the substitute, the fantasy, as though it were the thing itself.'⁴⁵ This particular relationship to doubling resonates with the definition of surrealist photography by Rosalind Krauss. Her thesis also focuses on the importance of doubling and the uncanny in the images:

it is doubling that elicits the notion that to an original has been added its copy. The double is the simulacrum, the second, the representative of the original. ... in being seen in conjunction with the original, the double destroys the pure singularity of the first. Through duplication, it opens the original to the effect of difference, of deferral, of one-thing-after-another.⁴⁶

It is this component of doubling – the ability to disrupt the 'original,' to put its 'original-ness' in doubt – that has implications in terms of the doubling of heterosexual, narcissistic and queer viewing structures. In Gaskell's work, the voyeuristic gaze is doubled by the narcissistic identification for the models, with a homoerotic desire for the models as nostalgic versions of the self and as seductive, separate individuals. It is the self-reflexivity that is required on the part of the viewer and the imagined position of both the artist and models that create a situation that Krauss describes as 'the disarticulation of the self by means of its mirrored double.'⁴⁷ This conceptualisation of the viewing space maps onto Kristeva and Mitchell's concepts of adolescent and serial sexuality, as well as Judith Butler's performative construction of gendered and sexual identity, showing how the photographic structure of doubling is echoed in the fantasmatic construction of heterosexuality as the original and homosexuality as the copy:

[I]n its efforts to naturalise itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the *effect* of its own originality; in other words, compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of 'man' and 'woman,' are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real.⁴⁸

Butler argues that the relationship between homo- and heterosexualities is in a constant state of anxiety and tension: 'The parodic replication and resignification of heterosexual constructs



within non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called original, but it shows that heterosexuality only constitutes itself as the original through a convincing act of repetition.⁴⁹ This compulsive repetition is duplicated in some of Gaskell's visual strategies, with the use of multiple models in *The Alice Portraits*, and the use of series of images in which numbers of models play one character simultaneously. In both Gaskell and Bellmer's work, this doubling is itself multiplied, so that seriality, 'one-thing-after-another,' is presented rather than the phallic logic of the either/or.

Resemblance

In Gaskell's series *resemblance*, a concern with 'origins,' rather than an idea of 'originality' is explored (Figs. 11-12). This series draws on a number of stories about creation, including 'The Sandman,' the German expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and Mary Shelley's classic gothic novel *Frankenstein*.⁵⁰ Each of these sources has at its centre a consideration of the double as both a character in the story, and as a projection of one of the characters. Gaskell's condensing of the characters of carer/creator/mother and child/creation into a performance by models of similar age transposes the relationship from a parental one to a struggle between peers, a fight for individuality and identity that is played out on a lateral axis.



Fig. 11: *Untitled #74 (resemblance)*, 2001 © Anna Gaskell. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York.

Fig. 12: *Untitled #71 (resemblance)*, 2001 © Anna Gaskell. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York.

In Gaskell's all-female universe, the source material is transformed into a struggle around definitions and representations of female identity. Gaskell has explained the activities of her models as acting out 'the impossibility of making the person who made you.'⁵¹ Or as described by Jeff Fleming:

Gaskell flips the usual roles: her young girls attempt to fabricate their creators, represented here by other young girls, in an ideal form. According to the artist, they act on the belief that if their creators are perfect, then they will in turn be flawless. To gain control over their histories and the construction of their bodies, the girls must go back to the time of their creation.⁵²



Here, curiosity about sexual identity and sexuality, as seen in the photographs and drawings of Bellmer is extended in an attempt to gain control over representations of the female body.

By imagining the creation of the creator, in *resemblance* the maternal body is invoked, bringing to the surface the disavowed other of the automata, as discussed by Laura Mulvey: 'An eviscerated, mechanised, femininity masks and marks disavowal of both the site of castration anxiety and the womb, the "first home."⁵³ Just as Bellmer's photographs and drawings disavow the phallic authority of the father, Gaskell's series interrogates the maternal reproductive power of the mother. In both cases, the adolescent stands in for a sexuality and a sexual identity that is posed against a reproductive heterosexuality and sexual identity based on sexual difference. This fulfils Kristeva's notion of an adolescent pornography that aims to 'constitute a desire to name, to bring to light a wavering meaning that lies upon the boundaries of words and drives.'⁵⁴ Or as Mitchell has put it in her discussion of a gendered sexuality, based on seriality: "'Gender" is the polymorphously perverse child, grown up.'⁵⁵

So, to return to my title, 'Bellmer's Legs,' who do these legs belong to? In both Bellmer and Gaskell's photographs, the doll/girl stands in for an identity that is not clearly defined, a sexualised engagement with another that is not dictated solely by the reproductive, heterosexual logic of self and other. By reanimating a symbol of feminine desirability, only to take it apart, both Bellmer and Gaskell expose anxieties around sexual difference, and the potential for serial modes of identification and desire presented in the figure of the adolescent that queer distinctions between narcissism, heterosexuality and homosexuality. Kristeva's notion of adolescent pornography allows for a reading of the fragmented and oscillating identities and sexualities presented in these photographs as performing a resistance to normative structures of both sexuality and society: 'When modern novels question either themselves or their inevitably patriarchal values (which stem from an inevitably adult society), their writers often claim to be directly seduced by the adolescent or by adolescence.'⁵⁶ By returning to the figure of the adolescent girl/doll – one which Freud is 'blind' to – the uncanniness of her relationship to artist and viewer can be read as a presentation of serial sexuality, one in which boundaries are disrupted and sexuality becomes a site of knowledge that is not fixed as either perversion or normative.

¹ Julia Kristeva, 'The Adolescent Novel,' in *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. by Ross Guberman, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, 152.

² *Ibid*, 151.

³ *Ibid*.



⁴ Quoted in Stephen S. Prokopoff, *Hans Bellmer: Photographs*, exh. cat., Kranner Art Museum, University of Illinois, 1991, 12.

⁵ In this essay, I am not engaging with wider debates around definitions of pornography. For a classic account of pornography's history, see Walker Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1987, 1996. His discussion of the history of the term foregrounds its changing definitions. Central to his argument is the use of pornography as a category to separate material from mainstream consumption in institutions such as museums and libraries. In this respect Kendrick's argument is useful in relation to Kristeva's focus on adolescent pornography as being a site of resistance to authority and disruption of normative identity.

⁶ Kristeva, 'The Adolescent Novel,' 151.

⁷ Gaskell is adamant that Crewdson was not a dominant influence on her practice, and that his construction of a group of artists around him at Yale occurred after she had left the course. Instead, Gaskell maintains that her own work on narrative and portrait photography during her time at Yale influenced Crewdson's directing of these younger artists. Gaskell, conversation with the author, 26 February 2002.

⁸ 'The Cindy Sherman of her generation' is quoted in Carol Squiers, 'Anna in Wonderland,' *American Photo*, Vol. 10, No. 1, January-February 1999, 34, 36 and 34.

⁹ Gaskell, conversation with the author.

¹⁰ See Rosalind Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti,' *October*, Vol. 33, Summer, 1985, 62.

¹¹ See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1993; Thérèse Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors: the Art of Hans Bellmer*, exh. cat., International Center of Photography, Berkeley, CA and New York, University of California Press, 2001.

¹² Kristeva, 'The Adolescent Novel,' 136.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 148. 'After the Oedipal stabilisation of subjective identity, adolescents often begin to question their identifications, as well as their capacities to speak or symbolise,' 136.

¹⁶ Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2003, 120.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁸ Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschal, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1982, 21 (originally published in French as *Histoire d'Œil*, 1929).

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. xvii, trans. by James Strachey ed. with Anna Freud, Vintage, London, 2001, 217-56, 232.

²⁰ Hans Bellmer, 'The Father' (1936), in *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, trans. by Sue Taylor Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2000, 211: 'We probably had a rather adorable air, more girlish than formidable as we would have preferred. But it seemed best above all to tempt the brute from his position in order to confuse him.'



²¹ Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny),' *New Literary History*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Spring, 1976, 536. Cixous is only one of many commentators who have reassessed the importance of Olympia. As Laura Mulvey has noted, 'Olympia introduces the question of gender, if only negatively, into Freud's understanding of the uncanny;' she 'is the perfect fetish object. Her wooden, inanimate body is not "wounded," and she acts as a screen for Nathaniel, reflecting directly back to him his unconscious fantasies, enabling the repression of his fears,' in Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, London, Reaktion, 2006, 46 and 49.

²² Freud, 'The "Uncanny,"' 244.

²³ Mladen Dolar, "'I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night': Lacan and the Uncanny,' *October*, Vol. 58, Autumn 1991, 9.

²⁴ The story is told through the exchange of letters between the hero Nathaniel, his friend Lothaire and his beloved Clara. The letters perhaps reflect the lens of the eye-glasses through which Nathaniel gazes on Olympia.

²⁵ ETA Hoffmann, 'The Sandman' (1817), in *Tales from the German*, trans. by John Oxenford and CA Feiling, London, Chapman and Hall, 1844, 156.

²⁶ 'The Sandman,' 162. Sue Taylor gives a detailed account of the difference between the story and the opera version, which ends with Olympia being dismembered. See Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, 62-3, 65.

²⁷ Laura Mulvey notes how Freud misreads the story, saying that Nathaniel sees Coppelius through his telescope, rather than Clara: 'Once Nathaniel recovers from the nervous breakdown that had been precipitated by the sight of the two evil father figures fighting over and dismantling Olympia, he is reunited with his living, loving fiancée, Clara. One day, when they climb to the top of a high tower to admire the view, a strange figure in the street below distracts them. Taking out his telescope to look more closely, Nathaniel focuses the lens not, as Freud claims, on Coppola below, but on Clara at his side, whom he mistakes for the wooden doll,' *Death 24x a Second*, 49.

²⁸ Freud, 'The "Uncanny,"' 232, note 1.

²⁹ Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 50-1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

³¹ For many commentators, the category of the uncanny features much more than castration. Mladen Dolar again: 'Freud is gradually forced to use the entire panoply of psychoanalytic concepts: castration complex, Oedipus, (primary) narcissism, compulsion to repeat, death drive repression, anxiety, psychosis, etc. They all seem to converge on "the uncanny,"' Dolar, "'I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night,'" 6.

³² This image is reproduced in Taylor, *Hans Bellmer The Anatomy of Anxiety*, 26.

³³ Kristeva, 'The Adolescent Novel,' 151.

³⁴ Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "Uncanny"),' 536.

³⁵ Bellmer visited an orphanage in around 1930 and invited a series of girls aged 8 to 10 years old to come and pose for him at his parent's home: 'The portrait studies he made of them, and the finished paintings (now lost) in which the anonymous girls are pictured in the



lace-curtained, bourgeois interior of the Bellmer home, are modest, straightforward, and sober,' Taylor, *Hans Bellmer The Anatomy of Anxiety*, 29.

³⁶ Speaking about the pictures of herself, Gaskell explains how she was trying to photograph what she calls a 'non-place': 'I was taking pictures of myself for a long time and I got bored of that. I took these pictures of myself sneezing – I was interested in this in between space where you expect a sneeze, or you expect an orgasm, or you expect ... I was interested in this non-place and trying to articulate that. Then I became more interested in characters that I felt could articulate that, because people were familiar with these characters and these imaginary places, a place where anything could happen, where there is no time. This was how I became interested in the character of Alice and because of her age, I cast these girls,' Interview with author 26 February 2002. In another interview Gaskell puts it slightly differently: 'When I was in graduate school at Yale, out in the middle of nowhere I started taking pictures of myself, but I didn't really enjoy it,' she recalled. 'Still, I had these personal stories that I wanted to tell. So I thought I'd have someone play a familiar character and then I could twist that, combine it with things related to it, and I'd be telling a completely different story,' David Hay, 'Photographs on a Wall, Doors to a Haunted Manor,' *The New York Times*, 29 September 2002, Arts and Leisure section, 37.

³⁷ Carol Squiers, 'Anna in Wonderland,' *American Photo*, Vol. 10, No. 1, January-February 1999, 36.

³⁸ Bonnie Clearwater, *Anna Gaskell*, North Miami, FL, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998, 7.

³⁹ Paul Eluard, 'The Games of the Doll,' in Hans Bellmer, *The Doll*, trans. by Antony Melville, London, Atlas Anti-Classic 14, 2005 (originally published as *Les Jeux de la poupée*, Paris, Les Editions premières, 1949).

⁴⁰ This is held up by Sue Taylor's assertion that the carpet beater is a toy, and can be seen in Bellmer's *Personal Museum*, 1938. *Anatomy of Anxiety*, 246, note 6.

⁴¹ Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 115. 'Bellmer's wild inversions of legs and breasts and his manic doubling and multiplying of them suggest a psychic convergence between castration anxiety and hysteria. Issues of hysteria also have to do with separation, identification, the rejection of repressed sexual desire or trauma, and the fear of growing up into an adult and taking care of oneself,' 116.

⁴² Hans Bellmer, 'The Anatomy of the Image,' in *The Doll*, 121.

⁴³ This equation of sexual play with a desire to 'know' the body relates both to Kristeva's notion of adolescent pornography, as well as to Mitchell's contention that in sibling or lateral sexuality sex and violence are intimately linked.

⁴⁴ Freud, 'The "Uncanny,"' 244.

⁴⁵ Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effects of Sibling Relations on the Human Condition*, London, Penguin, 2000, 210.

⁴⁶ Rosalind Krauss, 'Photography in the service of Surrealism,' in *L'Amour Fou*, ed. by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, New York, Abbeville Press, 1985, 28.

⁴⁷ Rosalind Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti,' 78.

⁴⁸ Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination,' in *Inside/Out: Lesbian theories, gay theories*, ed. Diana Fuss, London, Routledge, 1991, 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.



⁵⁰ All three of these sources use the structure of letters or oral histories to present the narrative as 'real,' and to bring into focus the unreliability of the narrator. In *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, dir. by Robert Wiene, 1920, the suspicious Dr Caligari has a somnabulist, called Cesare, who appears to predict people's death. When a number of unexplained murders occur, the finger is pointed at Dr Caligari and his strange companion. However, when watched over by the hero, Francis, neither Dr Caligari or Cesare appear to leave their house. When confronted by Francis and the police, it turns out that Francis had actually been watching over a dummy of Cesare, whilst the real man had been out all night. The trail to find Cesare leads to the local mental asylum, where it turns out Dr Caligari is the director. At the end of the film, Francis is telling the story to another man (which is also how the film begins), and it transpires that Francis is actually an inmate of the asylum, and whilst Dr Caligari is the director, he is most probably not the maniacal character that Francis presents.

⁵¹ Gaskell, in conversation with the author.

⁵² Jeff Fleming, *Resemblances*, exh. cat., Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines (Iowa), 2001, 9.

⁵³ Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 51.

⁵⁴ Kristeva, 'The Adolescent Novel,' 151-2.

⁵⁵ Mitchell, *Siblings*, 125.

⁵⁶ Kristeva, 'The Adolescent Novel,' 151.

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