

Phantom Prosthetics

Vera Klute *Blindgänger*

Butler Gallery, Kilkenny,

May 7 – June 19, 2011

Text by James Merrigan



Vera Klute, (foreground), *Gurgles*, plaster bust with sound, 2010; (background), *Public Pool*, 5-panel drawing, pencil and ink on paper, 2011; photo © Vera Klute; courtesy Butler Gallery.

+BILLION- Journal #13, 'Phantom Prosthetics', Vera Klute, 'Blindgänger', Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, May 7 – June 19, 2011; Text by James Merrigan

The Butler Gallery reads like a latrine in the context of Vera Klute's work—especially considering the artist's 'pissing ear' work at the far end of the Kilkenny art space entitled *It's coming out of my ears*. The grey tiled floor and series of 'alcove galleries' force the viewer to walk to the right and look to the left. Unavoidably, the art works are given a serial and segregated presentation, while the artist tries to form a cohesive hole. Saying that, the staccato architecture is perfect for Klute's work, which presents the body as a series of disconnected bit-parts; divine and maybe not so divine.

The terms or "literary modes" of the *carnavalesque* and *grotesque realism*—given to us by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, come to mind when viewing Klute's videos and kinetic sculptures. You almost have to break down her art practice into *genus* and *species*: drawings and paintings are also present. In each disconnected space of the gallery the viewer is presented with a limb, limbs or internal organs, that are being manipulated by kinetic or digital means. However, the first 'alcove' is 'dead still' with traditional methods of fabrication. A series of large drawings hang volutes-like from the ceiling with a top heavy composition of what can only be read as cherubim. However, the composition crops the heads of the figures, suggesting decapitation or *Icarian* hubris. The latter seems to fit Klute's playful fabrications, which suggest the daring of science and technology to play God through cybernetic experiments.

Michael Bell and Michael Gardiner promote the intriguing idea that Bakhtin's interest in the "carnival" and the "grotesque"

was due in part to his own affliction with *osteomyelitis* (bone marrow disease), which resulted in the amputation of his leg in 1938. Following this diagnosis they write:

The phantom limb is the scene of trenchant cognitive confusion: the reality of the stump is co-existence with the reality of the phantom; that is, one indicates a manifest absence in the same / time space relations as that which indicates a manifest presence. Thus, the phantom limb asks the first question of grotesquery: where does your body end?[1]

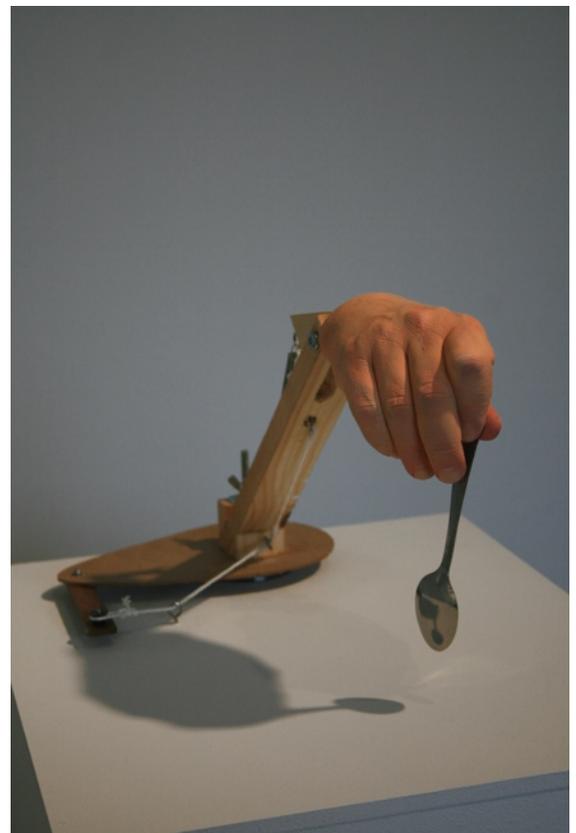


Vera Klute, *Linkshänder (left-handed)*, Pencil and ink on paper, 2010, collection: Aideen Barry: photo © Vera Klute; courtesy Butler Gallery.

It has also been analysed that for the patient, the “phantom limb” is an “image” rather than a “copy” of the amputated limb. It is invariably “shorter” and shows more “dexterity.”[2] Klute’s own dexterity comes

into question in two works—*Es hat sich schon mai einer tot gerührt* (German Proverb: ‘People have stirred themselves to death’), and *Linkshänder (left-handed)*. The former kinetic work includes two animatronic left arm/hands that make a ‘stirring’ motion with spoons. The drawing *Linkshänder (left-handed)* is also a portrait of left-handedness where two arm/hands hang together on the one page. Both of these works are exercises in paradox: on the one hand—awkwardness, and the other hand—dexterity. One can only presume that Klute is left-handed. Provincially, in the essay, *Understanding Idioms*, Nancy Chang situates the idiom “to have two left hands” in German origins—*zwei linke Hände haben* (be a bad craftsman). [3] Klute’s intentionally awkward fabrications of ‘thought’ (another “phantom”), bring her themes down to earth, clipping the wings of the divine.

+BILLION- Journal #13, ‘Phantom Prosthetics’, Vera Klute, ‘Blindgänger’, Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, May 7 – June 19, 2011; Text by James Merrigan



Vera Klute, *Es hat sich schon mal einer tot gerührt* (German Proverb: ‘People have stirred themselves to death’) Plaster, motor, string, 2011 photo © Vera Klute; courtesy Butler Gallery.

We also have to take into account gender in relation to a female artist working with this specific thread of visual research and thought. From the offset, androgyny is suggested in the cropped “ecclesiastical” figures in Klute’s drawings. The internal organ or disconnected limb is also genderless. However, these fabrications are illustrative of the ‘man-made’ and masculinity in the human sciences. The precursor of this type of scientific expression in art, that is engendered with both feminine and masculine attributes is found ninety years ago in the manifestation of Marcel Duchamp’s feminine alter ego Rose Sélavy. Bell and Gardiner write that “the whole, the complete, the autonomous body remains hegemonic in particularly Western concepts of selfhood,” and that “the grotesque itself rearticulates the feminist imperative in deconstructing the ‘man-made’ interface of the cyborg as a wholly male *Übermensch*.”[4] *Übermensch* is translated as superhuman, beyond-human or “overman” from a Nietzschean perspective. But the “overman” is always tied to humanity as a leader of men. *He* effects change in others and the world. As a counterweight to masculine wholeness and power, femininity is defined by body parts. But beyond the obvious sexual connotations which are successfully avoided by Klute, it is the history of the decentered, fractured feminine self that is tied to labour (both meanings of the word), and identity—in terms of the literary masculine pseudonym for the female writer, that surfaces in the confused states of motion and stillness in Klute’s work at the Butler Gallery.

It is also too simplistic to situate Klute’s work in the general arena of the *grotesque*.

Although there is an uncomfortable awareness felt in the stomach in front of the artist’s gurgling bust topped with a prominent trachea bone to suggest the potential of sound, and “CPR,” where the action of resuscitation is literally illustrated and connected to a digitally rendered ‘breathing’ lung on a flat screen TV. In the end the outcome of the science is fictional, placing Klute’s work back in the literary rather than *Tomorrow’s World*.

+BILLION- Journal #13, ‘Phantom Prosthetics’, Vera Klute, ‘Blindgänger’, Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, May 7 – June 19, 2011; Text by James Merrigan

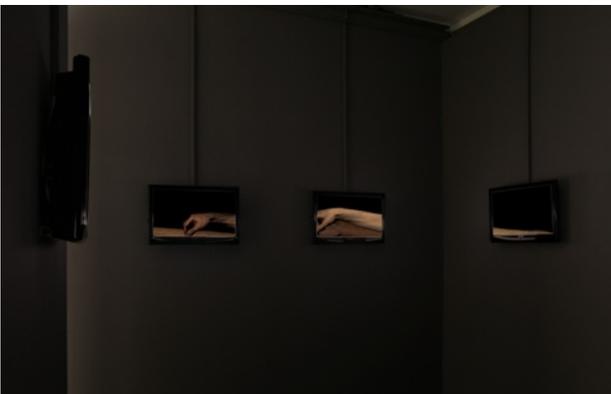


Vera Klute, *CPR*, multi-media installation, dimensions variable, 2011: photo © Vera Klute; courtesy Butler Gallery.

It is also a misconception that the *grotesque* suggests social isolation and anxiety. The humour in Klute’s work reinvigorates the other idiom—*Laugh in the face of death*.

If we go back 450 years, Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted the *grotesque* as a collective coming together, where the ‘deformed’ can be found in the festivities of his painted crowds. Bruegel is almost a visual companion to Bakhtin. The Russian philosopher also designates “folk humour” as an important aspect of the *carnavalesque* and *grotesque realism*— *Bakhtin writes:*

In grotesque realism, therefore, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people...The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable.[5]



Vera Klute, *Den Letzten beissen die Hunde P.O.A.*
 (German Proverb: ‘The last one will be bitten by the dogs’)
 8-channel video Installation, 0:53 min looped
 Dimensions variable, 2011:
 photo © Vera Klute; courtesy Butler Gallery.

This brings me to one of the most innovative video installation that I have experienced in recent times. Klute’s *Den Letzten beissen die Hunde* (German Proverb: ‘The last one will be bitten by the dogs’) is an 8-channel video installation displayed on 8 flat screen TVs that ‘circumscribe’ the

viewer and show elongated arms being dragged from one successive screen to another by “running” fingers. I write “circumscribe” to suggest a snake or the male penis, which (to my mind), the racing limbs allude to in the context of what went before at the gallery. This work also points back to David Cronenberg’s subjective articulations of anthropomorphic technology in his 1993 film *Videodrome*. Klute’s animated castrations flout bravely with humour, violence, gender and the gothic. The press release states: *the moving disembodied hands...bring to mind ‘Thing’, from the 1960’s TV series The Addams Family...who is able to run on his fingertips, much like a spider.* But it is the counter aspects of humour versus pain, movement versus stillness, the divine versus the earthly, that makes klute’s work encyclopedic in its inquiry into the narratives that the body offers the artist, and tirelessly meddlesome in the display of that inquiry.

*Thank you to Vera Klute and the Butler Gallery
 for the photos.*

Cited

- [1] *Bakhtin and the human sciences*, Michael Bell, Michael Gardiner, Sage Publications Ltd., 1998.
- [2] All quotes from Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Volatile bodies: toward a corporeal feminism*, Indiana University Press, 1994.
- [3] Nancy Chang, *Understanding Idioms*, International Computer Science Institute, 1947 Center St., Suite 600, Berkeley.
- [4] *Bakhtin and the human sciences*, op.cit.
- [5] Mikhail Mikhaïlovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, Indiana University Press, 1984.

+BILLION- Journal #13, ‘Phantom Prosthetics’, Vera Klute, ‘Blindgänger’, Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, May 7 – June 19, 2011; Text by James Merrigan