

## CONVERSATION BETWEEN DESIRÉE HOLMAN AND CURATORIAL ASSISTANT DENA BEARD

**DENA BEARD** What is in the gallery looks like a finished installation, but I see it as a two-year performance project, where you organized your own approaches to mythmaking and what can be called “serious play.” Sculpturally, cognitively, in a group setting, through the computer, in drawing, you renegotiated many kinds of relational frameworks, and I find that very performative. Since the idea of the frame or the framework resonates throughout all of your work, perhaps we should try to define that, but then can you talk a little about the aesthetic and social frameworks that you organized, or developed in tandem with other people?

**DESIRÉE HOLMAN** I learned about the frameworks concept when I read Gary Alan Fine’s *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*, a book he wrote in 1983. He discussed Erving Goffman’s concept of frame analysis, which organizes the ways that people make sense of their perceptions through multiple realities. Based on Fine’s ethnographic studies on American role-playing, tabletop gamers, Fine describes the player as operating in three orders of reality, or frameworks. The first is the primary framework, which is the real world. The second is the gaming or player framework, which operates within the constructs of the game. For example, if José is playing a character name Zeus in the game and then refers to himself as Zeus instead of José, then he is operating in the gaming/player framework. The final framework is identified as the fantasy character framework. This state is entered into when the player actually embodies the fantasy and mentally becomes a character she or he is playing. With a few minor changes I used the Fine/Goffman ideas as a way to organize the *Heterotopias* project.

I think a great metaphor for my practice is that of a dungeon master in *Dungeons and Dragons*. I’m coming up with the narrative, the props, and the game and the performers or collaborators are filling in part of the content and taking the work in new directions.

**DB** And you have this framework of data that you’ve been working with—you can see beyond the myth, in the same way that a dungeon master reads a ton of books to prepare for a game. They have secret knowledge that can be applied, at will, to this functioning world that they create.

**DH** In a sense the dungeon master has to be at once in and out of the fantasy—she has to be the architect but also engage in the fantasy enough to direct the characters. The goal for me is to keep the performers inside the fantasy. If I succeed at that, then I’ve done my job well. I can’t always do that, but that is my goal.

**DB** When you enter the gallery, there are sixteen framed drawings presented formally in traditional picture frames, but the drawings themselves are strange simulations of simulations. They are of skinned faces, these pink Day-Glo computer screens, and have titles like *Dancers Dancing in Their Own Digital Ectoplasmic Cocoons*, which is probably my favorite title of all time! The rendered surfaces are quite material: there’s significant evidence of the human hand and human investment, so they stay within normative visual parameters and exist within a more “known” realm. However when we move to the back room of the gallery, to the video, we move into the uncomfortable realm of the virtual and these same simulations take on a more deviant, less identifiable character. They seem, for whatever reason, less real.

**DH** Yeah.

**DB** Your title *Heterotopias* is borrowed from a lecture by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. His heterotopias are countersites necessarily created by society to allow citizens a space to deviate significantly from established norms. In the exhibition, the traditionally made drawings and the technologically revelatory video are like two opposing sites that mirror each other. How much do you encourage the viewer to experience that kind of transference, from real to virtual, alongside the characters? Should we “try on” these identities or maintain critical distance?



**DH** I hope both. Another marker of success for me is if I can get a viewer to engage intellectually as well as enter into the fantasy, and to move back and forth between these states. So, in past work, like *Troglodyte*, for example, I wanted visitors to immediately know that they are looking at people pretending to be apes only to temporarily forget and read the figures as real apes. When they realize it’s a big game it means they have been positioned to ask “why”? Or in *Reborn* it’s the opposite—you walk into the work and you may believe the babies are live babies only to discover later that they are not. That strategy aims to push a viewer back and forth between critical distance and a kind of passive engagement with the fantasy. I hope that the work has created enough of a gap, at points, to ask the why, when, where questions, but is also closed enough to get you engaged in the fantasy.

**DB** Another theme in your work, the mask, has taken on a startlingly new quality in *Heterotopias*. There’s this idea that online we create a mask for our physical identities, but it’s not really a mask because it exists alongside, parallel, to our physical presence. It’s not something that covers over the technology of our body; instead, the mask is controlled by the technology of the computer. The thing is, despite the fact that they often reveal their puppetry and belie their own framework, it’s still very easy to suspend disbelief when looking at digital masks. In that sense, it’s interesting to think about how avatars become a kind of prosthetic. If somebody who has never been able to walk creates an avatar that allows them to experience a form of walking, they are using a nonphysical, simulated environment to experience physical relationships. And teenagers, they absolutely use their online

identities to try out flirty or ironic personalities to see what’s more successful with their peers. Virtual masks allow for this testing and experimentation. How has CGI [computer-generated imagery] changed your approach to masking and, more specifically, what does it mean to have a diffuse map as a mask?

**DH** The diffuse map is something that a texture artist in the CGI pipeline uses to make a textural surface on an object; in this case the objects are figures, and the figures are representing the nine performers in this particular project. I’ve drawn four diffuse maps of four of the characters’ faces and the diffuse map is basically created from flattened and altered photos of the performers. The diffuse map is digitally “wrapped around” the polygon undergirding that a modeler created, like a bearskin rug wrapped around a bear skeleton. I am fascinated with the building process of the CGI and how it constantly references the physical. I’ve always been interested in masking and costuming as vehicles to open up fantasy by freeing people to explore with the safety and conduit of the prop. When I saw these diffuse maps they were just incredibly beautiful to me, because they were on this threshold between the physical and the virtual. They are all totally digital information, but they’re so confusing because they look really physical; they’re really fleshy and they’re on this fuzzy line between being kind of beautiful and being grotesque. So they’re just virtual skin, basically. It’s like someone was virtually skinned.

**DB** Can you explain a bit how atavism comes into play in this project?

Desirée Holman: video still composite from *Heterotopias*, 2011; three-channel HD video, 13 mins.; courtesy of the artist and Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.



**DH** An atavism is a throwback to our evolutionary or cultural past. We evolved from the water so we have the DNA for webbed fingers, or a tail, or fur. What if this type of atavism could be something that is nonphysical, where the body is antiquated? The digital avatar is a stand-in for the body but it's really only operated by someone's mind. I'm questioning the biology of our body, and I wonder if we have a trajectory where our bodies become less important with technology or, conversely, I wonder if consciousness preceded the body. Though that is very sci-fi, let's imagine this idea and reverse that timeline, or scramble it up, so it's not necessarily linear. Maybe what is before and after is no body.

**DB** It's a beautiful thing to think about, and maybe it isn't so futuristic. I think this concept would still make most people uncomfortable—this countersite, this heterotopia of deviance within CGI programming. A lot of us are confused by the idea of creating a more perfect self online, which both implies that we have failed in some ways and also implies that perfection is possible. In physical culture we have become comfortable with a certain degree of vulnerability in our interactions with other people, but our technology says something different. It says, "No, we want perfection. We want data relay to be an easy process and relationships to be a simple, 'I care for you', 'you care for me' type of thing." There wouldn't be any kind of disruption within that perfect framework if it were up to technology. I think a lot of critiques of CGI and LARPing [live-action role-playing] have to do with the fact that we are simply replicating our existing conflicts and desires, we're not allowing ourselves room to be affected and changed in the face of the other, being able to change in accordance with other people's ideas and hopes for us. So, did you find that there's room for this kind of relationship, this kind of innovation and adaptation, within LARPing or virtual gaming?

**DH** One thing that I was thinking of when you were posing this question is Sherry Turkle's idea, which has come up in several of her books, about people playing either back in the day in MUDs (Multi-User Domains) or even now through Facebook, and how they may be driven by a pathology, and like you said, they may reenact and reinforce pre-existing pathologies. Or, they could be, as she puts it in the psychoanalytic tradition, "working through" a particular pathology that they're presenting. Either of these possibilities could happen on an individual or collective level. So, I believe there is room for positive change within all of these forms, be they LARP or virtual gaming. Jane McGonigal's work is a great example.

**DB** In this project you use dance to create an ethos of empowerment, but always alongside choreographed war games and battles. Can you talk about this space for choreographed movement in your work?

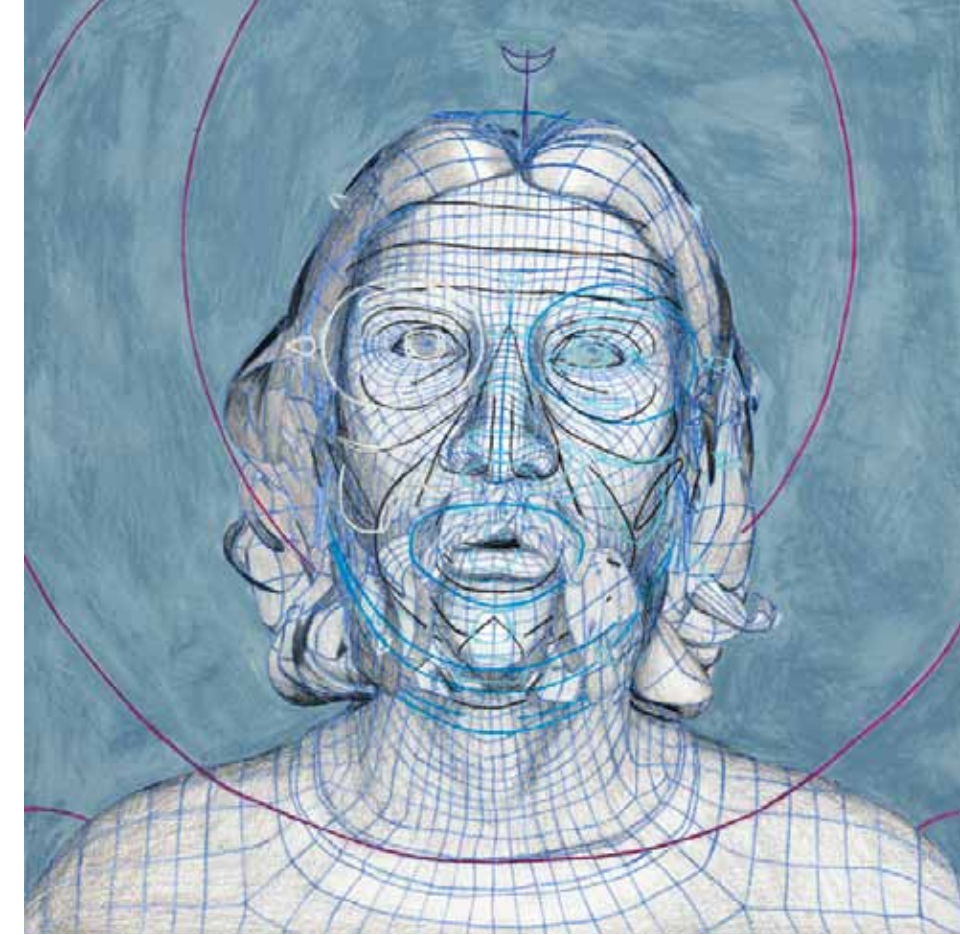
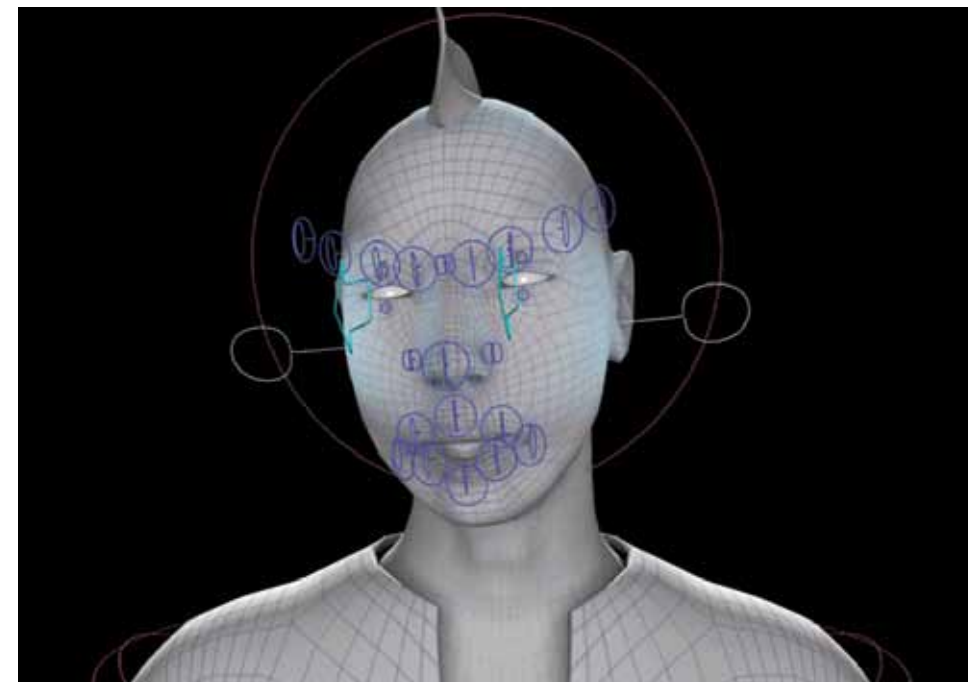
**DH** In this project I have included a LARP-inspired battle, which follows the rules of the dancing I've been using, whereby some of it is freeform and some of it

is choreographed; some of it shows the performers moving together in unity while other times performers are solo. But I'm really excited to hear you link the battling to the dancing. I hadn't thought of it that way, but it really clicks for me because in this project and throughout all my projects, I have been really interested in this personal and collective conflict between discord and harmony that is primarily represented by the dancing in the videos. Consider our ability as human beings to go back and forth constantly—to want harmony but act in discord in our personal lives and beyond. One of the themes in this project is this slamming back and forth between these spaces. I feel that battle is something that is prescribed in our biology, yet it is something that I believe we can transcend.

*Desirée Holman lives and works in Oakland, California. Her work has been exhibited internationally at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, Brazil; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Machine Project, Los Angeles; The Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Peekskill, New York; and BnD Studios in Milan. In 2007 she was honored with SFMOMA's biannual SECA Award and was also a resident at the Headlands Center for the Arts. She recently released her first self-titled catalog. Her work is in the permanent collections of numerous museums, including BAMPFA, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Hammer Museum.*

EXHIBITION CURATED BY PHYLLIS WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR ELIZABETH THOMAS

*Desirée Holman: video still from Heterotopias, 2010; three-channel HD video, 13 mins.; courtesy of the artist and Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.*



#### PUBLIC PROGRAM

##### Artist's Talk

Sunday, June 26, 3 p.m.  
Museum Theater,  
Reception follows in the Bancroft Lobby

ADMISSION FREE

The artist would like to thank Ben Bracamonte, CG lead technical director on *Heterotopias*.

The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; and the continued support of the BAMPFA Trustees.

FRONT Desirée Holman: *Cultural Atavisms (Diffuse Map)*, 2011; colored pencil and mixed media on paper; 40 × 40 in.; courtesy of the artist and Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.

ABOVE Desirée Holman: *Virtual Player Framework*, 2011; colored pencil and mixed media on paper; 19 × 19 in.; courtesy of the artist and Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.



## DESIRÉE HOLMAN HETEROTOPIAS

MATRIX 238 JUNE 26–SEPTEMBER 18, 2011  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM AND PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

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