The Real, the Fake, Jouissance, and Claudia Hart's *Caress*

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If you have ever wondered why children feel such a thrill to see their reflections in a mirror, if you have ever wondered what exactly is happening in your mind, in your body when you feel goose bumps, if you have ever wondered precisely how we understand the meanings of sentences only once the full stop has come and gone, if you have ever wondered why we feel such a mixture of elation and fear at the edge of a cliff, if you have ever wondered what is happening to our senses, to our minds, to our memories when we look at art, Lacan provides a place for beginning to answer such questions.

Lacan understands experience and its representations according to the three terms: Imaginary, Symbolic, Real.[1] I begin with a discussion of these three categories drawing on Lacan's writings; then I discuss *jouissance* in the work of art at hand.

Imaginary

Lacan discusses throughout his career the mirror stage as a quintessential component of the Imaginary. The mirror stage occurs in children from around six months of age to about a year and a half; it's a mistake to think that thereafter the mirror stage disappears. It certainly does not; it becomes transformed and subsumed by the Symbolic, becoming in fact its core, like the initial ring of a tree around which other rings grow. For Lacan, "it suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification* [emphasis Lacan's] in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes…an image – an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity's term, 'imago'" (Écrits, 76). The quintessential moment of the mirror stage occurs when we hold a small child up to a mirror or the face of the (m)other and seeing his / her extraordinarily delightful pleasure. For Lacan that pleasure is one of assuming an image as one's own, and it is at the heart of our ego formation through which we at once identify with an ideal image of the other and begin to form a sense of ourselves as independent of that other.

For Lacan it is crucial for human subjectivity that the jubilation of this assumption of the image of the other involves misrecognition: "[f]or the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority in which, to be sure, this form is more constitutive than constituted, but in which, above all, it appears to him as the contour of his stature that freezes it and in a symmetry that reverses it, in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it" (Écrits 76). This means that we enter the mirror stage and experience its jubilation at a stage of human development in which the prematurity of our birth is manifest. Once we learn to stand up and begin to master the movements of which our bodies are capable, we realize that what we had thought was our ideal image in the mirror of the other was simply a flat, two-dimensional mirage. Thus for Lacan there is an inherent ambivalence to the mirror stage as it resonates through our entire psychic development and maturity; there is, as it were, a tain in the mirror that will never go away.

To summarize: the Imaginary is the world of mutually exclusive, one-to-one binary oppositions of visual, acoustic, tactile, and corporal identifications with the other. The other (with a lower-case "o") is that strange replica of ourselves that we see in the world, at first the mother, other adults and siblings, and then others as we meet, imagine, remember and project them.

Symbolic

For Lacan, "we have here nothing more than an illuminating insight into the entrance of the individual into an order whose mass supports him and welcomes him in the form of language, and superimposes determination by the signifier onto determination by the signified in both diachrony and synchrony" (Écrits 35).[2] In other words, we are human as we speak language. Lacan and Lacanians know that children babble and that language develops throughout the Imaginary in terms of the acoustic mirror, its cries, and the developing orientation of the self as an entity inside a body that both contains, emits, and receives sound. Lacan focuses in the citation above and elsewhere, in the signifying chain set in motion by the signifier. The Symbolic with its quintessential feature of

language acquisition grows out of and grows around, as it were, the Imaginary. It can be seen as an answer to the gradual flattening of the mirror and the misrecognition it brings to the developing subject. That is, the mutually-exclusive binary opposition of presence and absence, plenitude and lack, of "black" and "white" becomes mediated through a world of "grey" in which we never have the object of desire completely, but we always have something incompletely – the signifier. Freud discovered precisely the same thing in his fort / da game that he observed his nephew playing. For Freud (the peekaboo game in English is an equivalent) when a child plays at tossing away a toy (fort) and then pulling it back (da); he / she has already made the crucial leap into language and the essence of culture – the ability to actively master through language an experience of loss that all children experience passively – the loss of the ubiquity and permanence of the mother's presence.[3]

For Lacan, "[f]ounding speech, which envelopes the subject, is everything that has constituted him, his parents, his neighbours, the whole structure of the community, and not only constituted him as symbol, but constituted him in his being. The laws of nomenclature are what determine…and channel the alliances from within which human beings copulate with one another and end up by creating, not only other symbols, but also real beings, who, coming into the world, right away have that little tag which is their name" (Lacan, II 20). The Symbolic is the world of language, of law, of social convention, and the names we have not only for things and ideas but for each other. And just as names are given to us at birth, we are born into the Symbolic and acquire the means to circulate in social space from it.

The Symbolic changes our relations with / to others. We relate to the other with a lower-case "o" as other in the Imaginary; we relate to this other in mutually-exclusive binary oppositions of presence / absence, plenitude / lack, black / white. It is a point-to-point system of binaries. We relate to the Other with an upper-case "O" as Other in the Symbolic; we respond to the call of the Other in ideological interpellation in which we are hailed into a wide array of social institutions; we enter into the world of speech with the Other.[4] We speak the language of the Other as bits in a random coin toss form

patterns: "[o]ne can grasp in its very emergence the overdetermination that is the only kind of overdetermination at stake in Freud's apperception of the symbolic function. Simply connoting with (+) and (-) a series playing on the sole fundamental alternative of presence and absence allows us to demonstrate how the strictest symbolic determinations accommodate a succession of coin tosses whose reality is strictly distributed 'by chance'" (Écrits 35).[5] The (+) stands for a signifier; the (-) stands for the difference between one signifier and another in a signifying chain. I introduce this potentially confusing example to make a point, and that has to do with the nature of binaries in the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

To summarize: in the Imaginary, binaries are one-to-one forms of identification; in the Symbolic, binaries are one-to-many signifiers distributed in punctuated series (plural). The Imaginary with its quintessential mirror stage inaugurates the developing subject into mutually-exclusive binary identifications of presence / absence, connection / separation through senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing and seeing in which the developing subject locates its being within a gradually forming boundary of skin, enclosing his / her body. As the Imaginary wanes, as the developing subject seeks relief from its relentless and unforgiving binaries, we enter the Symbolic in which we embrace the language into which we were born, hear ourselves in the call of the Other, and find ourselves in a network of signifiers.

Real

Throughout his writings, Lacan sometimes refers to the real, to reality, as we might refer intuitively to situations, conditions of experience that are actual and to which we need to accustom ourselves in order to function; he does this particularly in reference to the reality of the therapeutic situation in which one must, whether patient or analyst, deal with transference. Elsewhere, in his writings, he refers to the real much more in the special meaning it has acquired. I will refer to this meaning as the Real with an upper-case "r" to distinguish it from the more anecdotal reality with which we are more or less familiar. In reference to Freud's dream of Fliess giving his patient Irma and injection, Lacan suggest the following: "[t]here's a horrendous discovery here, that of the flesh one

never sees, the foundation of things, the other side of the head, of the face, the secretory glands par excellence, the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery, the flesh in as much as it is suffering, is formless, in as much as its form in itself is something which provokes anxiety. Spectre of anxiety, identification of anxiety, the final revelation of *you are this – You are this which is so far from you, this which is the ultimate formlessness* [emphasis Lacan's]" (Lacan, II 154-155). The Real is associated with the pulp thingness that supports Imaginary and Symbolic; we see, hear, feel, taste, and smell in registers of Imaginary binaries; we speak and respond to the call of the Other in the Symbolic, and as we do so the Real lurks just out of reach, beneath.[6] For Lacan, the Imaginary always flips its binary identifications that range from jubilant assumption of images to feelings of abject abandonment; the Symbolic is a network of perpetually sliding signifiers; the Real, on the other hand "is that which is always in the same place" (Lacan VII 70).

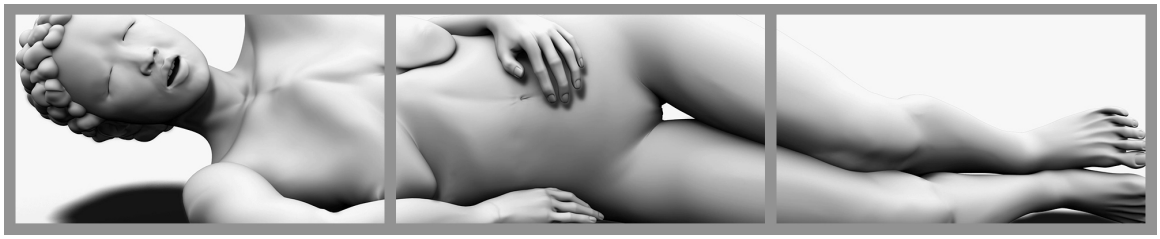
To summarize: the Lacanian Real is rather like the Kantian sublime – a pure thingness that underlies experience and surpasses our ability to describe or name it. It is the absolute, irreducible kernel of substance that supports everything we know. It is absolutely never seen, heard, tasted, smelled, touched, felt, or named in any way. By looking at the world and our experience awry, we sometimes get a glimpse of it, as Imaginary and / or Symbolic components of our experience are under sufficient strain. One can glimpse the Real as the Freudian uncanny, a sense that an experience, sensation, thought has been there before, displacing the epistemological security of things being where, when, how they should be, both in experience and in memory. If the Imaginary is the world of the other (with a lower-case "o") and the Symbolic is the world of the Other (with an upper-case "O"), then the Real is the world of alterity writ large as such that supports the two.

Caress (2011)

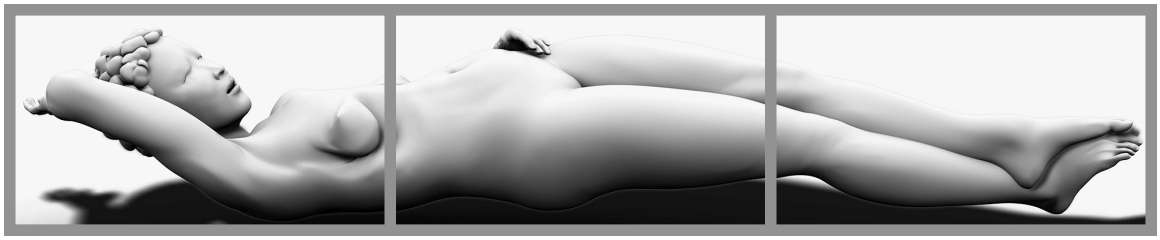
Claudia Hart's *Caress* (2011) is a 3D animation; I will write about a version that is 5 minutes and 50 seconds in length, with a simulation that makes it look as if the animation were split among three screens.[7] There is a female figure in black and white, lighted

from above. Throughout the work, the figure moves gently among five positions; see Examples 1 through 5:

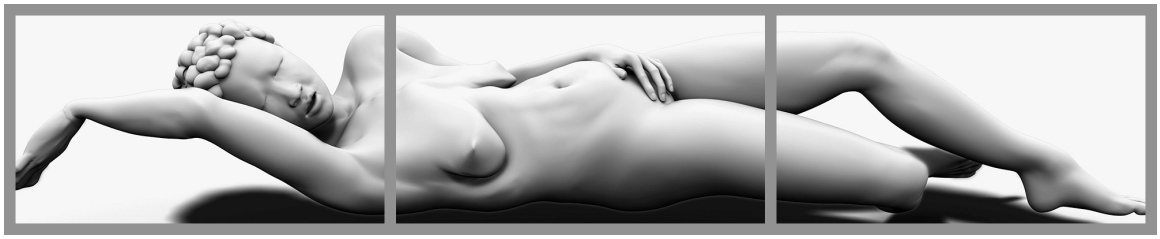
Example 1: *Caress* (2011) Pose A



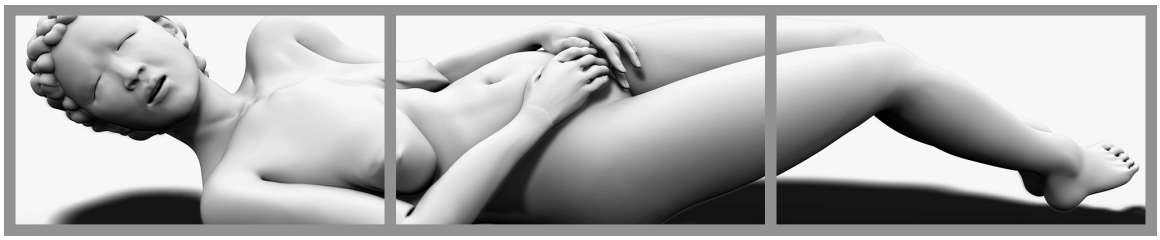
Example 2: *Caress* (2011) Pose B



Example 3: *Caress* (2011) Pose C



Example 4: *Caress* (2011) Pose D



Example 5: *Caress* (2011) Pose E

This version of the work has the figure moving within or just behind a confined space to which the viewer has access through three adjacent screens. These screens suggest the tryptich model that is common in western art.[8] The frame adds a mediating element to the work forcing the viewer to look through and around its confines, and within which the figure must move.[9] For me the confinement of the screens obtains more to the experience of viewing rather than of the figure moving; yes, she moves within its confines, but we can also see her limbs extend beyond the frame(s) without encountering resistance at their edges. As a mediating element, the frame heightens the erotic charge of the work, much like clothes highten the erotic charge of the body.[10] And frames suggest windows through which we look, a scenario of scopophillic pleasure.

The work moves in the following series: A B C D E C A D B E A; after an exposition of the five poses in order, there is a retrograde / rotation concluding with the A section. Each pose lasts around 16 seconds with around 16 seconds of transformation to the next pose. Nothing is sudden; nothing is curtailed; nothing is irregular. A sketch of the sequence of the work with poses, morphs, and time spans follows:

A = 0:00 to 0:16

morph from A to B = 0:17 to 0:34

B = 0:35 to 0:51

morph from B to C = 0:52 to 1:06

C = 1:07 to 1:22

morph from C to D = 1:23 to 139

D = 1:40 to 1:56

morph from D to E = 1:57 to 2:12

E = 2:13 to 2:29

morph from E to C′ = 2:30 to 2:47

C′ = 2:48 to 3:02

morph from C′ to A′ = 3:03 to 3:19

A′ = 3:20 to 3:35

morph from A′ to D′ = 3:36 to 3:52

D′ = 3:53 to 4:09

morph from D′ to B′ = 4:10 to 4:25

B′ = 4:26 to 4:41

morph from B′ to E′ = 4:42 to 4:58

E′ = 4:59 to 5:15

morph from E′ to A″ = 5:16 to 5:33

A″ = 5:33 to 5:50

After this sequence; the entire series moves in retrograde. According to the artist, the figure is based on a painting of Madame Recamier by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres. In Ingres, the female nude is reclining on a couch; for *Caress* Hart deleted the couch and modeled hair as if in small, rounded stones. The body breathes gently throughout, the limbs and fingers are clear and supple; the eyes are closed and lips gently parted in prolonged, auto affection. There is something erotic about this work; for me, it has to do with one of Lacan's most elusive concepts – *jouissance*.

Jouissance in Lacan

I begin with what *jouissance* is not; according to Lacan: "[r]egarding the status of jouissance [no italics], we must situate the false finality as corresponding to the pure fallacy of a jouissance that would supposedly correspond to the sexual relationship" (L XX 112). The sexual relationship is far from self-evident in Lacan; by distancing *jouissance* from the sexual relationship, Lacan is saying that it has nothing to do with orgasm (a meaning in everyday French for the word *jouissance*).

For Lacan, *jouissance* has to do with the signifier, the signifier as unary trait, as mark: "[w]hat is important is that, whether natural or not, it is well and truly as bound to the very origin of the signifier's coming into play that it is possible to speak of *jouissance*. Nobody will ever know anything about what the oyster or the beaver enjoys, because, in the absence of the signifier, there is no distance between *jouissance* and the body. The oyster and the beaver are at the same level as the plant, which, after all, perhaps may have

jouissance at this level. *Jouissance* is very precisely correlated with the initial form of the entry into play of what I am calling the mark, the unary trait, which is a mark toward death…" (L XVII 177). The signifier paradoxically marks the body and separates it from the subject whom it divides; this is one way to understand *jouissance* for Lacan.

Since *jouissance* lingers where this mark that divides the subject occurs, it is closely related to drive; "[t]he problem involved is that of *jouissance*, because *jouissance* presents itself as buried at the center of a field and has the characteristics of inaccessibility, obscurity and opacity; moreover, the field is surrounded by a barrier which makes access to it difficult for the subject to the point of inaccessibility, because *jouissance* appears not purely and simply as the satisfaction of a need but as the satisfaction of a drive" (L VII 209). For Lacan (think of his famous broken circle or "net"), drive is both produced and impeded by a fissure, a gap, in the psychic apparatus. Drive has nothing to do with need, with energy, with instinct; drive has to do with a structure that paradoxically propels and impedes psychic activity. Think of the broken circle; the gap both impedes the circulation of psychic energy; it also propels action around it. It's rather like a circuit in an electrical device; a short circuit fries everything, while a proper management of resistance will allow a device to function till its parts fail or the energy source weakens. The psychic appartatu is more of less like that latter device; and the resistor is like the gap that both produces and impedes its drive.

I think what makes *jouissance* so difficult to grasp is that it is less a thing with features and attributes than a place, a condition under which things may or may not happen. In discussing the origins of the utterance of the first person pronoun by God, Lacan says: "*I* am in the place from which 'the universe is a flaw in the purity of Non-Being' is vociferated. And not without reason, for, by protecting itself, this place makes Being itself languish. This place is called *Jouissance*, and it is *Jouissance* whose absence would render the universe vain" (L E 694). *Jouissance* is at the place at which the unary signifier both divides the subject and calls him / her into being, and for Lacan it is crucially prohibited. This prohibition is at the heart of the Law. For Lacan it is as if we require two kinds of prohibition in order for the Law to function – a prohibition, and the

lifting of that prohibition. What the lifting of a prohibition gives us is not freedom, but a stronger prohibition; *jouissance* resides where the double negative of a lifted prohibition simply strenthens the prohibition at the heart of the Law: "[a]ll the mystery is in that act [the murder of the father]. It is designed to hide something, namely, that not only does the murder of the father not open the path to *jouissance* that the presence of the father was supposed to prohibit, but it, in fact, strenghtens the prohibition. The whole problem is there; that's where, in fact as well as in theory, the fault lies. Although the obstacle is removed as a result of the murder, *jouissance* is still prohibited; not only that, but the prohibition is reinforced" (L VII 176).

Since *jouissance* is prohibited as foundational for the Law and since the removal of prohibition simply increases prohibition's own power, then *jouissance* is something remote, removed, silent, hidden, exceptional. This is what Lacan means in the following: "[i]n effect, if *jouissance* is forbidden, then it is clear that it only comes into play by chance, an initial contingency, an accident. The living being that ticks over normally purrs along with pleasure. If *jouissance* is unusual, and if it is ratified by having the sanction of the unary trait and repetition, which henceforth intitutes it as a mark – if this happens, it can only originate in a very minor variation in the sense of *jouissance*" (L XVII 50). It is as if it is right before we are about to die that *jouissance* might be glimpsed, and this controlled proximity to death is crucial for Lacan and his reading of de Sade. This death at which *jouissance* might be glimpsed is the famous second death: "the second death imagined by de Sade's heroes – death insofar as it is regarded as the point at which the very cycles of the transformations of nature are annihilated" (L VII 248).

Caress (2011) and *Jouissance*

Lacan associates *jouissance* with the signifier, the mark, that divides the subject, and it does so at the body. The signifier is a controlled inscription, and for me, one of the most powerfully erotic dimensions of *Caress* resides in its control, its order, its pacing, and its command. Hart moves this figure in 500 frame increments from pose to pose and holds her in each pose for 500 frame increments, within a serial, rotational structure that moves forward and then backwards in retrograde.[11] There is a gentle, erotic intensity in this

control of a representation of a female nude in a series of poses and transitions; the work is like a chant of long whole notes and whole rests, one after the other.

The work's cyclical structure evokes drive. The "A" pose begins and ends the work as a loop. The psychoanalytic loop of course has a flaw, a fissure, a gap that at once sets it into motion and blocks its potential for immaculate closure. For me the fissure in *Caress* is embodied in the figure which on the one hand evokes a woman (she is subtly Asian, and her body is modelled with a classical attention to anatomy and how a body breathes) and on the other evokes an alien (the hair is collected into stone-like shapes, and her head rests as if on the couch that is missing with no signs of muscular strain in her neck, and the absence of hair makes her look like a sculpture).[12] There is an invisible, seamless seam (to name the paradox head on) at which these two registers become one another and merge in the body of the female figure in *Caress*. And Lacanian *jouissance* is at that place.

For me, another dimension of drive (and an erotic drive to be more precise) resides in the agency of movement in the work. Imagine a very different scene. Imagine that a viewer is watching a video in which an artist shoots a video of a woman assuming poses and holding them in 16 second increments behind a screen; in this conventional, scopophilic scenario we have a series of frames within frames: artist, viewer, screen, woman. One can quibble about which frame is within which other frame, but what we would have in such a scopophillic scenario is the visual equivalent of frame narration in which imagery becomes marked, and transformed (by that mark) at each stage of mediation. Or: the artist sees what the viewer sees as it is mediated by the frame to reveal the (triply removed representation of the) woman. For me one of the breath-taking dimensions of *Caress* is that these frames have been severely compressed; the viewer's eyes are surrogates for the artist's eyes as she not only looks at but animates the figure. There are to be sure poses and camera positions, but the artist has written the code that animates both the figure and our look at her. For me the prohibition of the work lies at once in the power with which the artist draws our eyes into the work as surrogates for her own, and

the distance that she creates between the work and the position from which we (must) see and (not) touch.[13]

Lacan says that *jouissance* is exceptional; unlike simple orgasm, or even erotic pleasure, it is a threshold phenomenon that recurs right at the place of the mark of the signifier upon the body. Taking Lacan's discussion of de Sade into account, one might even say that *jouissance* is singular, something to be glimpsed in an instant right before death. And such is the second death, the moment at which the subject knows that he / she is dead. For Lacan, the second death comes before the first: "…being a psychoanalyst, I can see that the second death is prior to the first, and not after, as de Sade dreams" (L XVII 67).

The figure in lives, as it were, between two deaths – a death that would cease her animation, and the more interesting second death that might reveal to her in a flash of *jouissance* the contingency of the mark of that animation itself. During the entire animation, her mouth is open, her forehead delicately knotted in concentration; she is in a state of prolonged rapture. And although one pose in particular evokes auto-affection of an auto-erotic nature (pose D), the emotion for me is one of a prolonged anticipation of *jouissance* – of seeing the mark in the instant before death. An interested, male, heterosexual, Lacanian, de Sadean viewer might say to her: "Should you awaken, or simply open your eyes, I will not tell you that you are dead, for then you would surely die."[14]

In summary: *jouissance* might be glimpsed at the threshold between the Symbolic and the Real. We might see it in an instant before a release of the tie that binds us to the signifier, at that place where it does so – the body. In *Caress*, Hart has captured, mastered, and animated that moment and *and at* that place.

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[1] I capitalize the terms that are Lacanian in meaning in order to distinguish them from either more commonly assumed colloquial meanings, or meanings that refer to other systems of thought. For another introduction to these terms, see Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

[2] For an elementary description of the basic semiotics upon which the Symbolic depends, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*. Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Translated by Roy Harris. (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1983). For Saussure, the sign comprises a binary opposition of signifier and signified. The word "t r e e" is a signifier that points to a signified—an idea of a tree in the mind of a listener. Saussure's sign is binary and balanced; like a piece of paper, if you cut one side of the sign, you cut the other. For Lacan, the sign is not symmetrical but profoundly asymmetrical. Signifiers slide perpetually along signifying chains, reaching a wide range of signifieds along the way.
[3] See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated and Edited by James Strachey. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), 13-17.
[4] For a detailed account of hailing, see Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy*. Translated by Ben Brewster. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971). See also Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (New York and London: Verso, 1994), "Superego by Default", 54-61.
[5] For a helpful explanation of both how Lacan's coin toss can be seen to underwrite the Symbolic, see Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 179, n. 6.
[6] There's a scene from *The Matrix* in which Morpheus shows Neo, the real world—a horrific dystopia of ruin that is the material support for the illusory code with the Matrix dupes its subjects. This scene is often taken to be an illustration of the Lacanian Real. What doesn't work in this illustration is the fact that a paranoid, anti-technological imperative underlies the film, *The Matrix*. There is an essentialism behind the notion that there is such a thing as an authentic human, an irreducible essence that is somehow at odds with the world of coded meanings. The film for all its interest shows us a quintessentially Cartesian, post-adolescent, humanist subject.
[7] I thank the artist for information relating to the composition of this work, the five screen shots above, and for access to video documentation of this work.
[8] Tryptich paintings can be found throughout western art history, but one of the more prominent uses was in religious paintings of the Middle Ages; Hart's use of three screens to evoke the tryptich subtly evokes an image of religious rapture. See http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/t/triptych.html; accessed July 29, 2011.
[9] Hart suggests that the confines are "a box like a prison or a coffin"; the citation is from a private e-mail message sent summer 2011.
[10] See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 10.
[11] Earlier I refer to approximately 16 seconds for each pose and each morph between poses; the artist reports that while this approximation holds, there are actually 500 frames for each increment. The citation is from a private e-mail message sent summer 2011.
[12] One might be tempted to call her a new and subtle cyborg – part human / part machine. The cyborg was introduced to western cultural discourse by Donna Haraway; see Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991). For Haraway the part-human, part-machine cyborg held revolutionary

potential for women. For me the association though evocative is tangential to Hart's work.

[13] In my fantasy scenario there would still be one dimension of erotic control that is also present in *Caress* – the will of the artist that animates the figure in controlled poses in which she obeys, acquiesces. There is a particularly powerful erotic charge to the serial mastery of erotic images. Think of the alphabetical order of elements of Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, or *Reigen* by Arthur Schnitzler. In this book, a chain of erotic vignettes are linked to one another in a loop that returns at its conclusion to its beginning.

[14] I do not mean to imply that these categories in some way limit the apprehension of this work; rather, I imply that I need to take some responsibility for my own desire in relation to this work.