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*"Sharing in the trickery of the automaton is merely another way to define ourselves as human, that is, as both being and nothingness, presence and absence: the automaton is, in a way, our mirror...or our evil eye."*²

"Mother on Trial" is a work in video and digital art which addresses infanticide or filicide and the institution of motherhood as it is defined in the United States. The work, which includes documentary and experimental media, seeks to address why mothers kill their children and the public opinion surrounding these acts. Countering the commonly held notion that filicidal mothers are either mad or bad (evil), the writer Michelle Oberman suggests that infanticide "may be seen as a response to the societal construction of and constraints upon mothering..."³ In an essay by feminist criminologists, Allison Morris and Ania Wilczynski, they suggest that pathologizing filicide as a female "sickness", rather than looking at the social conditions conducive to filicide, aids in strengthening the definition of "good" or "bad" mothers, further controlling the behaviors of all women and mothers.⁴ Mother on Trial further investigates the system of justice and punishment in United States, and the public desire for retribution. When a mother kills, how much should she pay?

The act of a mother killing her children is understood to be one of the most monstrous acts a woman could commit, as our notion of a good mother is one who protects and loves her children at all costs in every moment. When a mother fails to hold to these standards of selfless service or manifests less than perfect love, she feels and is described as a bad mother. Above all else, when a mother murders her children, she is not simply a person on trial, but a mother on trial. In other words, her identity as a good or a bad mother is the focus in the court of law.

In 1999, I attended the trial of a woman, Susan Eubanks, who killed her four children in San Marcos, California in 1997. During her trial it was apparent that the discourse of the good mother, as it is defined in the United States, was never challenged. As a matter of fact, it was used by both the prosecution and the defense in her trial and sentencing. Susan was a single working mother with five children in her care. What she wore the night of the murders, if she baked cookies or served hot meals were repeatedly referenced by the lawyers. The questions asked about her domestic abilities, (were the children's birthday cakes store-bought or homemade?) were used as evidence in support or in denial of her fitness as a good mother. Store-bought cakes--the death penalty. Home-baked cakes--life in prison. In 1999 she was given the death penalty.

During the last few years, I have carried on a correspondence with Susan and have visited her in prison where she is on death row. She does not want to avoid her death penalty, as she says, "the lethal injection cannot come soon enough." However, she doesn't want to be silenced until her death about why she murdered her sons, or what happened in her trial, or how the lack of resources can lead to these kinds of crimes. As she says, "That my voice was missing in my trial is right on target. If you asked me why I did what I did, it was out of a sense of

protection, yes, absolutely. It is called extended suicide. I could not make the distinction of them being their own persons as they were an extension of me...so I could not leave them behind."⁵

Mother on Trial has several different manifestations, one of which is the video, "Gathering Voices in the Theater of Attraction". "Gathering Voices" uses dialogues downloaded from chat rooms during the weeks following Andrea Yates' drowning of her children in 2000. I reconstruct scenes of these "cyber" characters having dialogues about this crime through the use of 3-D character animation and spoken text. The characters are simplified and lack dimensionality, leaving the viewer with an experience of unstable identification. Occupying placeless sets, fields of text or layers of stock footage, they act on the threshold of place. In these chat rooms, they speak their deepest thoughts, some calling for the mother's slow and tortured death, others admitting they, too, have felt her despair in their own lives. In these public spaces of moral expression, values take shape, anger and fear grows, and retribution designed. These animations, these puppets, are proxies for human emotion.

The trials of filicidal mothers take place against the back drop of popular culture and media which produce clichés and stereotypes the public can invest in. Magazines, newspapers and tabloids announce that these murderous women are monsters, sex-crazed, evil. Their characterizations are created in opposition to what "good" motherhood looks like, which is equally stereotypical. What Suzanne wore the night of the murders was described by the deputy who found her. She wore a T-shirt and underwear, with no bra. The prosecutor, Bonnie Howard-Reagan, grilled the deputy for more details. What kind of panties? How small were they? What color were they? The mother's inappropriate attire was further evidence of her "badness" as a sexualized being.

The second section of "Gathering Voices", incorporates scenes from a Law and Order episode about infanticide. The belief in the "real" characters of the TV show is ruptured by the periodic overlay of the animated figures which interrupt the seamless flow of the drama of the TV show with its clichés, stereotypes and conventions. It is this moment when the illusion is broken which allows for critical reflection of the issues. These figurative simulations employ attraction and illusion to disrupt the normal modes of spectator identification and cinematic realism, suspending the viewer between belief and disbelief, desire and repulsion, truth and image.

Animation is like puppetry; its power exists between the real and the illusion. The puppets imitate the artificial and transcend it through their hyperbolic realism. In these animations, I try to exploit the weirdness of cybernetic flesh. How much *is* the voice embodied in the form of a vacant puppet when the movement is unnatural, sliding and jerking across the stage? My hope is that the voice is thrown, not from the ventriloquist to the puppet but from the puppet to the viewer. When dealing with these difficult issues surrounding infanticide, to break with realism, the so called "naturalized" screen space of believable actors and action, and instead offer a text and image-figure without boundaries (or having what I call "weird flesh") may serve to distance the viewer enough from his or her own investment in the subject matter to consider all possible angles--even those counter to some of our most deep seated beliefs. In their artificial state, they both call into

question their believability and at the same time allow us, the viewers, to assign them agency.

The animations create "estranged familiarity" or Brechtian alienation (Verfrumdungseffekt). I remember experiencing this when watching a Japanese Bunraku puppet play. Not only were the less-than-lifer-size puppets on stage, but also the three puppet masters or handlers for each puppet were on the stage as well. One for the head and right arm, one for the left arm, and one for the feet. The dark figures behind the puppets were and were not simultaneously part of the action. The puppets were both imbued with agency (the power to make things happen) and robbed of autonomy (self-rule or self-movement). The contemporary animator/computer is not unlike the traditional puppeteers in that animator/algorithm is always part of the puppet. Chickamatsu, the famous 17th century playwright for Bunraku puppet plays or ningyojoruri, said, "Art is something which lies in the slender margins between the real and the unreal". Writing for a new merchant class no longer interested in historical drama, but rather interested in practices of street-storytelling, ballads, gossip and above all the love suicides or "shinju", Chickmatsu wrote for puppets who said things real people would not say but yet that are the truth.

Borrowing from the rules of Bunraku puppetry, I have tried to utilize abstract movement to express human emotion in a highly stylized way. Some of these rules are:

- When a puppet calls out another's name it points at the skies with its hand.
- To walk softly the body should be bent and the thighs lifted; to walk in darkness the hands are extended.
- When asking a question a puppet steps forward; in making a refusal it steps back. To show fear the face looks right and left.
- The female puppet wipes away her tears by moving her face, the male by moving his hand.
- Tears may be wiped away with the left hand once in every three times, but if the puppet has its back turned to the audience, the left hand may only be used once during the course of a play.
- To express understanding the head must be bent; for astonishment, it is raised upwards.
- A puppet leans backward to relate a story, and to listen to one, bends forward.
- A male puppet moves his shoulders in laughter; a female puppet bends her head with her sleeve before her mouth.
- A great master does not move his puppet if there is no reason to do so.
- It is bad for a puppet to stand idle after speaking, but it is worse for it to move unnaturally.

The theater of attraction is that place of negative fascination. In the words of one observer of these animations, "Those figures, those puppets, they give you that feeling of "oh, no, it's happening again"; they make you want to watch and not watch at the same time." The Internet is a site of public opinion and self-expression in this theater. These chat rooms, from which I have borrowed the dialogues about such difficult subjects, are theaters of attraction with the audience itself acting on the stage of cyberspace. Marshall Soules refers to the process of communicating with networked computers as the "technology of the stage" in which the performance is for someone, even if that someone is the self.⁶ The networked computer becomes an apparatus for performing social codes, expressing sensations of fear, anger or sadness, a place to work out social conscience or relieve oneself of moral responsibility. In the words of

Brenda Laurel, computers are mediums⁷, with people acting as agents in representational space. Maybe, after all, then, the computer, if it is a medium, is both the puppet and the stage.

¹ Originally presented at International Symposium on Electronic Art, Nagoya, Japan, 2002

² Jean-Claude Beaune, "The Classical Age of Automata: An Impressionistic Survey from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century", Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part I, edited by Michel Feher, (Zone, 1989), 437.

³ Cheryl L. Meyer and Michelle Oberman, Mothers Who Kill Their Children, Understanding the Acts of Moms from Susan Smith to the "Prom Mom", (New York University Press, 2001), 2.

⁴ Allison Morris and Ania Wilczynski, "Rocking the Cradle, Mothers who kill their children", Moving Targets, Women, Murder and Representation, edited by Helen Birch, (University of California Press, 1994)

⁵ Eubanks letter, dated..

⁶ Marshall Soules, "Animating the Language Machine: Computers and Performance", *Journal for Computing in the Humanities*. 36.3, August, 2002. 319-344.

⁷ Brenda Laurel, Computers as Theatre. Reading, MA, USA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991.