Plastic Tomorrow / Jeffrey Stuker

"The twenty-ninth floor housed a wide assortment of technical newspapers and magazines, most of them published monthly, ranging from *Sportland* to *The Frozen Age* (food products), The *Actuary* (vital statistics), *Frequency* (radio and television), and *Plastic Tomorrow*."

— Kenneth Fearing, *The Big Clock*

The magazine described by George Stroud (the novel's main character) constitutes one of many periodicals owned under the monopolies that became the norm in the 20th century. An entire floor of a giant high-rise in Manhattan is purportedly dedicated to every aspect of objective spirit: eating, decor, work, sports, crime. To this application of a mechanical algorithm to what was once called culture (in good faith), Fearing gives the name, *The Big Clock*.

Plastic Tomorrow, which has the merit of sounding like a drunk joke, has become, through the continuous turning of the gears, Reality Today. This is to say the fantasy of a future cast in the mold of post-war commodity production helps to explain the destruction of the objective conditions of daily life that our parents' generation put up with (frozen and microwaveable meals), the dismantling of public transport, defunding of museums and libraries, the privatization of education. Any claims to the unified human subject once imagined within these conditions sound like pure ululations from a long-dead language. This Plastic Tomorrow has been presented to their children as a simple reality to which they must adapt.

It would appear that to the citizens of Plastic Tomorrow signs of wear and the settling of dust, constitute a significant transgression against the order of things—blister packs for toys, plastic casings around trivial hair clips that cost less than their packaging, safety packaging around ink-cartridges that have already been packaged in two layers of plastic. Then there are the second skins, or packaging for the body—in particular, the manufacturing of a feminine body. If one had to abbreviate this history into a single word, this one would suffice: nylons. It came to signify the instant when the modulation of the body by artificial constructions named itself, and then promptly withdrew into that unremarkable zone where meaning is obscured by constant use.

Tomorrow has aged badly. As it has offgased boredom with its carcinogens, the question has become one of the inability to distinguish organic from inorganic matter, the made from the unmade. This is the question Lakshmi Luthra's photographs raise with each of their still life compositions. Her images are comprised of detritus shed by the human organism and retail commerce merging before the lens. In *All Supply, no. 5 (2016)* for example, black nylons wrap tightly around bars of soap. Caught in the grid of their weave, small hairs of different lengths, variously coiled, cling in white. The hairs, and what appear to be small flakes of skin find an echo within the composition in the hangtags for gloves behind them made of milky white plastic. The tags, which came from the gloves piled in black to the far left of the composition, leave the status of mere utility as they begin to resemble, after a minute of looking at his composition, question marks piled and pointing to the stockings in the foreground.

In her trademark stockings pulled to tightly squeeze her upper thighs, Betty Boop played dentist in *Ha Ha Ha* of 1934. Through heavily retouched photographs rotoscoped to match cel-animation, Betty stepped out of the surface upon which she had been drawn and into the reality

of the animator's desk, where, just before, a diminutive clown dipped his finger in the upper layer of a chocolate bar and, sampling it, gave himself a whopper of a toothache. Within this reality--which is, of course, only a more painstakingly animated construction--Betty hoists a pen to draw a dentist office on the very surface from which she has, moments before, emerged. She and her clown step into it. Without spoiling the plot, one can describe the drama that unfolds next: the pliers Betty will use to remove the bad tooth and a set of dentures fight to the death, animated by their own will (or perhaps that of Betty, who, after all, invented this tableau). The laugher of Ha Ha Ha comes from this opening of the dentures repeatedly in an attempt to flee the instrument that resembles them too well. Echoing *Ha Ha Ha* Luthra's *All Supply, no. 2* (2016) depicts a lint roller bereft of its adhesive film (referring comically to the dust and hair all around the composition). It has been captured in a life and death struggle with a retail perfume box made of black velvet sorely in need of a dusting. The emplotment of these two items that need each other echoes the Betty Boop animations at the level of narrative. But visually there can be no mistake: the pink satin within the box appears as if it will begin to salivate at any moment.

In each of these compositions the cotton based fabric Duvetine has been used to create the dark backdrop upon which the assembled materials pose. Used widely in set-design and product photography to absorb light and to disappear, in these photographs the material has been lit and exposed with such care that it becomes a nameable element, rather than a neutral ground. One characteristic of Duvetine is its ability to gather dust and whatever else the photographer might shed while working with it. Under normal lighting conditions, such as one finds in the pages of the magazines described on the 29th floor of *The Big Clock*, the few specs that showed through would have been easily removed by the hand of the photo retoucher.

Five years before the appearance of *Ha Ha Ha*, Walter Benjamin transcribed reflections on Mickey Mouse from a conversation he had with Kurt Weill and Gustav Gluck. In the short text, an unfinished fragment published long after his death, Benjamin grasps the strange and utopian possibility of a body that can continue to move after the natural conditions that once animated it had been destroyed. "Mickey Mouse," he writes, "proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being. He disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind." However, the shedding of the resemblance to a human being in Mickey Mouse does not mean that resemblance as such has been disavowed. Quite to the contrary, survival depends upon the body's adaptation to the nexus of man-made things. To explain the immense popularity of these animated films Benjamin relates that the audience is not misunderstanding their historical condition through fantasy but rather finding their resemblance in the constant modulations of these black and white creatures: "the public recognizes its own life in them."

If plastic the noun describes something of "the sex appeal of the inorganic" that has overtaken public life, plastic, the modulating adjective, attests to the potential modification of all matter through its description and representation. This has been accomplished through the production of semi-conductors that replace film and developing labs, the development of software and computer hardware that allow for the removal and replacement of any piece of anatomy, or, importantly, the removal of all dust from a scene. Captured with the highest resolution digital photography equipment, Luthra's photographs approach this "plasticity" of form engendered in contemporary representation. And it is this same plasticity and modularity that Jonathan Bruce Williams explores in his work.

As the contemporary extension of Mickey's world, where it is possible to have "one's own arm, even one's own body, stolen" — because modularity also means replaceability — Williams has modeled and animated arrays of hands, on the computer. From these models, first animated in virtual space, Williams has set them turning as 3D prints in mechanical space. The resemblance of the mechanisms he has designed to horological inventions from the era of the first clocks extends this technical model into the past. Looking at *Dodecagonal Somatoform of the Antebrachium and Manus, 2016*, the viewer may recall the first paintings of time-reckoning instruments as they appear in parchment miniatures. The miniature in Heinrich Seuse's *Horologium Sapientiae* of 1339, for example, shows a disconcertingly anatomical arm affixed to the face of a medieval clock, pointing to a numeral in the manner that, much later, would become second nature as the "hour hand." This arm may have a far reach, but the connection between the clockwork mechanism and animation is hardly a stretch: long before "motion picture" the word cinema was used by physics to define the play of forces used in the design of clocks.

Plastic Tomorrow counts as but one small volume in an entire floor given over to magazines alone. *The Big Clock*, which corresponds closely with Time Life, represents, with its allegorical turnings, the transformation of culture into an algorithm. The exact contemporary of The Big Clock, or Time-Life--Walt Disney, the inventor of Mickey's replaceable arm, lies cryogenically frozen awaiting his reanimation. In the meantime, Ed Catmull has taken over. In 1972 he made the first computer animation of the human hand by drawing polygons onto a plaster cast then mapping those polygons onto a simulation of three-dimensional space in the computer. This relationship becomes clearer when one realizes that the algorithms Catmull used to render his hand have became the basis of most animations one sees today--what is called the Catmull-Clark Subdivision Surface. The white hand that he animated not only looks like Mickey's, somewhat bulbous in its white glove, it *is* Mickey's: Catmull is now the head of Disney Animation Studios.

Just as the replaceable arm of this electro-mechanically animated body has a long history, so too do its legs. In *Twin Dodecagonal Somatoforms of the Membrum Inferius* (2016) Williams has intervened in the long arc that this movement traces among sets of legs that dance in perfect unison, seemingly interchangeable between the bodies that hover above them. Instead of the tights that must be worn by dancers to ensure a unity of skin tone and muscular tissue, in Williams' sculpture the legs have been made from a polymer that gives 3D printed forms inorganic unity all the way through. They share the material status of nylon leg coverings from the inside out. It is this de-personalized unity of legs moving without resistance or difference toward which the cinema aspired, years after the depiction of the can-can became a cliché in painting. Looking at *Twin Dodecagonal Somatoforms of the Membrum Inferius* the viewer may recall the famous sequence orchestrated by Busby Berkely in *42nd Street* (1933) where the legs of the dancers create a bodily aperture dilating in perverse mimicry of the lens through which they are filmed.

Finding ways to replicate body-parts ad-infinitum has long been a goal of advertisements too. Now computer generated animations allow for the simulation of entire bodies, often passing under the eyes of the spectator unnoticed.* Their mechanical rhythm was parodied in the inane clomping of multi-colored legs in platform shoes in Godard's *Tout Va Bien* (1972), for example, which depicts the choreography of Dim advertisements for nylons. In 2014 Luthra began to explore this mechanization of legs in general — and the Dim advertisements in particular — in

her film *Nothing and No One*. This overlap with Williams' work hints at one of the iconographic connections Maayan Strauss must have made between the works of these two artists.

Poly, the name of the show that Strauss has used to solidify this connection, refers to the chemical composition of plastics, as polymers, but also to multivalence in general. It points to potentiality as such, to the plasticity of a tomorrow the present had not already formed in its vacuum-mold. With their focus on the way technologies of perception tend to morselize our bodies (psychically and physically)—the disembodied arms, the skin flecks, the arms turning without a shoulder, the hairs without a scalp—the challenge this exhibition poses to the visitor is to regard these morsels of bodies from any standpoint other than despair. After speaking with his friends at some length about Mickey Mouse's animations, Benjamin wrote: "In such a world, it is not worthwhile to have experiences."

*Footnote:
For the most recent example, see the advertisement for Galaxy chocolate bars running in the UK, which composites a simulation of Audrey Hepburn into live-action footage.