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Lili Reynaud-Dewar

PARIS,
at Kamel Mennour

by Mostafa Heddaya (/Search/Mostafa+Heddaya/)




Lili Reynaud-Dewar:
*Teeth, Gums,
Machines, Future,
Society*, 2016, video,
36 minutes; at Kamel
Mennour.

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Lili Reynaud-Dewar's exhibition "Teeth, Gums, Machines, Future, Society," comprising a video and a sculpture installation, focused on the grill, a decorative metal plate over the front teeth, pluralized as "grillz" or "fronts"—American rap culture's version of a tradition of dental adornment stretching back at least two-and-a-half millennia and spanning societies as disparate as the Maya, Etruscan, and Viking.

In the half-hour-long, quasi-documentary video that was the exhibition's lodestar, the talking heads of Reynaud-Dewar's interviewees are often shown in close-up. Their mouthy half-faces speak through grillz with which the artist had them fitted, each uneasily flashing their finery. The setting is Memphis, Tennessee, where, during a residency, Reynaud-Dewar began connecting the materialist and feminist propositions in Donna Haraway's 1984 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" to the city's racial and labor history. The specific incidents that the artist draws upon are Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1968 speech to striking sanitation union workers and his assassination the day after, which are addressed in the video via imagery of trash and a critical discussion of King's legacy. The thumping bass of the video's hip-hop and electronic soundtrack, coupled with interspersed B-roll footage of Memphis streets, recalls the gangster-rap music videos that popularized grillz at the end of the last century.

The human encounters Paris-based Reynaud-Dewar (b. 1975) orchestrated in Memphis between a diverse group of local spoken-word and comedy performers (along with an electronic noise musician) supply the video's narrative. Their responses to Reynaud-Dewar's questions often lead to a freewheeling discursivity. "The concept of a woman as a cyborg is kind of offensive to me, because women are characterized as overly emotional or compassionate,"



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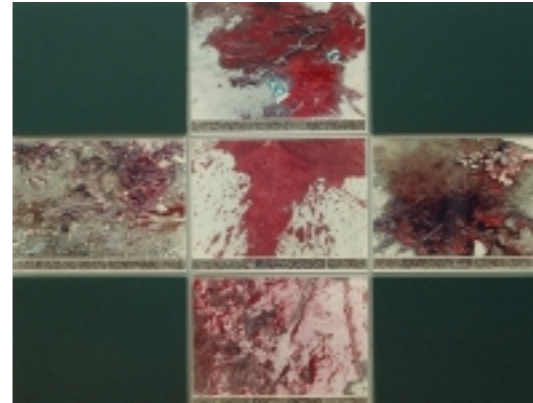
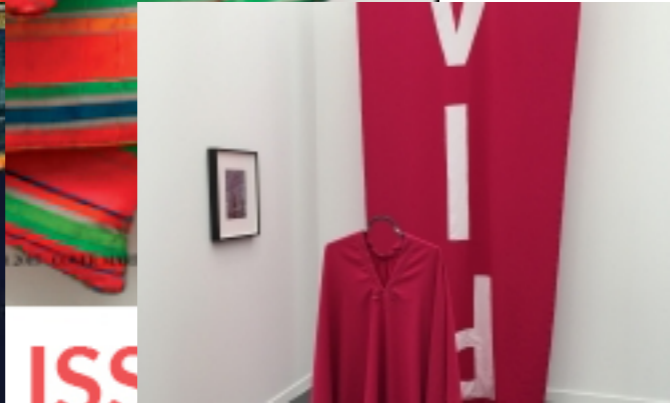
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says one woman. Even though she later resolves this objection, the element of doubt renders the exchange speculative but not conclusive, a critical riff rather than a polemic.

A separate gallery displayed six works for which the grillz designed for Reynaud-Dewar’s participants were enlarged to body width, cast in aluminum, and affixed to waist-high poles. The hollows of the grillz are stuffed with the refuse generated over the course of the video’s production—cigarette cartons, paper cups, etc. This detritus also littered the gallery floor, which was carpeted with posters depicting the performance in a Memphis band shell that is the culminating point of the video. In rare moments of computer-generated intervention, the same garbage floats ethereally on-screen. In the band shell scene, the artist reads Haraway’s manifesto from a high stool while her interlocutors converse beneath her, resulting in a cacophonous, incoherent layering of speech.

The different ideas at play in “Teeth, Gums, Machines, Future, Society” felt less calcified than opened up by this strategy of associative accumulation. While “conspicuous consumption accentuates the surface politics of the mouth,” as artist Deanna Havas writes in a brief yet dynamic text accompanying the exhibition, the “conspicuous” historical facts Reynaud-Dewar invokes seem to trouble the past just as the grillz trouble the mouth. These parallel procedures refocus the testifying, narrating mouth as a lexicon in itself, encoding as it codes—and so glittering grillz come not to adorn hidden incisors and cuspids but rather to represent the occluded legibility of the historical violence that haunts Memphis.



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