

CARISSA RODRIGUEZ: The Maid
By Andreas Petrossiants — April 4, 2018



Carissa Rodriguez, *The Maid* (still), 2018. 4K video with sound, 12:22 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Karma International, Zurich/Los Angeles.

In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions.

—Marcel Duchamp, 1957

Becoming an author is a process of subjectivation, and so is becoming a soldier, becoming a cashier, becoming a potted plant.

—Bernadette Corporation, 2004

If one were to walk into the exhibition **Carissa Rodriguez: The Maid in the SculptureCenter's large, ground floor gallery** without reading the introductory wall text, it would be reasonable to imagine the works were contributed by three different artists. Two very different films and a series of five silver gelatin prints seem to demonstrate, somewhat opaquely, multivalent considerations concerning: the nature of reproduction (libidinal, economic, aesthetic); artistic production/re-production, specifically performative iterations of the “picture;” the “dead” author/birther reader; and so on. Rather than a small group show of like-minded critical practitioners, it is instead a rare solo exhibition by Rodriguez, whose engagement with questions regarding reproducibility and authorship have been apparent since her early and continued involvement with the “authorless” collectives Bernadette Corporation and Reena Spaulings—the latter of which exists as both published novel (2004) and functional gallery on the Lower East Side.

However, the work is not just bound with gestures of dislocation or iterative displacements of authorship, or the temporalities invoked in (art) production in general, but engages both questions simultaneously. In the exhibition, the “creative act” itself is subjected to the passing of time, in frameworks both conscious of its cooptation by market forces, and present as both affective and reproductive labor. Rodriguez’s starting point, as Leah Pires concludes in her phenomenal essay in the catalogue: “By now artistic production—like biological reproduction—is thoroughly mediated by institutions, technology, the law, and the market.”¹

In the middle of the space, screening simultaneously on two sides of a large screen is *The Maid* (2018). Each side is slightly different due to irregularly distributed natural light. In stark contrast to this towering screen positioned diagonally in the “post-industrial” and sky-lit gallery, are five small images of developing embryos produced by an EmbryoScope (part incubator, part time-lapse camera). Titled *All the Best Memories are Hers* (2018), Rodriguez subsequently transferred the images to film and installed them on brick walls at the edges of the exhibition’s physical frame. Lastly, in an isolated screening room at the end of the space is *The Girls* (1997-2018), a 37-minute unspooling of barely-edited footage of children playing in a park on the Lower East Side in 1997, filmed when Rodriguez first moved to New York to pursue an art career.

It would be too easy to consider the works glib, postmodern continuations of announcing the author’s death, or summarily about eliminating the patriarchal genius-as-creator through acts of collaboration or appropriation from a feminist critical position.² Clearly, the work enunciates some co-mingling of Walter Benjamin’s “age of mechanical reproduction,” Douglas Crimp’s “pictures,” and Silvia Federici’s necessary criticism of the post-autonomist conception of affective labor in administered neoliberalism. However, it would be a mistake to describe the work solely as a critique of the culture industry. In her critique, Federici describes that Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt miss that “women are the central subjects of emotional labor,” and describes that the common “generalization of affective labor ... takes us back to a pre-feminist situation.”³ Similarly, Rodriguez understands that issues of artistic reproduction cannot be disentangled from the politics of reproductive labor.



Carissa Rodriguez, *The Maid*, 2018, installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Karma International, Zurich/Los Angeles. Photo: Kyle Knodell Zurich/Los Angeles.

The less-nuanced readings are, of course, valid—apart from the “glib” qualifier—and necessary for parsing the theoretical weight Rodriguez transmits. Though a more “productive” appreciation must involve an engagement with the relations (structural, politico-economic, art historical, and so on) produced and exposed in the tension between the two analyses. Important as well is the tension in the arrangement of artworks themselves: the three by Rodriguez, and the “nested” results of appropriation, photography, reference, or re-presentation in the films themselves. For one of many examples of entering such dialectics, the curator Ruba Katrib invokes Melinda Cooper’s writings on the relationship between contemporary reproductive technologies and “the establishment of neoliberal politics and policies in the United States as it relates to chronological time as well as to notions of capital...inviting many possible exploitive practices.” This is clearly invoked by Rodriguez’s *EmbryoScope* photographs, and less obviously by the other works. Katrib appropriately adds that the photos “exist as their own version of a time capsule, the temporality of the matter depicted is one of indefinite suspension.”⁴ The films, of course, also exist in this way, particularly *The Girls*. Furthermore, as Pires reminds us, the first baby was born using IVF in 1978, a year after Douglas Crimp’s *Pictures* exhibition at Artists Space. (His revised and extended “*Pictures*” essay appeared in October the following year).

In 2015, Rodriguez participated in the exhibition *RRZZ* at Gluck50 in Milan. For her contribution to the catalogue, she “montaged” together a short text, photographs of her Milan residency bedroom wall, and images of her work in the exhibition. Cindy Sherman had stayed in the room previously and left a signature photograph; Louise Lawler also stayed there and contributed a picture of the Sherman installed in the space itself. Undergirding the text and these images is Rodriguez’s *It’s Symptomatic/What Would Edith Say?* (2015): pictures of artists’ tongues marked up by an acupuncturist’s comments. The pages of the catalogue are thus a temporal and generational palimpsest: pictures of pictures of pictures within pictures and so on: still aptly described by, though an extension of, Craig Owens’s “*photography en abyme*.”

On this note, it is interesting to consider Rodriguez’s role at the Reena Spaulings gallery in relation to older critical artists. Lawler herself had worked at Leo Castelli’s gallery for some years in the ’70s. What was once perhaps a form of “subversion” via entrance of the administrative structure of the institution—though also a supplement to income (before the total ubiquity of unpaid work)—has become progressively more common as contingency and precarity force art workers to recycle traditionally artistic “skills.” Though, as a collaborative authorless project, Reena Spaulings is perhaps an attempt to counter both precarity and the “re-skilling” of the artist.

The Maid—titled after Robert Walser’s paragraph-long tale describing a domestic care worker’s two-decade search for a lost child—similarly engages artworks and artists through time. It tracks six Sherrie Levine *Newborn* (1997) black or white glass sculptures made from a direct cast of Constantine Brancusi’s *Le Nouveau-Né* (1915). (Notice the shift from the female gender in Brancusi’s title to a gender-neutral translation in Levine’s). Pires: “By associating the image with *The Maid*, Rodriguez draws out the form of the *Newborn* relation to the notion of germination implied by the embryo.” The film follows the ovoid-like forms—similar in size and shape to a newborn baby—from a museum conservation lab, to wealthy collectors’ homes, to their indexing in auction house wall labels, not to mention the passing glance at dozens of art filing cabinets in museum storage. Along the way the camera pans over work by Lichtenstein, Warhol, Kawara, and da Vinci (in the auction catalogue PR campaign for his *Salvador Mundi*), and others installed in collectors’ homes. All the above artists, not coincidentally, are men. The film follows the Levine sculptures in their packaging, crating, wrapping/unwrapping, and intimate domestic exhibition; i.e. the “care” of the objects by and for the market and history.

The camera ventures from an opulent hilltop steel-and-glass modernist California mansion to an equally decadent Manhattan Central Park penthouse. We pass family pictures nestled among unremarkably-framed photographs of the collectors with Bill Clinton in the '90s and Hillary Clinton circa 2016 (neoliberalism invoked by its champions), Kawara's indexing of days in November 2000, a sunset in California, a snowstorm over the borders of Central Park filmed with a drone. This is surely a pedagogical form of "displaying" those mechanisms of art historical maintenance, to borrow Mierle Laderman Ukeles's term. Pires adds: "While for [Brancusi] the key to artistic creation was spiritual inspiration, for Rodriguez it is the coefficient of institutional, material, and libidinal forces mediated through the role of the artist."

And what of the children playing in 1997 documented *à la cinéma vérité* in the next room? They are recorded by Rodriguez without any cinematic "intervention"—apart from, inevitably, the framing, editing, and positioning of the camera. Kept in storage for the last two decades, Rodriguez unearthed the reels and installed the recordings as yet another experiment on the passage of time and its embeddedness in structures of socio-economic development/displacement and (financial) speculation. And what of the neighborhood the children played in, as building after building is razed to accommodate more steel-and-glass towers? (Similar in form to the opulent collector's homes, themselves part domestic, part public exhibition space under the watchful eye of the camera). Now that the children pictured are in their early twenties (their birth years nearly corresponding to the pictured Kawara dates), Katrib asks: have they been forced out of the neighborhood, along with the communities destroyed for "development's" sake?

Rodriguez recognizes strategies of appropriating, representing, and reproducing pictures as necessary for a contemporary, feminist, critique of teleology and historiographical time. Importantly, however, just as Federici affirms that the exploitation of affective labor cannot be extricated from the alienated, economic position of women workers, Rodriguez interjects the often invisible nature and subjugation of reproductive labor into the aesthetic discourses around appropriation. Rodriguez presents a cinematic sketch of interwoven (art) historical developments, images of art works, and moments of the everyday. And so, in *The Maid*—both exhibition and film—the "moving picture" strategically becomes a series of pictures" moved.

Notes

1. Leah Pires, "Alternate Conceptions," in *Carissa Rodriguez: The Maid* (New York: Sculpture Center, 2018), 10.
2. See: Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983).
3. Silvia Federici, "On Affective Labor," in *Cognitive Capitalism, Education and Digital Labor*, eds. Michael A. Peters and Ergin Bulut (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).
4. Ruba Katrib, "Carissa Rodriguez, *The Maid* and Others," in *Carissa Rodriguez*, 6.