



J E A N N E D U N N I N G

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# ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS

BY LAURIE PALMER

Let's begin with this, and make it personal: art is a solicitation, a proposition, an *advance*. When an artist pushes her work into a public arena, it is because she wants my attention; she makes herself vulnerable when she asks me to look.

Reciprocally, I am not looking; I go to a gallery or a museum (or open a book). I want something too, but as a viewer I have the privilege to be wary, discriminating, not easy to please. In order to be seduced I have to be approached in a particular manner, with just the right balance—for instance—of lightness and force. In short, I am a spoiled brat, used to being catered to, and expecting to get it for free.

Jeanne Dunning positions her work within this sexualized system of power relations, but she enters the arena determined not to give herself away. She gains our attention with clean, well-lit, seemingly straightforward photographs, geared for disclosure; then in precisely the place where she is expected to expose or express, she turns her back to the viewer (*Heads*) and refuses to speak (*Untitled with Bulge*, *Untitled with Tongue*). But we are held in rapt attention nonetheless. What we get instead of revelation are quiz-zically contextless representations of parts of the body—hair, limbs, heads, noses—and, in more recent work, pieces of food—whose stranded, unexplained objecthood leaves them ripe for fetish cathexis.

Dunning's refusal is a tease and a slap in the face. In the series called *Heads*, attention is diverted to the color and twist of inordinately red or yellow hair, or to the phallic shape of a woman's bobbed haircut. But the message—from artist to viewer—is, more simply, fuck you. (You can admire and desire me; I have positioned myself in front of (and am held by) your gaze; in fact, I need you to look at me. But I will never reveal myself. I will never give you what you think you want). What do we want? Maybe precisely this, for our desire to be tweaked but never satisfied; for exactly that refusal, to be rejected again and again, while given some token on which to focus our pathetically doglike desire—i.e., to be able to ogle the back of her head. (Isn't the woman as phallus what we—speaking in the role of the male viewer in which this work positions me—are supposed to want anyway? An image of ourselves, of sameness, the sign of our power reflected back to comfort us; reassurance that it is still there. The *real* woman—what or whomever that may be—is not the object of our desire, nor is she representable anyhow).

But is this really what I want? Dunning enters the arena with all the history of the objectification of women weighing her down and crowding in around her, and the fierceness of her refusal to give is fueled by the history of having been taken. These photographs enact a kind of revenge. Dunning sexualizes the roles of artist and viewer because the dynamics of sex and power correspond with the history of looking. Because the image (art) is an object of desire, it takes a female role—stereotypically powerless and geared to please—while the viewer's role becomes male—the desiring subject to whom the image “sucks up.”<sup>1</sup> Dunning reflects back her own image (through images of women) the only way that “we” (as culturally constructed male viewers) can

# Organs Without BODIES

BY MATIAS VIEGENER

Jeanne Dunning is best known and most often recognized as the creator of the *Heads*, those inverted Breck Girl shots of women's tresses seen from behind; these are most often interpreted as reflections on feminist concerns about the male gaze, pleasure and the objectification of the female body. Yet the remaining body of her work, such as the *Untitled Landscapes*, the *Details* and the *Holes*, supplements these concerns with Dunning's interest in the uncanny relation of parts to the whole object—parts which spookily begin to substitute for objects. By avoiding the binary terminology of “natural” drives and cultural repression, Dunning's work aligns itself with a critical enterprise examining the body and our subjectivity itself as social constructions.

Dunning's slick, seductive cibachromes survey a veritable pocket inventory of fetish objects: hands, feet, mustaches, orifices and hair—perhaps the paradigmatic fetish. Yet her work is more conceptual than polemic; while the body—and by extension, the feminine subject—is obviously the whole behind these partial objects, the goal of this work is *not* the reconstruction of the body. If anything, this is an anti-Oedipal project, as delineated by Deleuze and Guattari, one in which there can no longer be a myth of fragments waiting at last to be glued back into a glorious (Oedipal) totality, offering us our last chance to reinscribe ourselves into the family romance. This work challenges the meaning of the Freudian framework even as it has been articulated by the whole strain of Lacanian feminism, from Mulvey to Irigaray.

Why are we so easily seduced by hair? In advertising imagery, hair is always subsidiary to what is actually being sold, be it an automobile or a lifestyle in the form of Fabergé shampoo. In Dunning's heads the hair stands alone, but it hardly stands for itself. We are offered mystifying heads of hair without a face, without even the certainty of whether the model's back is facing us or whether the hair is combed over her/his (as the gender markers are minimalized) face. In *Head 1* (1989), the vibrant henna-colored tresses forefront the citation of hair as both nature and culture, as a sort of irrepressible natural trace *and* as a cultural artifact or inscription on the body. In its refusal to speak (no mouth) or be positioned (no eyes), the muteness of this image decenters the opposition of nature and culture and highlights the constructedness of the body itself; Dunning's refusal of binary logic aligns her with much of the recent critical theorizing on the body, as seen in such post-Foucauldian enterprises as Zone's *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*. The fragmentary nature of these endeavors descend from an anti-idealist or Nietzschean attack on totalizing philosophies.

These hieroglyphic locks of hair are the mute, distant descendants of the kind of writing Baudelaire found in women's tresses, a language of desire which connected the inside with the outside, the soul with the body. In *Untitled Body* (1990), a Rapunzel-like blond mane trails down a stout woman's back, impassive and opaque. Like the *Heads*, this piece is a refutation of reading, of the “truth” in women's hair as much as the truth in the woman's essence. In the case of Baudelaire, this truth was essentially a

# *Elle A Chaud au Bouche*, Or THE HOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

BY BARRY BLINDERMAN

**When you become obsessed with an image, you are aware of its references, on one level or another.**

— Jeanne Dunning, 1991

**A**ssociation is an inexorable process, especially when reflecting upon images that penetrate the senses more like aromas than pictures. There is something deliciously irritating and disorienting about Jeanne Dunning's work—like an itch one senses in a “phantom” limb. Subliminal prurience. Desire as decoy. Dunning teases the viewer into confronting socially forbidden fruits, holding our eyes as collateral against a bout of photo-foreplay. She focuses her camera—itself a fetishistic compression chamber—on fleshy vegetables and isolated body fragments, engaging us in a game of substituting one part for another and, ultimately, stranding us on the banks of an unfathomable whole.

**The line between inner and outer landscape is breaking down . . . The whole random universe of the Industrial age is breaking down into cryptic fragments.**

— William S. Burroughs, 1990

**Eroticism is the fourth dimension.**

— Marcel Duchamp, ca. 1960



CAT scans, genetic engineering, Virtual Reality helmets and datagloves: the inner and outer landscape exchange through a technologically permeable membrane—between nerve tissue and machine, between sensors and skin. This membrane—call it a ghost in the machine—evokes Marcel Duchamp's enigmatic term *inframince*, or infrathin, wherein “the smoke of the tobacco smells also of the mouth from which it comes.” Indeed, the blurring of sexual and semiotic boundaries in Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (the Mona Lisa wearing a mustache—phonetically transformed via French to *elle a chaud au cul*, or “she has a hot ass”), *Rose Sélavy* (the artist in drag—“Eros, that is life”) and *Objet-Dart* (the phallic nonready-made cast “art object”) provides an intriguing context for deciphering Jeanne Dunning's photogenetically encoded material.

Duchamp was out for more than shattering the Museum's cobwebbed windowpanes; he wanted us to peer into the hairline crack in the glass separating male and female, matter and spirit, the third and fourth dimensions: “The possible implying the becoming—the passage from one to the other takes place in the infrathin.” Likewise, Dunning is not content to have us jump through theoretical hoops; she dares us to unravel the delicate thread of meaning between image, language and desire so we can see how insidiously entangled we are in our cultural dream machine.

Marcel Duchamp  
*Belle Haleine*  
(detail of the artist as  
Rose Sélavy), 1921,  
photo-collage

## Making Mountains Out of Mole Hills

We live today in the age of partial objects, bricks that have been shattered to bits, and leftovers. We no longer believe in the myth of the existence of fragments that, like pieces of an antique statue, are merely waiting for the last one to be turned up, so that they may all be glued back together to create a unity that is precisely the same as the original unity.

— Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1983

Since her first *Untitled Landscapes* in 1987, Jeanne Dunning's art has dealt with details of the body, particularly details involving hair. The photograph's inherent capacity to abstract through framing has historically inspired artists to draw analogies between details of the human body and the landscape. Edward Weston's dunes and nudes, for example, are parts of a formal and linguistic "coherent whole" in which "details have their own integrity, and through them the whole is indicated." This precept of unity, however, could not be further from the ambivalence and fragmentation that inform Dunning's work.



Study after *Untitled Landscape*, 1987  
black and white  
photograph, frame  
12 x 13 inches  
1988

During the past week a series of enormous signs had been built along the roads surrounding the hospital, almost walling it in from the rest of the world. A group of workmen on a scaffolding truck were pasting up the last of the displays, a hundred-foot-long panel that appeared to represent a section of a sand dune. Looking at it more closely, Dr Nathan realized that in fact it was an immensely magnified portion of the skin over the iliac crest. Glancing at the billboards, Dr Nathan recognized other magnified fragments: a segment of lower lip, a right nostril, a portion of female perineum . . . At least five hundred of the signs would be needed to contain the whole of this gargantuan woman, terraced here into a quantified sand-sea.

— J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, 1970

In viewing Dunning's *Untitled Landscapes*, we find ourselves literally unable to tell an ass from an elbow. What appears to be a well-muscled stomach could just as easily be a furrowed brow; a mound of Venus an eyebrow. As in *The Seven-Percent Solution*, where sleuths Sigmund Freud and Sherlock Holmes join forces, Dunning links heightened attention to physical detail to a search that combines diagnosis in both the medical and whodunit sense.

. . . Any natural detail is in constant danger of a morbid mutation . . . the natural is finally indistinguishable from the pathological.

— Miriam Schor, *Reading in Detail*, 1987

Scrutiny reveals imperfections. The closer we zoom in, the more we focus on flaws. Pubescent boys fervently monitor the same growth of fuzz above the lip that many women will tweeze or bleach away. Cancer warning sign #4: any change in a wart or mole. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel warns the portrait painter against depicting "the purely natural side of imperfect existence: little hairs, pores, little scars, warts."



Untitled  
C-print, frame  
15 x 12 inches  
1988



*above and top:*

Untitled Hole

C-print, frame

13.5 x 14.5 inches

1988



The viewer asks the image to speak, and by speaking to draw him in, to convince him, to cater to him, to coddle him, to suck up to him, to desire him.

The viewer asks the image to give him the power to accept or reject, to reinforce or ignore, to forgive or condemn, to pass judgement.

If no one is looking at me and I don't speak, then no one *will* look at me. I must have a voice to have power.

Speaking without first being spoken to is a way to take power.

But if someone *is* looking at me and they know it, they're asking me to speak, they've given me power.

I have something they want.

If I speak, I'll give away that hold over them, that thing that I have that they want, that thing that I know that they don't, which is power. If I don't speak, I'll retain the power to accept or reject and pass judgement.

If someone is looking at me and they know I know it and I don't speak, they'll keep looking.

From *Heads*, 1989

an artist's book by Jeanne Dunning

# Checklist

**Untitled Landscape, 1987**

C-print and frame  
15.5 x 21 inches  
collection of Kevin Maginnis and Suzan  
Rezac, Chicago

**Untitled Landscape II, 1987**

C-print and frame  
17 x 25 inches  
collection of Timothy and Suzette Flood,  
Chicago

**Study after Untitled Landscape,  
1987, 1987**

black and white photograph, frame  
12 x 13 inches  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Study after Untitled Landscape,  
1987, 1988**

black and white photograph, frame  
12 x 13 inches  
collection of Refco Group, Limited,  
Chicago

**Study after Untitled Landscape,  
1987, 1988**

black and white photograph, frame  
12 x 13 inches  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Study after Untitled Landscape,  
1987, 1988**

black and white photograph, frame  
12 x 13 inches  
collection of Kevin Maginnis and Suzan  
Rezac, Chicago

**Study after Untitled Landscape,  
1987, 1988**

black and white photograph, frame  
12 x 13 inches  
collection of Hirsch Perlman, Chicago

**Study after Untitled Landscape,  
1987, 1988**

black and white photograph, frame  
12 x 13 x 1 inches  
collection of Michael Leon, New York

**Untitled, 1988**

C-print, frame  
15 x 12 inches  
collection of Timothy and Suzette Flood,  
Chicago

**Untitled, 1988**

C-print, frame  
15 x 12 inches  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Untitled, 1988**

C-print, frame  
15 x 12 inches  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Untitled, 1988**

C-print, frame  
15 x 12 inches  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Untitled, 1988**

C-print, frame  
15 x 12 inches  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Untitled, 1988**

C-print, frame  
15 x 12 inches  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Untitled, 1988**

C-print, frame  
15 x 12 inches  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Untitled Hole, 1988**

C-print, frame  
(5 works, each an edition of 3)  
13.5 x 14.5 inches  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Detail 1, 1989**

laminated cibachrome, frame  
22 x 17.5 inches, edition of 3  
collection of Illinois State Museum,  
Springfield

**Detail 2, 1989**

laminated cibachrome, frame  
17 x 23 inches, each of 2 photos  
collection of Edward R. Downe, New York

**Head 1, 1989**

laminated cibachrome mounted on plexiglass  
25 x 17.5 inches, edition of 2  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Head 2, 1989**

laminated cibachrome mounted on plexiglass  
28.25 x 18.75, edition of 2  
collection of University Galleries, Illinois  
State University, Normal

**Head 3, 1989**

laminated cibachrome mounted on plexiglass  
25 x 17.5 inches, edition of 2  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Head 4, 1989**

laminated cibachrome mounted on plexiglass  
26 x 18.75 inches, edition of 2  
collection of Brooke and Carolyn Alexander

**Head 6, 1989**

laminated cibachrome mounted on plexiglass  
30 x 19 inches, edition of 2  
The Sandor Collection

**Head 8, 1989**

laminated cibachrome mounted on plexiglass  
30 x 19 inches, edition of 2  
collection of Richard Telles, Santa Monica

**Head 9, 1990**

laminated cibachrome mounted on plexiglass  
28.25 x 19 inches, edition of 2  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Head 10, 1990**

laminated cibachrome mounted on plexiglass  
26.5 x 18 inches, edition of 2  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Untitled Head, 1990**  
laminated cibachrome mounted on plexiglass  
30 x 20 inches  
courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa  
Monica, and Feature, New York

**Untitled with Bulge, 1990**  
laminated cibachrome, frame  
20 x 16 inches  
courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa  
Monica, and Feature, New York

**Neck, 1990**  
cibachrome mounted to plexiglass, frame  
33 x 28 inches, edition of 3  
private collection

**Red Detail, 1990**  
cibachrome mounted to plexiglass, frame  
40.75 x 20.5 inches, edition of 3  
collection of Camille Oliver-Hoffman,  
Naperville, Illinois

**Untitled Body, 1990**  
laminated cibachrome mounted to  
plexiglass, frame  
47.75 x 28.5 inches, edition of 3  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Back, 1990**  
cibachrome mounted to plexiglass, cast  
rubber frame  
21.5 x 17.5 inches, edition of 5  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Torso, 1990**  
cibachrome mounted to plexiglass, cast  
rubber frame  
21.5 x 17.5 inches, edition of 5  
collection of Tony Tasset, Chicago

**Untitled with Tongue, 1990**  
laminated cibachrome, frame  
22.5 x 18 inches  
collection of Eileen and Michael Cohen,  
New York

**Untitled with Beard, 1990**  
laminated cibachrome, frame  
21.5 x 17 inches  
courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa  
Monica, and Feature, New York

**Detail 4, 1990**  
laminated cibachrome, frame  
21.5 x 17 inches  
courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa  
Monica, and Feature, New York

**Detail 5, 1990**  
laminated cibachrome, frame  
21.5 x 17 inches  
courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa  
Monica, and Feature, New York

**Detail 7, 1990**  
laminated cibachrome, frame  
21.5 x 17 inches  
Jederman Collection, N.A.

**Hanging 1, 1990**  
cibachrome mounted to plexiglass, frame  
36.75 x 24.75 inches, edition of 3  
Jederman Collection, N.A.

**Sample, 1990**  
cibachrome mounted to plexiglass, frame  
23.5 x 16.75 inches, edition of 3  
courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa  
Monica, and Feature, New York

**Sample 2, 1990**  
cibachrome mounted on plexiglass, frame  
18 x 15 inches, edition of 3  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Sample 3, 1990**  
cibachrome mounted to plexiglass, frame  
18 x 15 inches, edition of 3  
courtesy of Feature, New York

**Sample 4, 1990**  
cibachrome mounted to plexiglass, frame  
18 x 15 inches, edition of 3  
courtesy of Feature, New York

## Lenders to the Exhibition

Brooke and Carolyn Alexander, New York

Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa Monica

Collection of the Illinois State Museum,  
Springfield

Eileen and Michael Cohen, New York

Feature, New York

Feigen, Incorporated, Chicago

Timothy and Suzette Flood, Chicago

Jedermann Collection, N.A.

Michael Leon, New York

Camille Oliver-Hoffman, Chicago

Hirsch Perlman

Refco Group, Limited, Chicago

The Sandor Collection

Tony Tasset

Richard Telles, Santa Monica