

REAL DECEPTIONS

The Contemporary Reinvention of Realism



JENNIFER FRIEDLANDER

"This bold, astute, and dazzling text makes an immense contribution to critical, political, aesthetic, and cultural theory by offering a strikingly original account of what it means to try to change the world. Both surprising and persuasive, its impact will reverberate across the critical humanities."

—**Mari Ruti**, Professor of Critical Theory, University of Toronto and author of
The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within

"*Real Deceptions* completely shatters the prevailing ideas of what realism means. It shows us that we gain access to reality only in rejecting the idea of a reality beyond our distortion of the object and in this way announces a realism revolution."

—**Todd McGowan**, author of *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets*

"Can art have an inherent and radical political dimension? Jennifer Friedlander engages in a powerful and compelling conceptual conjunction of Rancière and Lacan in order to develop her central idea of realism as based on deception, in which she recognizes a prominent carrier of the subversive dimension of art."

—**Alenka Zupančič**, Professor of Philosophy and Psychoanalysis,
The European Graduate School

Demonstrating how radical political transformation might be facilitated from within the much maligned aesthetic category of realism, Jennifer Friedlander examines a number of contemporary works from *Big Brother*, *Melancholia*, *Catfish*, and *This is Not a Film* to Aliza Shvarts' "abortion art." Her discussion of these pieces suggests new understandings of the role of *trompe l'oeil* in illusion, the rendering of realism's limitations, and relationships between hypervirtuality and simulation. Friedlander's core project throughout is to develop a framework for thinking about contemporary forms of realism which, rather than focusing on the importance of seeing beyond deceptions that distort reality, argues that reality lies within the deceptions themselves.

JENNIFER FRIEDLANDER is the Edgar E. and Elizabeth S. Pankey Professor of Media Studies at Pomona College.

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

www.oup.com

Cover image: YM by Judith Eisler

ISBN 978-0-19-067612-4



9 780190 676124

FRIEDLANDER

REAL DECEPTIONS
OXFORD

REAL DECEPTIONS

The Contemporary Reinvention of Realism

Jennifer Friedlander

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Friedlander, Jennifer, author.

Title: Real deceptions : the contemporary reinvention of realism / Jennifer Friedlander.

Description: New York : Oxford University Press, [2017]

Identifiers: LCCN 2016055980 | ISBN 9780190676131 (pbk. : alk. paper) |

ISBN 9780190676124 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780190676162 (Oxford scholarship online)

Subjects: LCSH: Aesthetics. | Realism in art—Philosophy. |

Art—Political aspects. | Feminist theory.

Classification: LCC N70 .F755 2017 | DDC 701/.17—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016055980>

Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc., United States of America

Real Deceptions

To Falafel Jones (1950–2016) forever with love: in honor of your search for how to properly arrive at truth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been enormously fortunate to have had the unconditional support of many people I love throughout the long process of writing this book.

Thank you to brilliant friends and colleagues who have sustained me over the years through innumerable acts of kindness, especially Mark Andrejevic, Stephanie Harves, Rachel Lindheim, Genna Miller, Carol Ockman, Mary Paster, Frances Pohl, Vin de Silva, Sean Spellman, Zala Volcic, Peggy Waller, Gary Wilder, and Meg Worley.

Much of the writing of this book has taken place in Vienna, and would have been impossible if not fueled by the tremendous encouragement, good cheer (and many, many spritzers) provided by dear friends: Klemens Brugner, Franziska Eberhart, Inaki Ezpeleta, Dagmar Serfezi, Otchie Stranzinger, Wolfgang Strazinger, and Carmen Visus. The gorgeous food, décor, and hospitality (not to mention the eternally replenished Wienerwasser) offered by Café Corbaci made it such a pleasure to sit and write each summer. Thank you, too, to my Melbourne “offices,” especially Jimmy Watson’s and DOC Espresso for never seeming to mind how long I lingered.

I am deeply fortunate to have cherished friends who are also intellectual comrades: Justin Clemens, Russell Grigg, Hilary Neroni, Todd McGowan, Robert Pfaller, and Michaela Wünsch. Their brilliance and unstinting generosity make possible previously unimaginable ways of thinking and being.

Thank you to Kevin Song for his tireless assistance, and for always asking what more he can do after already doing everything.

I am enormously grateful to Norm Hirschy for his enthusiastic and expert handling of the manuscript.

My life has been indescribably enriched due to the unstinting encouragement and generosity of my wonderful family. My exceptional parents, Mark Friedlander and Marybeth Friedlander, have given me the gift of unqualified love and the consequent courage to follow through on my

desire. My wildly talented aunt, Vicki Iorio, and my extraordinary grandmother, Roslyn Vener, are strong and remarkable women who have had an incredible impact on me. I am so fortunate to be surrounded by so many other radiant and creative spirits that populate my family: Karen Iorio Adelson, Henry Wagons, Melvis Crawford, and Casper Wagons.

And to my supreme loves, who have nurtured me so tenderly through the ontological insecurities of writing this book: Josef Krips, whose affection and humor makes me forget everything else and continually teaches me the joys to be had in entering into fiction; and Henry Krips, whose luminous wisdom is as welcoming as it is deep, is the only one with whom I want to enter the impossible.

Finally, I would like to thank publishers for allowing me to use material that has appeared in earlier forms. I include the citations here:

"No Business like *Schmo* Business: Reality TV and the Fetishistic Inversion." *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1, no 1.3 (2007):1–17.

"Representing Uncertainty/Claiming Indeterminacy: Aliza Shvarts' Unseen Yale Art Project." In *Resolutions3: Global Networks of Video*, edited by Ming-Yuen Ma and Erika Suderburg, 235–240. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

"Imperfecting the Illusion: Belief and the Aesthetic Destruction of Reality." *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 35.3, Fall (2013): 384–399.

"Public Art and Radical Democracy: Christoph Schlingensief's Deportation Installation." In *Urbanity. The Discreet Symptoms of Privatization and the Loss of Urbanity*, edited by content associates, 11–19. Vienna: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.

"Breast Feeding and Middle-Class Privilege: A Psychoanalytic Analysis of 'Breast is Best.'" *Subjectivity* 8, no. 1 (2015), 74–91.

"Documentary REAL-ism: A Lacanian approach to 'This is Not a Film' and 'Catfish.'" *CiNéMAS: Journal of Film Studies*. Issue: *Revoir Lacan*, vol. 26, no 1, 2016. pp. 69–91.

"How to Face Nothing: *Melancholia* and the Feminine." In *Lars von Trier's Women*, edited by Rex Butler and David Denny, 201–214. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2017.

"Corporeal Difference: *Body Worlds* and *Cloaca*." In *theory@buffalo* 19 issue, "Difference: Sexual, Cultural, Universal." January, 2017.

Real Deceptions

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: Realism and Deception 1

1. The Realistically Deceptive, or the Deceptively Real? Ron Mueck
and the Internal Illusion 17

2. Documentary Real-ism: *Catfish* and *This Is Not a Film* 31

3. An Uncertain Indeterminacy: Aliza Shvarts's Unseen Senior
Project 51

4. A Ruse for the Real: Christoph Schlingensiefel's Deportation
Installation 59

5. The Faux and the *Schmo*: Parodying Reality TV 67

6. Corporeal Realism: *Bodyworlds* and *Cloaca* 79

7. "Something I Can't Quite Articulate": Breastfeeding and the Real 91

8. *Melancholia* and the Real of the Illusion 111

Conclusion: On Being Duped 123

Notes 131

Bibliography 145

Index 151

Introduction

Realism and Deception

During a family trip to Manhattan, we enticed our then three-year-old son, Josef, to go with us on an evening stroll by promising him that we could visit the animal sculptures he had spied earlier outside an art shop a few blocks away from our hotel. When we discovered that the bronzed animals had been locked inside for the night, we attempted to forestall what seemed like an inevitable meltdown by assuring Josef that if he stayed calm and kept walking, we were certain to encounter something equally special. And there, on the very next block, stood an incarnation of every three-year-old's idol: Elmo. With a combination of awe and apprehension, Josef walked up to Elmo and gave a tentative wave. Elmo, to my initial horror, responded with a polite but disinterested "Hi. How are you?" in a deep voice that made no attempt whatsoever to mimic Elmo's high falsetto. Upon hearing this surprising voice, Josef looked at me with what I first mistook for fear, but turned out to be elation: "Mommy, it's the REAL Elmo!" he exclaimed.

What was it that made Elmo seem real? Was it simply his presence in the fur—as it were—rather than as a two-dimensional image on the glowy box? Or could it be that somehow "Elmo's" very *infidelity* to the fiction lent him a more realistic status? Rather than prop up the illusion that Elmo is "real," this 47th Street Elmo revealed the truth, namely that Elmo is a fictitious character, who is often embodied and/or voiced by "real" folks—in this case by a man trying to earn a living in the heat of the New York summer by dressing in a heavy fur-coated suit and posing for pictures with preschoolers at a dollar a snap.

What might we glean from this encounter regarding the relationship between realism and deception, and how, if at all, might the interaction between realism and deception be used to facilitate an aesthetic politics? By taking up the overt trappings of Elmo, while simultaneously refusing to commit to the fiction that he was Elmo, the costumed man disturbed our expectations regarding the maintenance of a gap between fiction and reality. Our Elmo revealed the deception that is usually masked in carrying out the realist illusion. Such a revelation creates in viewers the “curiosity, the desire to see closer up,” *but*—and this is the key point—the hope of reaching a final truth through a nearer view is always dashed.¹ Encounters with representations that invite the viewer to peek at the reality behind the artifice perpetuate the fantasy that there is a reality behind the fiction (even if it is one that we did not expect to find) rather than confront us with the more disturbing recognition that there might indeed be nothing behind the fiction.

Jacques Rancière’s conceptualization of aesthetic politics, with which this book closely engages, requires us to abandon the idea that the disruptive potential of realism emerges from its ability to reveal a truth that has been masked by a deceptive appearance. Rather than think vertically in terms of “surface and substratum,” he is committed to “think[ing] in terms of horizontal distributions, combinations between systems of possibilities.”² To be specific, for Rancière, the possibility of equality without hierarchy is thwarted by the process of seeking to uncover a masked truth: “where one searches for the hidden beneath the apparent, a position of mastery is established.”³ By not taking the fiction seriously, Elmo stages a different deception, which might also facilitate such a position of mastery: he creates the illusion that if one can do away with fiction, one can arrive at the truth. This book will argue to the contrary that, in Jacques Lacan’s terms, it is only by committing to the fiction that one can encounter truth.

An engagement with this Lacanian premise in conjunction with Rancière’s conception of “aesthetic politics” will inform the analyses in the chapters that follow. As a preliminary, we consider an inverse of the Elmo case via an engagement with a politically incorrect television commercial for the Australian beer Toohey’s. As we will see, in this scenario, rather than surprise the viewer by abandoning the fiction, the central figure takes the fiction too seriously. The ad opens with a man walking a small dog; he passes a pub from which an attractive woman sitting by the window beckons him to come and join her. He begins to enter the pub but pauses when he sees a “No dogs allowed” sign. The next shot reveals the man, now wearing dark glasses, entering the pub with his dog. The bartender quickly tells him that there are no dogs allowed. With a subtle but confident nod