

Paris, Aubervilliers, April 2012

Dear Virginie,

We both recovered from being sick--as everybody in the team was while shooting Ioxic (2012) at Aubervilliers in February. We wonder if it was a contagious virus (influenza or a stomach flu) that produced a strange but overwhelming union of us all by infection, or if it was in fact a substance, a toxic one, which could have been a cure if taken in a small dose but which was able to produce--in higher concentrations as we experienced it--a quite tough body-substance-object connection: it still allowed for escapes (staying in bed, alone or in company, being comforted by cushions, refusing to work, dreaming instead of functioning) but at the same time, for some of our bodies it was too much to take.

Maybe the sickness was caused by our shift of perspective. We started the film project with the assumption that it could be useful to see not only substances--chemicals or parts of plants for instance--as toxic but the film apparatus as well, its history since the nineteenth century and its social effects, but also the way we continue to work in it. The film apparatus also uses chemicals (today it is mostly digital but even more dependent on toxic substances and toxic working conditions in the production of the chips, of cameras and computers) to transmute light, which is reflected by objects, into images, but images that can't be separated from the factors and the means of their production. Those images have been used to poison with serious social effects. But the effects of the doses are not always predictable. When the mug-shot was invented--a way to photograph a human with two cropped and paired views, one frontal, the other from profile--it was used by various state and scientific institutions such as the police or anthropology to identify, which meant, to install social hierarchies and to legitimize privileges: between the photographers and the viewers as "normal" and privileged on the one side, and the photographed on the other side: criminals, sex workers, homosexuals, black people, and people from the colonies. What interests us especially about the toxic is its unpredictability and the way in which sometimes the poison can indeed be used as a cure.

And this reminds us that the important critiques of racism and homophobia sometimes overlook the history of alternatives and resistances. We discussed W.E.B. du Bois's 363 photographs with which he participated in the "American Negro Exhibit" at the 1900 world fair in Paris and won a gold medal. While largely making use of the mug shot, Du Bois's photographs, called Types of American Negroes, Georgia, U.S.A, might be still seen as toxic to the legacy of racist taxonomy and eugenics that was so overwhelmingly present at the world fair. They use the same substances: shots from the front and from profile, no full names, no explanatory captions that might point in the direction of critique, social antagonism, or antiracism. But the doses are different. Instead of producing "white" viewers and of inviting them to learn to identify the individuals represented, to scrutinize the bodily markers, the gaze here might be more complicated. The light is softer, the eyes of those photographed are

allowed to wander and look off camera, they sometimes grin, they look as if in complicity, or it seems that they almost can't hold back their laughter. Time and again, quite diverse body markers refuse to work as signs of racial difference. Some of the portraits show middle-class clothes and decorative elements such as Victorian chairs, books, and lace curtains. Shawn Michelle Smith describes how the careful weighing of the substances makes use of the toxic effects: "By 'signifying' on the form of the criminal as well as the scientific mug shot, Du Bois's photographs suggest that for some (white) viewers, the middle-class portrait of an African-American was equivalent to the mug shot of a criminal. . . . It is precisely this transformation of the black image in the eyes of white beholders (a transformation of the black image into a criminal mug shot) that Du Bois's Georgia Negro portraits unmark."(1)

With your support, Virginie, we also looked at the portraits of homosexuals and transvestites at the Paris Police Archive, so-called p  d  rastes, who were arrested by the police in the 1870s and photographed. Those images were taken at a time when the state institutions had not yet developed their own visualizing methods and apparatuses. They took the apprehended homosexuals to commercial photography studios and had them photographed in a bourgeois setting, and with the same poses of pride and peacocky self-presentation that had been developed as a means of recognition by the establishment. From there we developed the thesis, with which we experimented during the shooting of Toxic, while feeling sick and strange: even if the cinematic apparatus tries to allow for unmediated objectivity and knowledge about "stranger danger,"(2) it might--as dirty and uncanny by-products--also produce ec/static bodies and queer connections.

Best wishes,
Renate and Pauline

(1) Shawn Michelle Smith, Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 90.

(2) Sara Ahmed, Strange Encounters-Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality (London: Routledge, 2000).