

NO WOMAN'S LAND Émilie Notéris

(traduction Philippe Aronson)

Yesterday, the death of former whiz kid Orson Welles was splashed across the front pages of the world press. His radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, broadcast on October 30, 1938, which simulated live coverage of a landing of hostile aliens, seems more relevant than ever. Welles' hoax created chaos in New York, or in his own words, an "extraordinary act of collective schizophrenia." This episode seems prophetic nowadays, in view of the rise of Dr. Manhattan, who has extended his influence to the sphere of international politics. Welles's little green men have now been replaced by a solitary blue man. Comparable appeals to flee the Apocalypse have been heard in recent weeks, but these are neither a hoax nor a daring radio play with ghostly voices. The public's initial admiration for Dr. Manhattan has given way to an outburst of hatred and suspicion. He has been held responsible for what some journalists have called "the ten plagues of America," leading inevitably to a Third World War. For many, the only solution is an exodus!

Rather than flee, many community groups, political organizations and individuals have preferred to take action, and have not hesitated to express themselves vehemently on the matter. The omnipresent poster campaign waged by the feminist collective WatchGirls has been one of the most intriguing enterprises of this type. Several examples of their work are reproduced here. Welles would undoubtedly have been pleased by the landscape that greeted New Yorkers this morning in the street. Posters were plastered in every nook and cranny of Manhattan this morning, tangible evidence of a considerable organization hidden within this forest of ink and paper. Banners replaced American flags and flapped in the wind in front of the New York Stock Exchange, the American Museum of Natural History, the World Trade Center and the Metropolitan Opera; king-size stickers and fluorescent tags covered the ground, parking meters, street lamps, staircases, railings and walls. A mosaic of paper littered the footpaths of Central Park, covering sculptures and statues like a second skin. Fountains full of runny ink spurted soggy messages. Even more surprising were the modifications made to famous statues, such as Alice in Wonderland, Mother Goose, Hans Christian Anderson and the Ugly Duckling, as well as the Sophie Irene Loeb Fountain. Andersen

has been transformed into Dr. Manhattan, the bronze hidden by a coating of electric blue. He wears black briefs, a hydrogen atom is tattooed on his forehead and the pages of the book he holds in his metallic hands are covered with stickers. The ground at Alice's feet swarms with graffiti and her face is covered with black paint; her blue eyes cry red tears. The huge mushroom that serves as a base for the statue bears the following inscription (in French): "*Alice a des yeux bleus. Et rouges. Elle s'est ouvert les yeux en traversant le miroir,*" ("Alice's eyes are blue. And red. She cut them open during her trip through the looking-glass"), the first lines of a book by Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, published in 1977. (Irigaray advocated the advent of a female sexuality "other than that defined in and by the dominant phallic economy"). The Lewis Carroll characters appearing on the fountain, dedicated to "The Godmother of American Children," have also been painted black. Mother Goose, renamed "Dr. Harlem," has a new look with her trendy cape and ebony mask. The statues in the park now all bear the signature "W.Grl".

The message is clear: a system of archaic values (family, country, In God We Trust, etc.), which like so many cards in a deck should have been reshuffled by the blue hands of a certain blue monster of technology, is still in effect. While the presence of Dr. Manhattan has engendered genetic and scientific revolutions, he has not shaken people's faith in old-fashioned family and social concepts. These interventions by the WatchGirls are like a million Post-It Notes, serving as reminders and calling for awareness.

They are strongly inspired by the artistic actions of the Guerrilla Girls and the event they initiated last April, which denounced contemporary art galleries in which less than 10% of art on display is created by women, and sometimes none at all. Another inspiration is the activism of graphic artist Barbara Kruger: the WatchGirls question the all-powerful status accorded to Dr. Manhattan's western, heterocentric and phallogocentric figure. In response to this suffocating supremacy, they have erected the figure of Dr. Harlem, heroine of "masked avengers of the political world", in the image of a powerful black woman, reminding us that in "Manhattan", there is "MAN." What would happen if the Manhattan Project were countered by a Harlem Project, with a Little Girl and a Fat Lady against Little Boy and Fat Man? Are weapons of mass destruction necessarily male?

Dr. Harlem is also a rebuke to President Nixon, who in 1973 (according to the Oval Office recordings made in January and February of that year) advocated abortion in special cases such as rape or interracial intercourse, even if he otherwise considered it a factor in the destruction of the family. The revision of Central Park's statues as black figures also denounces a lily-white America, and a government which while considering the breakup of the typically WASP family out of the question, finds it perfectly normal to exterminate a racially-mixed child. To be perfectly aligned with contemporary society's new sexual attitudes, it is best to establish one's heteronormality with utmost exactitude, on the dotted line.

The WatchGirls were awakened by the glimmers of cohesive nuclear force from the cyborg shadow of Dr. Manhattan, a man "spawned by machines.*" Their action is directly linked to the Jupiter Space concept, developed by Zoë Sofoulis last year (Zoë Sofia (Sofoulis) "Exterminating Fetuses: Abortion, Disarmament, and the Sexosemiotics of Extraterrestrialism", *Diacritics* 14, n°2, 1984, pp. 47-59). In Sofoulis' article, Strauss' *Blue Danube Waltz* (again, the color blue) serves as a backdrop for a Jupiter-bound spaceship just as the embryonic imagery of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* becomes the impetus for a "cannibalized extraterrestrial and hyper-masculine excremental rebirth." Jupiter Space may also refer to the controversial Sally Jupiter, former resident female of the Watchmen clan, who has since become the trophy wife of hegemonic Dr. Manhattan. Today she has melded into the Andersen statue, in a far cry from fairy tales. American women are all princesses who wake up because they felt the peas that had stealthily been slipped under their mattresses: technological triumph is of necessity, that of masculinity.

For the WatchGirls, rethinking these man-machine couplings by releasing them from their gender contexts is a way of opening the door to new social configurations, and repositioning women at the heart of the debate. They present a feminist economy as a contrast to the political-military outcomes generated by the US possession of the ultimate weapon, the H-bomb, that is the human bomb: Dr. Manhattan.

The recent article by Donna Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"*, published in *Socialist Review* 80,

(vol. 15, No. 2, March-April 1985) seems to suggest an alternate interpretation of cyborgs, in more of a bilateral than a unilateral light. Although Haraway cites Sofoulis, she makes a case for parallel consideration of blurred boundaries between nature and culture in a strategic manner. "There remains the overarching problem of cyborgs: they are the illegitimate offspring of militaristic and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate children often prove exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers are, after all, out of the loop."* If we are to believe Haraway, the solution is in the hands of Dr. Manhattan himself: if he would only turn against the state and impose his own law, thus proving his infidelity, hope may still loom behind the gloomy and particularly threatening opaque polynuclear clouds that now cast their shadows on our country.