



## Lili Reynaud-Dewar: Kamel Mennour

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In 1985, finding that feminism and Marxism had “run aground,” scientist and philosopher Donna Haraway published “A Cyborg Manifesto,” proposing “a creature in a post-gender world.” Arguing for “*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction,” Haraway asserts that “we are all . . . fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.” When French artist, writer, and teacher Lili Reynaud-Dewar arrived in Memphis in 2009 to find billboards advertising “grillz,” she interpreted this practice of adornment as a manifestation of Haraway’s vision of hybridity. Grills—gold, silver, or platinum jewelry, sometimes studded with precious stones, and worn on the teeth—first appeared in New York City’s hip-hop scene in the late 1970s and took off in the ’90s with Southern rap. Looking something like oral prostheses, grills alter the appearance of the wearer’s face more dramatically than traditional types of jewelry. It is this phenomenon, promoted in the city of Martin Luther King Jr.’s activism and murder, that Reynaud-Dewar examines in a recent body of work encompassing a performance, video, sculptures, and installation, all of which share the title *TEETH, GUMS, MACHINES, FUTURE, SOCIETY*, 2016.

On the walls of the gallery’s narrow ground-floor space, Reynaud-Dewar posted excerpts from Haraway’s manifesto in black block letters amid six aluminum sculptures of oversized grills. Mounted on metal posts, like grinning municipal waste bins, the interior cavities of the sculptures overflowed with American trash: empty plastic water bottles, cans of spray paint, packets of salad mix and other related waste. Crumpled trash was scattered over color posters from Reynaud-Dewar’s related performance and video strewn across the floor. The dense, messy staging forced proximity with the metallic prostheses and brought out their relation, if only in Reynaud-Dewar’s imagination, to Haraway’s vision.

At the same time, in this project Reynaud-Dewar aims to evoke the civil rights movement and what happened in Memphis in 1968. On April 3 of that year, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to a group of striking sanitation workers, who were calling on the Department of Public Works for recognition of their union, safer working conditions, and fair remuneration. In this speech, which would be his last, King spoke of the Promised Land. The Memphis workers’ protests and their signs, printed in all caps—I AM A MAN—helped galvanize a movement that continues today.

In the gallery’s downstairs space, viewers were offered seven lumpy white beanbags—Oldenburgeresque renditions of lost milk teeth—from which to watch a video featuring interviews with four stand-up comedians from Memphis, each sporting a gold-plated grill. On camera, the participants talk about Memphis and King, as well as the stand-up comedy scene and the cyborg. At times, Reynaud-Dewar is heard questioning her subjects, who often appear on-screen as just noses and mouths, their eyes out of the frame. The artist punctuates these exchanges with a montage of Memphis streets shot from the passenger window of a minivan, footage of the artisanal creation of a gold-plated grill, and scenes of the comedians and a female cyborg character flinging trash on the ground. The video culminates in the cyborg’s performance in Levitt Shell, an outdoor amphitheater in Memphis where Elvis Presley performed his first paid concert. Wearing a suede pantsuit coated with silver spray paint, the cyborg reads Haraway’s manifesto from atop a towering metal platform, dropping each page onto the damp concrete stage as she finishes. Meanwhile, a DJ produces increasingly excruciating electronica. “Cyborg politics insist on noise,” writes Haraway, and so Reynaud-Dewar presents us with an almost impenetrable wall of sound.

Using Brechtian strategies to create a distancing effect, Reynaud-Dewar’s Memphis and grills, inevitably foreign to her European audiences, also become unfamiliar subjects to her American viewers. Acting more like an anthropologist, perhaps, than an artist, Reynaud-Dewar has constructed her own cyborg in the space between herself and those she studied and collaborated with for this project.

—Lillian Davies