

Boundaries

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Over the last fifteen years the iconography of the hybrid has literally invaded our landscape of images. Blaming genetic engineering would be excessive even if it obviously bears some responsibility for this in the same way that huge steps have been made in research in the fields of artificial intelligence and plastic surgery. Cosmetics with its repertoire of make-up, plastics and wigs succeeds in doing what plastic surgery has still been unable to do – and it has done a lot – not only filling the media but also our street billboards with images of sexual hybrids, ageless women, breasts, pin-up lips and bandanas giving way to thick flowing locks. Where cosmetics itself fails, cosmetic imagery succeeds thanks to post-production software which aims to render invisible any differences between reality and simulation.

Hybridization is without doubt the major topic of the moment: genetic manipulation certainly, but also climate changes, the removal of borders, religious syncretism, immigration, linguistic hybridization, cultural contacts and clashes between civilisations while the post human is its aesthetics. Art had already anticipated in the late 80s a future which is already here, hence it is only natural that nowadays Art prefers the present to the future. Realistic photographic images of aliens, cyborgs and mutants – just three examples among many possibilities: The Loughton Candidate by Matthew Barney, the American Daniel Lee's theriomorphic

images and the robots in love from Chris Cunningham's video clip for Bjork have less effect on us since they became part of car advertisements. We realise that these images have to recover their metaphoric impetus and need to talk again about us and about our hybridisation. Paradoxically, at the moment when these hybridisations, which for centuries have accompanied our dreams and nightmares become possible, we feel the need to hear them told in a less literal manner. The faun, in order to recover his metaphoric value – and hence universal value – to be able to talk to us has to go back to being a faun, not the bizarre character we could meet in the underground. He has to return to being a legend, a myth or a fantasy and not the anticipation of a future that troubles us.

In other words, the image of post human has to recuperate those boundaries which in recent years it has tried hard to break down; real boundaries between myth and reality between the present and the future. Nowadays make-believe is camouflaged and is part of the reality of everyday life. We have Pamela Anderson and yet we go back to dreaming about Jessica Rabbit.

Stelarc's third arm is a useless metaphor in the iPod era. We don't need Orlan's silicon horns any more as long as we have Emmanuelle Beart's deformed lips. Daniel Lee's theriomorphic monsters are folkloristic when compared with the fawn's look in the anorexic model photographed by Oliviero Toscani for Nolitita: an animal's glance produced not by Photoshop but by an everyday body movement which has escaped us.

Few artists have understood the truth of this statement as clearly as Karin Andersen, whose work in the late 90s comes under the tradition here mentioned: a tradition that Karin knows very well. And from which she draws her main references: Barney, Mariko, Mori, Chris Cunningham, Daniel Lee and Jan Fabre... In fact, she goes further. She investigates the philosophical-conceptual background, co-writing with Roberto Marchesini (the author of a fundamental work on post human) a fascinating book, that covers the history and iconography of theriomorphism in the

light of the theory which claims that humanism (with its anthropocentrism) has been surpassed in order to recognize both the complexity of our bond with the animal world and the influence which this tie has had on our biological and cultural evolution.

This vision, which moulds and shapes all her work, focuses her attention on the fusion of man and animal on a different horizon from the one which we might be tempted to place it at first glance. It is not just a simple question of fascination for what science and technology have made possible, nor an anticipation of what they could make possible in the future. Her mutants are more ‘visual metaphors’ of a proximity which has always been there, and it is her auspice that it will still condition our ‘natural’ evolution. The ears, the tails, the claws and spots on the skin of the protagonists of her pictures are not the dreams (or nightmares) of a child of the biotech era but are the physical visualisations of the components that are already part of our humanity. Not by chance has Karin always chosen herself or friends with whom she feels particularly close, like the artist Christian Rainer, as the protagonists of her works. This ‘diary’ aspect cannot be taken for granted and cannot be undervalued. The animal appendages of Karin, Christian and other models are the visualisation of certain aspects of their personalities which the artist feels have been fecundated over the centuries through its proximity to the natural world.

The symbolic nature of her images also explain her familiarity with fables and myths which brings her closer to Piero di Cosimo or Hieronymus Bosch rather than Biotech imagery. This also explains why after having worked for years on images which render her metaphors as real as possible, Karin Andersen drives herself in her most recent works to make the gap between reality and fiction more visible as well as the gap between actual photography and post-production intervention. The fact that the credibility of her intervention on the image damaged the credibility of her metaphors put her on a horizon of senses where she didn’t belong. Hence Karin has found her boundary again. She creates deception but she offers the tools to understand it as it is and so transcends it. *Nouvelles études sur le magnétisme animal*

is an exhibition which talks about two poles which attract each other but which still remain as they are. Man assumes animal attributes, feelings and atavistic fears. The figure who, in *Sisemus*, walks prudently along a disconnected plank, without making any noise, scrutinising us out of the corner of his eye, is a rational being, modern and civil, and dressed like a human being, but this does not prevent him from having anxieties which his conscience would probably reject as irrational. *Turg* is a splendid metaphor of maternal instinct, that unexpectedly links a human being with a cuddly teddy bear. Karin often concentrates on the affective link between man and exponents of the animal world, real or emulated whatever they may be: dolls, but also technological gadgets (like the mouse) or designer objects (the trend toward contemporary designer blobjects is one of the more evident manifestations of ‘animal magnetism’). In *Trio*, a dialogue is created between the protagonist, the cuddly toy he carries beneath his jacket and the strange being that is perched on his shoulder: three types of Nature, yet the same one.

The scenery also plays a decisive role for the clarity of the metaphor. Karin utilises photographs taken in urban frameworks going through rapid evolution: cities like Riga, Vilnius and Tallin, where the passage from socialism to unbridled capitalism has left visible signs on the landscape, scars which cannot be healed. Border areas in which other boundaries emerge, walls, railway lines and bridges. And then further works in progress, tumbledown dwellings, some in the stage of being rebuilt, again work in progress, places which are being transformed, not brand-new places. She writes:

“The scenery, like the mutants who frequent them, oscillate between very modern or futuristic elements, out-of-fashion or even antique ones, between dirt and plasticization, between photographic reality and virtual-imaginary dimensions. They have a natural predisposition for improvisation and the fantastic. They are also a little odd and rather peculiar”.

Like the mutant in *Administracija* who in his bizarre clothes which are worn

strangely inverted (the trousers are worn like a jumper) seems to claim to give to those who have erected the grey and functional place where they are, a fanciful lesson on style. Who knows: maybe one should really follow his suggestions.

Explored in all its complexity, the hybrid is therefore proposed, in Karin Andersen's works, as a complete metaphor of our contemporaneity. And as in every real fairy tale, the ethical imperative becomes the direction to take. We can't resist the 'animal magnetism', a full appreciation of our humanity can only come out of this.