

The representation of the true artificial body (last version)

On the occasion of the Posthuman exhibition held in Hamburg in 1993, Jeffrey Deitch, who as you know, curated the exhibition, spoke the prophetic words: we stand at the eve of a completely new era, an era in which radical developments in the biological sciences will take place. Although I think that we already were in that new era in 1993, a new milestone was recently reached when scientists announced that the atlas of the human being has been mapped. Meanwhile we have become used to all the possibilities of genetic and pharmaceutical manipulation. Deitch called this new era the biological era. The Posthuman exhibition intended to show works that would, perhaps, symbolise our time or the near future. As in the past Holbein portrayed in the figure of Erasmus the era of humanism in one single painting, as Houdon became the painter of the man of the Enlightenment, Gericault that of the romantic, Kokoschka of the psychological man and Bacon of the existentialist, so one of the artists selected by Deitch would presumably make the work that will for ever be associated with the biological era. Who will be selected, who will be the chosen one? Will it be Jeff Koons, Deitch's protege at that time, or Matthew Barney, or Cindy Sherman, or Clegg and Guttman? All these artists, some or whom should have been discussed by Norman Bryson, were included in the Posthuman exhibition.

The biological man is the man who celebrates the artificial, who is not satisfied with acknowledging that the body owes everything to culture, but who uses the phantasmatic to demonstrate the possibilities of manipulating the human body and bodily functions.

In the eyes of Deitch, Jeff Koons was probably the embodiment of the artificial human being. Jeff Koons, on the other hand, points towards Michael Jackson as the perfect example of the artificial biological man. 'Jackson', I am quoting Koons, 'does not want to wait for evolution, for the slow development of a Darwinian process', but exploits all available medical-technical means to create a new image in order to be able to respond the longings of his audience. Koons emphasizes the "artifice" in "art"; it is only through artifice that human beings can create beauty and perfection. God, so he said, creates nature, and this nature is so perfect that - I am still quoting Koons - it is almost artificial.

If Michael Jackson is Koons exemplary posthuman man, others think Orlan the French performance artist, to be the best example. She has in several of her cosmetic surgeries sacrificed her obsolete body too, and not only that, she has thematised this process constantly in her work since the early seventies. A posthuman woman avant la lettre? She will not be the only one.

The Posthuman implies total control over health and appearance. Appearance will be modeled more and more after the images we can find in a certain culture or historical tradition. Orlan's ideal body was compiled from representations of bodily parts originating in the history of art. Nowadays - but this changes everyday - the ideal body has the lips or eyes of Claudia Schiffer, the cheeks of Bridney Spears perhaps and the legs of Elle McPherson. Drugs nowadays are not only used to cure people but to engineer their lives, and to prevent or postpone degeneration.

In the 1993 exhibition Matthew Barney, Cindy Sherman, Taro Chiezo, Yasumasa Morimura, Clegg and Guttman and Paul McCarthy offered us images of the artificial human being. However, the differences amongst these artists are big. Paul McCarthy's tree-fucking man can hardly be taken seriously as the image of the biological man. He belongs to another era. When we hear McCarthy talking about this installation we notice a critical undertone, an undertone we associate with the political engagement of the seventies, but apparently still alive with artists of his generation. This critical undertone was directed against the Disneyfication of our society, against the loss of individuality, against isolation and alienation. One of his most recent works, called *Chocolate Blockhead* that he made for the Expo 2000 in Hanover, Germany is again a representation of a fake world dominated by consumerism. For 5 German Marks you can get a phallic nose from Paul McCarthy's *Nose Bar*, which appears to be a thick, but hollow piece of chocolate. This nose bar is inside a 29 meters high chocolate brown plastic puppet with cartoon-like features and an axe in his nose. Pinocchio is still his model. He cheats us the way we are cheated always, the way we wanted to be cheated. This critical irony is completely absent if one listens to Koons, or to Barney and Chiezo. Koons and Barney celebrate the new - I would almost say - fanged man. Taro Chiezo is more commonsensical when he states that the new Otaku man is a man or woman, who in the privacy of his or her room spends time with the computer and other machinery as extensions of the body. Nevertheless, most of these different forms of posthuman art seem to have one thing in common. In posthuman art the idea of the capacity to construct the human body by way of new technologies and a new consumer culture goes together with explicit expressions and representations of primary libidinal drives, oral, anal or genital. It goes hand in hand with things that bring human beings close to animals and nature. Most of these artists make use in one way or the other of the natural drives, of the sexual-loaded mechanical, the ugly, the abject and the uncanny or of the bizarre qualities of the applied materials and representations. I will come to that shortly. But first let me say a few more words about artificiality - that apparent opposite of the natural drives.

In the tradition of modernism artificiality had acquired an unfavorable connotation, which affected daily usage. Originally, artificial meant "to be in accordance with art" or "obtained by art" and therefore artificiality was on the side of art and culture, as Koons would have it today. In modernism as well as in performance art of the seventies it became morally wrong. The artificial could be described in the same terms as Greenberg defined "Kitsch". In the following quote from Greenberg's influential essay, I am putting 'the artificial' in the place of kitsch. "The artificial uses the academicised simulacra of genuine culture, it welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. [...] The artificial is mechanical and operates by formulas. [...] The artificial is faked, it is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times."

Koons re-valuation of the artificial should be understood, as not only a mockery of the paternal modernism, but also as an agreement with the way contemporary science considers the artificial. In

science the possibility to replace human organs by artificial organs is one of its highest achievements. But Koons takes an extreme position, with the result that one can hardly believe him. Do you believe him? The artificial is, for Koons, the only trustworthy, truthful and credible thing. "I trust a little sculpture of a deer more than a photo." (end of quote). Koons is right. In the age of digital reproduction the photo has lost its indexical signfunction and consequently its reliability and truthfulness. His strategy is clear: Put at stake what is the least trustworthy, what is so overtly a simulacrum. This strategy however happens at the same time in which artists are engaged with "a return of the real" as Hal Foster has put it. The abject art of the 90s is Foster's main evidence. In Abject Art artists make use of or refer to natural drives, to the ugly, the abject and the uncanny. Is this kind of art so remote from Posthuman art?

This return of the real is in fact often a return to the strategies and media applied by the performance art in the seventies.

Originally I planned to present a paper called "How theatre is leaning against the body of performance art", in which I would have argued that theatre performers and film directors look closely nowadays at the way corporeality was presented in performance art. Performance art not only inspired new developments in film and theater, it not only stimulated the theoretical debate about performativity and presentness versus presence, but it also seems to have everything to do with the wish to be credible, to be authentic, to create work that is as real as possible, that has no screen of protection- everything which is not a simulacrum. And here we see both a difference and a similarity with Koon's Posthuman Art. In performance art autobiographical stories were and are used, real time and space are involved, corporeality is stressed, the audience is made a witness of the prosecution. The viewer could not lean against his upholstered chair as one can do in theater and say: this is not my responsibility. Not a judge but the happening itself makes him a witness of the prosecution. This kind of art was not to be seen at the Posthuman exhibition or, rather, it did not fit into the conception of the exhibition, perhaps also because it was the subject of a concurrent New York exhibition: the Abject Art show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Hal Foster's examples are more or less the same as the ones showed in the Whitney. However both these diverse tendencies or strategies come together in their preoccupation with the abject, the ugly and the uncanny, especially with those things that are related to bodily fluids and to the openings of the human body or to waste and decay. Basically this fascination refers to the old opposition between nature and culture, but now put into a Freudian, Lacanian or Kristevan outfit of an Id, the libidinal drives of human nature versus the subject that has entered the domain of social prohibitions and order.

Both tendencies, if you may call it this way, were inherently contradictory. Most artists of the abject art show were obviously not celebrating the artificial. Rather they showed off with the real, with an authentic real. These images were not meant to be plain simulacra, but in fact they were nothing but. Jeff Koons, as I suggested the ideal representation of Jeffrey Deitch's Posthuman Art proclaimed the possibility of a true, in the sense of truthful artificiality. Truthfulness seems, even in the age of digital

reproduction and genetic manipulation, to be a last value, those artists engaged with the real won't give up, but even Koons still adhere to.

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