

SCHINKEL PAVILLON e.V. AUSSTELLUNGSRAUM FÜR ZEITGENÖSSISCHE SKULPTUR

The Brightness Inside

Laura McLean-Ferris

Humans, delicate creatures, are caught up in the “rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces,”¹ wrote Mark Fisher, describing the eerie knowledge that there are always other presences sharing our interiority with us. Humans have always been tangled up this way, with the composition and theatrics of the atmosphere, the turn of the planet around the sun, the movements of the landscape and most everything that lives with us on the Earth. But many other more recent forces too, now catch and drag our human systems one way or another: the gases and fumes of various machines, infinitesimal pearls of microplastic running around in every water source and bloodstream, the shifts in the flows of capital, the algorithmically timed euphoria and dysphoria that arrive with the chime of smartphone, countless pharmaceuticals, implants, prosthetics. The list goes on, it is made up of almost everything in our ecosystem, economy and infosphere (though some elements get deeper into us than others). “There is no inside except as a folding of the outside”, Fisher continues: “the mirror cracks, I am an other, and I always was.”²

The presence of so many others inside, the intuition that one’s thoughts might not always be fully one’s own: these might be one way of accounting for certain spikes in depictions of hybridity in art and literature since the postwar period, especially in relation to new technologies. Though hybridity is an abiding human concern seen in ancient cultures, the desire to move into the future, especially to move past incidents of global trauma such as world wars via waves of ever-developing new inventions, vehicles or media, also occasioned deep and complex forms of intimacy with technology that could seem hardwired. Was there a kind of screen inside us? Did the acceleration of vehicles and information change the speed of electrical currents that ran through human bodies and brains? Am I a machine, a computer, an android?

This inextricability has deepened and normalized. Are website users not, indeed, asked on a regular basis to confirm that they are human? To tick a box that says ‘I am not a robot’ or to complete (or even fail at) a frustrating task identifying fire hydrants or indecipherable letters and numbers. As Rosi Braidotti has pointed written, this mundane example points to the fact that human has become a question mark.³ And yet this human-machine hybrid imagery reminiscent of cyberpunk is only one facet of our hybrid interiors. Scientific developments in biology and other life sciences bring other living worlds closer. The inseparability of human bodies from our symbionts: fungi, bacteria and microorganisms that accompany us through life, and those species who create livable conditions for us – cleaning the air and the soil, fertilizing the fruit flowers. Organisms live in symbiosis, in a state of dependency with one another. The mirror folds and cracks, revealing the outside to be inside. We are inundated. It is as though humans might cut themselves open and find wires, data, tendrils of vine, insects and circuit boards, drugs, images, sunlight. But what of the subject who speaks? There are yet more ways in which others jostle inside. Past selves, multiple and overlapping models and markers of identity, homes, relationships, other places left behind in this lifetime or further in the past. And other others: the voices of family, ancestors, the disruptions of trauma, in the life of an individual or from past generations. Everything abjected, rejected has a place in the system too. And perhaps something else in the mix: an unquantifiable, unstudiable element that lambently powers the human.

¹ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London, Repeater Books, 2016) p.15

² Fisher, 2016, p.15

³ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (London, Polity Press, 2019), p. 1. Braidotti typifies the current era as posthuman, after critiques of enlightenment humanism that made ‘man’ the measure of all things and post-anthropocentrism which criticizes species hierarchies that would place humans at the top.

Henry James wrote that “relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.”⁴ In other words, the difficult task of the artist is to represent a closed ecosystem extracted from reality, so it can be considered and understood. Yet perhaps a different tradition emerges: one of artistic patterns that do not disguise the fact of boundaryless relations and interdependence. Visions of the hybrid, already polluted and inundated human. Tetsumi Kudo, writing in 1971 in the long shadow of nuclear devastation in Japan, that “the concept of DOMINATION (primitive antagonism) will be destroyed by the decomposition of values and by the seepage of values into one another...I forecast, here and now, the growth of the new ecology in the slough of ‘polluted nature’ and ‘decomposing humankind.’”⁵

That metamorphosis has not yet taken place, but the ecosystem that defines the human is changing - sharply and violently – and so might yet arrive. In the short story ‘Human Is’, by Philip K. Dick a couple, living in a reality where interplanetary space travel is possible, but whose particular unhappiness is drawn with an American 1950s cookie cutter, find their life disrupted by the presence of an ‘other’ in the body of the husband. The body of the husband, formerly a cruel man, has been co-opted by a kindly alien, with a beneficent vision of the humanity that it attempts to mimic. Could this be humanity undone? An alien vision that might be a preferable one? More recently, in Jeff VanderMeer’s novel *Annihilation*, a biologist inhales a sporal text which causes a change in her being which she refers to as a ‘brightness’.⁶ Her senses become increasingly sharpened and her environment becomes thrillingly charged with sound, texture and beauty. All the while, she is becoming less human.

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⁴ Henry James, *Literary Criticism Vol 2: French Writers, Other European Writers, Prefaces to the New York Edition*, Ed. Leon Edel. (New York: Library of America, 1984) p. 1075

⁵ Tetsumi Kudo, ‘Pollution – Cultivation – New Ecology’, 1971, published in *Tetsumi Kudo: Garden of Metamorphosis* (Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 2008), p. 129-31

⁶ Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (New York, FSG Originals, 2014)