

Janaina Tschäpe: a monstrous sublime

by Germano Celant

In order to place Janaina Tschäpe's creative adventure historically, one needs to touch on the artistic situation of the 1990s, when the artist began studying at the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst in Hamburg. Her frames of reference was European art and its challenge to the prevailing iconographic and photographic qualities of American art, expressed through work that ranged from the performances of Joseph Beuys and Henning Christiansen to the pictorial installations of Imi Knoebel, by way of neo-expressionist expressions fluctuating between Georg Baselitz and Joerg Immendorf.

However if this was the artistic climate, defined by the academic world, true innovation did not reside in the world of tradition, but rather in the realm of technology, which, with its capacity for ceaseless investigation, had reached a point where modifications were being made to the corporeal structure itself, pushing it to a post-human condition. Whether in cinema or in the visual quest to alter one's own body, this means of self-expression and the gratifying value of technological or epidermal alteration moves away from the composed if theatrical use of the person, from Vito Acconci to Cindy Sherman. A new being emerges – the cyborg – through extreme modifications ranging from body building to bio-technological operations and recourse to mechanical insertions or surgical interventions, and it attains a strongly constructed and artificial identity.

This is a search for fluid subjectivity where anatomy, whether sexual or emotional, is no longer permanent, but can be modified, so that destiny can be shaped and gender becomes supplely changeable. Transgender has emerged, calling into question the process of defining male and female individuality. The osmosis between opposites entails a transformation of the external and internal limits of the human figure, which is molded or modified, as in the work of Orlan, or is extended and expanded, as in the work of Sterlac. The intention is to expand one's own corporeal territory, producing a modified identity, in a state of perpetual metamorphosis.

In 1996 Janaina Tschäpe began defining a stage where she put herself as



protagonist, using her body; but dealing with genetic modifications and new codifications of the flesh, through information technologies, she puts forward her persona as a mirror of her identity. She does not accept artificial ramifications, introducing replacement parts or fibers, but simply reshapes parts of her body, with latex prostheses filled with water. This is by no means a cyber-body, but rather an almost surreal interweaving between liquid entity and body. It is a process of assimilation in which the artist creates an enigmatic 'difference' where the human figure seeks logic, where the extraneousness of a prosthesis produces a diversity, bringing into question the being's rigid structure.

Constructing a metamorphosis of herself, Tschäpe tends to liberate the way her identity functions, to arrive at an ‘astounding’ dimension, typical of the magical universe, from the siren to the unicorn, suspended between human being and myth.

The objectification of a ‘surreal’ body corresponds to the attempt to designate or open up a space, a stage in the world of images, where objective and subjective are not considered opposites or antinomic. In the work of Max Ernst and René Magritte, Maya Deren and Louise Bourgeois, the artist looks inward for imaginary collisions, capable of generating a different figuration of the feminine. Between 1992 and 1996, when Tschäpe was living in Germany and Brazil, she stopped making sculpture and began focusing on photography, which became a spectacular space of ejection, a zone of suspended reality, wherein an indefinite series of fantasies can open up. It is a theater, entrusted with the rapid and immediate recording of an astounding condition, which can also be defined as the ‘stage set of her desires’. It is a search for an interiority by way of externals, a quest for corporeal limits, which is also inspired by the Afro-Brazilian culture of Salvador, with its Candomblé rituals and an osmosis between religion and paganism. This is a mix that accepts the idea of ‘seeing’ and ‘believing’, resorting to the theatricality of magical objects. This explains, after Tschäpe’s move to New York in 1996, her search for a fortuitous collision between body and object initially led her to choose a mattress, the oneiric symbol par excellence, as an object consonant with her ideas. The result was a performative dynamic that revealed its desire to ‘sum up’ the universe of day and night, conscious and unconscious, celebrating its energetic flow. “It was a solitary thing, it was a kind of transparent performance, it was just me finding the city, and finding myself.”¹

¹ Germano Celant, interview with Janaina Tschäpe, New York, 2005, unpublished.



Another way to enact a change of identity is the mask, which the artist incorporated into her work in 1997, revealing her interest in the primitive and in Afro-Latin cultural tradition. Wearing a second skin on her face, Tschäpe tends to validate her search for a blend of different representations – the naïf, the child, the lunatic – in a sort of emblematic figure in whom one can recognize not only personal themes, but also anthropological assertions about her activity. Hers is a ‘hybrid’ image that avoids scientific rationality, but is, instead, a way of finding a different formality, one that can be applied to the body and can identify a magical sort of seduction, going against stereotypes of the feminine and women.

The mask is offered as the telos of an evolution and the point of convergence of different histories, the sum total of which constitutes a new being; the facial disguise is an ‘other than the self’ that, confusing characteristic features, effects a passage between object and subject, invites exchanges of identity and forms, which also leads to a form of instability of the figure. Intuiting this danger of continuous fluidity, the artist decided to move from an interchangeability of identity to a perpetual motion of her body. Thus after



donning the last mask, which is completely white, she says: “I raised the face and I raised the identity,”² and she then decided to ‘move’ into the world. The change of sign then reveals her interest in a dynamic realm, beyond her interiority but tied to traveling and to related autobiographical experiences.

In 1996 Tschäpe began a visual ‘voyage’ that materialized in *100 Little Deaths*, 1996-2002, a photographic sequence where what matters is the instability of the body in the space of different urban settings and the rapid execution. Moving between countries and continents, the artist recorded her physical transmutations and her passages through places: “the space was very related to either new places I was living, or new places I was going to... I was really a landscape.”³ Her work no longer consisted of maskings, but rather of actions that can germinate images, variable in time and space, transmuting the body into sculpture and experiencing the repetitiveness of an action, applied only to herself. “I want to be able to be somewhere and create something just with the camera and me, without having to use anything.”⁴

Mutation is transferred into a metaphor of an encounter between person and setting, where desire is also a place of death, the place where the image is not an integral part of a meaning, except to suggest the limit of the loss of self in a territory: “It was the idea of me dying, or living a little history, that was very short in every place. Like dying a little bit.”⁵ The result is a ‘dreamed’ totality precisely because the oneiric images are ephemeral and at the threshold of reality. Losing herself in them, Tschäpe becomes a maker of ‘visions’ in which physical and psychophysical dynamics are interwoven. Like

² Germano Celant, op.cit.

³ Germano Celant, op.cit.

⁴ Germano Celant, op.cit.

⁵ Germano Celant, op.cit.

Narcissus, she enters her reflected image, but is negated as identity – her face is always hidden, as if to obliterate her disturbing eyes – to explore a different dimension of female existence. She aspires to a freedom of absolute and unconditional movement, determined only by herself, but she is aware that this result is inevitably buildable within a defined territory. For this reason she never stays still but finds places and loses herself in them, to maintain a dynamic continuity between ego and id, person and context. She dies in these places, because she deliberately accentuates her detachment from others, with whom she has difficulty communicating.

In this sense the loss and dissolution of the eyes indicate a ‘dislocation’ of signs, typical of surreal thought, where beauty is no longer thinkable in one sole place or in a rigid harmony, a seductive glance, or a sensual apparition. Instead it can also exist in a state leading into its opposite, deformation and disharmony, where the body can be undone and disjoined, without identity and without limits. And since the name Janaina means Orixá iemanjá, or ‘queen of the ocean’ in Candomblé, the new definition of her body passes through a fluid expansion; it is liquid, ‘non-epidermal’, made up of a transparent film, in latex, full of water, which, having neither depth nor materiality, as in *Capri Exterior*, 1999, reflects the incorporeal nature of the dream.

In *He drowned in her eyes as she asked him to follow*, 2000, shot in Spain, Brazil, and the United States, the 20-minute super-8 film tells a story without becoming narrative. “I like the idea of working with a fragmented narrative, so the viewer has room to construct a story for him/herself”⁶ about a creature whose epidermal boundary of the hand, foot, face, or leg expands and multiplies, going beyond itself to reveal a hidden order. It is the continuation of a discourse ‘from within’ that escapes any concrete weight

⁶ Quoted by Linda Yablonsky, in “Putting Guts on the Outside, *Artnews*, September 2003.

other than visual language, and in particular language that speaks through images. In the interstices of the adventure between two beings, one intuits a relationship and the tragic death of a sailor and a siren. The latter, for Tschäpe, is the historical and literary prototype of the mythical woman, who seduces through the double nature of her being. An aquatic nymph who symbolizes an extra-human context, thereby shifting the image of the woman from the preordained and disenchanting dimension to a surprising and monstrous condition (in the sense that *monstrum* originally meant a marvel). Her otherness, as a half-human and half-animal being, projects her into a mythical place where she is divine – “janaina,” a sea divinity, with her blue garment, green teeth, and blue legs – an original figure associated with a fantastical world: the unknown universe of man, fisherman, or sailor.

Devil, 2000, belongs to the same realm, where, in a perverse game, the naked and sensual figure of the woman reveals feral wings, almost an extension of the ‘perverse’ and the delirious that align within the human person. It is almost an initiatory declaration of descent to the underworld of the unconscious and the unknown, which seems to trace the artist’s itinerary. The subversive potential of this image is a way to distance oneself from the codified rules of human existence. Making oneself other and different signifies keeping the voyeur-viewer suspended, to subject him or her to a series of questions about the concept of the feminine. An analysis of how the topos of the figure of the woman is represented in painting and in literature reveals a predominance of the nude, which implies a natural offering and male excitation. This is an innocent subject that, placed in an architectural and urban context, as in the work of Paul Delvaux and René Magritte, modifies the iconography of the city, turning it into an Eden and a nirvana. Tschäpe

subverts this positive and mythical function, to introduce a different sort of physical integrity, that of the woman as the almost diabolical ‘generatrix’ of tension and uncontrolled energy. She raises doubts about her naturalness and virginity, declaring herself as a non-neutral, but fatal being. It is a miraculous apparition, a ferment of revelation as well as danger.

The disruptive power of the feminine does not only proceed through seduction and sexual behavior; it also unfolds in everyday gestures, where it functions as a great mother for the family and for social life. In *Camaleoas*, 2002, the artist shoots and documents, as in a reality show, the simple, daily actions of four women, Fatima, Cristal, Jani, and Claudia, who occupy the screen with their spontaneity. The inhabitants of a favela in Rio de Janeiro, they reflect its behavior and way of life, but their performance before the camera pushes them to act the roles of four heroines, the Camaleoas, or chameleons, constructing their personalities and clothing, their masks and stage props. There is a deliberate and sought out departure from everyday life, which pertains to the female, capable inventing a new personality for herself through even the most abject daily realities of life.

In *After the Rain*, 2003, shot in the mountains and along the coast of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais and presented on three screens, the classical nature of the female divinity is transformed into an astonishing plastic vision, brought alive through a modification of the body. It is an apparition of a sacred nature, timeless, a bearer of appendices and soft and sensual prostheses, colorful and silky, which transfigure the figure in surprising fashion. Female beings who do not fall within any representative category, but are reality, since they possess names like Mana, Neia, Ducha, Dani, and

Zeth, and are portrayed in real settings, such as meadows, forests, and courtyards. They are creatures that, through a liquid mucus, exhibit unusual protuberances, made of tubes and spheres, tulle and elastic fabric, orange, pink, green, or blue in color. In an evolution of the prostheses of the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, but in a biomorphic direction, they cover parts of the body, from the neck down, and are almost always organic in nature and full of water, so they float freely in their environments, be these oceans, waterfalls, or rivers, as if they were fetuses in a maternal womb. These are divinities that personify fertilizing water, interwoven with the fecund earth, almost like memories of a surreal female movement, as in the paintings of Eleonora Carrington and Frida Kahlo. Sources of life, nurturers, they exemplify woman's descent to and return from the original sources of unknown and mysterious energy, when she was a primordial creature – a siren or an aquatic serpent: “I wanted to create a world between rainstorm, between reality and fiction, something that bursts out of you, like when you walk into the woods after rain and you see mushrooms coming out.”⁷

It is an attempt to return to lost Olympus, where Venus is not presented through her perfection, but through the emblematic details that make her a creative force, since she is half-woman and half-fish. She is a womb and a vessel, a uterus and a fetus, which contains within itself a series of imaginary possibilities. It is interesting to note that at the Centre d'Art in Albi, Toulouse, France, *After the Rain* was shown in a basement of an old building, as if Tschäpe wanted to develop the analogy of the womb-matrix of the hollow, sign of intimacy and repose, to the point where the installation included a drawing and some prostheses, revealing the alchemical gestation of art, made of painting and

⁷ Linda Yablonsky, op.cit.

sculpture, film and photography, which converge in a hermetic vessel, where the two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality of things become living forms.

The house too, with its windows and its illuminated interiors, represents an internal dimension, the warm and welcoming environment that protects the fragile being from external adversity and, in fact, it becomes a territory of life for the marvelous being in *The Moat and the Moon*, 2003. After leaving the water and traversing a wood, the figure with an extendible and elastic body finds, in the sensibility of a historic place, imbued with culture, a cozy and sheltered environment, which, in the work's installation, offers its damask-covered walls for the display of documentary evidence of the event filmed and photographed by Tschäpe.

In *Agua viva*, 2003, a liquid territory accommodates the evolution of a sublime figure with female connotations. It is an aquatic divinity whose body and garments float, creating erotic and marvelous images. Its gestures are gentle and sensual, interweaving with organic forms that can be captured or move freely, as if their relationship to the water nymph were one of attraction and repulsion, in a sort of amorous game. In *Agua viva*, the mutable and indefinite image of the liquid in which the female figure lives relates to the drawings *The Interior of Water*, 2003 which strive to express the lightness and mobility of the context. Not being documents of an event or a performance, they are a presence full of an inner vision of aquatic places, as if they were aspiring to lower the glance of the being that is submerged and will adapt its perception to the colors and to the transparency of the water. In the drawings, watercolors on paper, so numerous that they sometimes take the form of rolls or long folders, a scene unfolds with infinite variations, never-ending, to begin again, since the glance is suspended within the liquid. There is a

relentless multiplicity of luminous reflections, which, moving across the surface of the sea or river, become elements and landscapes of colors that gradually slide into one another, with suspended and powerful effects.

In her drawings the artist is a spectator to her aquatic immersion, in *Blood, Sea*, 2004, a 4-channel video installation, she is, instead, and external witness to a world of aquatic creatures that are fascinating, being half-fish, half-woman. They are the sirens in the amusement park in Weeki Wachee, Florida. The work is inspired by a text written by Calvino that states, “The conditions that obtained when life had not yet emerged from oceans have not subsequently changed a great deal for the cells of the human body, bathed by the primordial wave which continues to flow in the arteries. Our blood in fact has a chemical composition analogous to that of the sea of our origins, from which the first living cells and the first multicellular beings derived the oxygen and the other elements necessary to life. With the evolution of more complex organisms, the problem of maintaining a maximum number of cells in contact with the liquid environment could not be solved simply by the expansion of the exterior surface: those organisms endowed with hollow structures, into which the sea water could flow, found themselves at an advantage. But it was only with the ramification of these cavities into a system of blood circulation that distribution of oxygen was guaranteed to the complex of cells, thus making terrestrial life possible. The sea where living creatures were at one time immersed is now enclosed within their bodies.”⁸

⁸ Italo Calvino, *t zero*, Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego, CA, 1969, translated by William Weaver.

The sirens are precisely those creatures dreamed by Calvino, fascinating despite their undeniable monstrosity. Women with fishtails, expert at diving and breathing underwater, who inhabit and move about in an aquarium, are symbols of a seduction that is both physical and intellectual. Tschäpe chooses them for their allure as well as for their dangerousness, as maidens of the sea who lure navigators with their appearance and their song. According to legend, the sirens' virginal upper bodies, which resemble those of humans, float while their scaly tails remains hidden beneath the water. The artist shows them in their totality so that in the film they become creatures of the abyss, enamored of their gestures and movements, a blend of female narcissism and male enchantment.

The figure is the sign of a danger, namely the risk of being seduced with a resulting loss of reason as well as material riches; but it is at the same time the double image of a reality that is rich and potent because it is the aggregate of separate universes. The artist, wishing to assume the double position of navigator and siren, films them from above and from within the water, while they execute their sensual and soft movements. What is important is the revelation of their enchantment, which, according to various philosophical interpretations, from Adorno to Horkheimer, can presuppose the power of the unknown and the cerebral, and can call into question the virile male (Odysseus) who embodies progress and the bourgeoisie. "Directly recalling a recent past, the sirens threaten, with the irresistible promise of pleasure, which their song is heralded and heard, the patriarchal order that restores to each his life only in return for his entire temporal duration."⁹

⁹ T.W. Adorno-M. Horkheimer, *Dialettica dell' Illuminismo*, Turin, Einaudi, 1968, p. 41 (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, 2002, Translation by Edmund Jephcott).



A song that promises pleasure, but perhaps leads only to death. The encounter with these beings is in fact unpredictable, and the outcome cannot be known. There is an oscillation between seduction and danger, hero and death, art and politics, which makes Tschäpe's work enchanting, and she fosters our sense of fantasy, without ignoring the critical tension toward the universe of power.

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