

Nazim Ünal Yilmaz & Kay Walkowiak
Transtone, Krokus Gallery Bratislava
1.2.-15.3.2013

Krokus Gallery presents the first joint exhibition of two young artists living and working in Vienna: the painter Nazim Ünal Yilmaz and the sculptor Kay Walkowiak. This exhibition entitled "Transtone" is a selection of their current work.

Face to face with a chimera

In the room stands a creature of uncertain origin, half man, half beast: judging by the high heels and tights it could be a woman, but the face dominated by a large red nose (or is it a beak?) is more reminiscent of some kind of fantastical creature with feathers on its head (or is it a hat?). The broad shoulders and the red veil covering its protruding genitals indicate that it could be a man. What's going on here and with whom? What is it we are dealing with? Questions on the identity of the figure in the picture *I don't find myself beautiful* (2012) by Nazim Ünal Yilmaz have to be asked. In the background a lady's dressing-table with a mirror, a knife lying on it. The desire to be beautiful has remained unfulfilled.

In Yilmaz's paintings, individual biography clashes with traces of a collective history and the present. As an artist working in the medium with a long history, he is ready to confront the tradition of Western European painting in terms of both form and content. In his expressive, figurative compositions, we can find references to the work of the avant-garde from the beginning of the 20th century as well as to earlier Renaissance and Baroque painting. His eclecticism is a programme; through the use of complex visual language, he questions the modernistic message that knowledge of the world is based on objective and rationally defined categories. He is interested in, so to say, unconventional situations that question our idea of "normal" by searching for in-between space where some kind of transformation can take place. In the paintings presented in the Transtone exhibition, Yilmaz deconstructs the socially accepted definition of gender and sex and the values associated with them, which are the pillars for creating and understanding one's own identity.

A look into a mirror is important for our self-recognition. However, the integrity of our identity, our "self", is strongly influenced by others, and as Jacques Lacan argues, self-consciousness appears as the result of the interaction between the subject, its reflection in the mirror and others whose view reflect how they see him. Our alienation lies in the fact that we are born into a culture which has a great influence on who we become; on the other hand, we have the freedom to change our image according to our own fantasies. When Yilmaz paints hybrid figures in front of a mirror, he is showing that it is not easy to find a harmony between both sides. A naked male figure in the painting *Dress-Table* (2012) wearing blue high-heels opens a dressing-table drawer in a wig, as if caught in the act. Behind his back an almost allegorical scene is being played out: winged figures reminiscent of angels with split faces and flailing hands. In the background behind the open door there is the sitting figure of a man taking off (or putting on?) his trousers. The picture is divided into two parallel scenes, separated by an open door as a symbol of transition, a dividing line between what is outside and what is inside, what is known and what is secret.

In the case of a hybrid subject it is impossible to apply the single categories of race, sex or gender. We cannot refer to the figures in Yilmaz's paintings in the terms of "either-or". Instead, we need the logics based on "both-and", since only this opens an in-between space where difference can virtually appear. Binary and often hierarchically structured categories such as man-woman, black-white, familiar-strange simply do not work here and a hybrid subject attains the status of a notional "third figure". From the history we know that intolerance against difference in society can have far-reaching consequences. Hybrid subjects are no invention of the modern age – they were known in ancient times and in the Middle Ages as a "polyphonous" social figure to whom people attributed negative traits such as uncleanness, inferiority, immorality. Some of these ideas prevailed until the twentieth century – and some are still prevalent today. A hybrid subject threatens the existing social order; it is a monster, a bastard which must be marked and singled out. In the picture *"Self-portrait with wig (Confrontation)"* (2012), two chimeras stand face to face: a man in a wig with red lips (neither a man nor a woman), and a monster with the figure of a man and the tentacles of an octopus (neither a man nor a beast). At this point, one imagines a cyborg as described by Donna Haraway in her manifesto: a creature of many forms born in the process of layering, crossing and transgressing borders and traditional divisions such as "spirit and body, beast and man, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilised."

We can also perceive the hybrid subject as a productive figure whose subversive power lies in the possibility of freeing oneself from the traditional categories of knowledge and action. As the sociologist Georg Kneer put it, hybridity is a social practice of transcultural border-crossing, where dominant rules and patterns are deactivated. Yilmaz's compositions show that it is not an easy task, but that it is essentially important for a critical practice that through the form of resistance gives a space to marginal figures and themes in our culture.

The automatising of pleasure and a fluid identity

The scientific, technological and sexual revolution of the second half of the twentieth century brought with it as well as greater comfort in life and more freedom, increasing control of public and private life. The border between public and private has been blurred as a result of the ever-present media in which intimacy is a hot issue. Thus this concept has been transformed to the item of consumption and along with sexuality it helped in opening the new markets. Even though Nazim Ünal Yilmaz and Kay Walkowiak's work is different in many ways, it is close in its very interest in normative ideas and control mechanisms linked with the body as a mark of our identity and source of pleasure.

As opposed to Yilmaz's expressive painter's hand, Kay Walkowiak's objects and installations stand out for their industrial aesthetics in the spirit of minimalism and contemporary product design, which allows him to create model situations that cross over the border of the subject. He links the abstract form of iron structures with the ready-made, thus introducing a figurative dimension and narrativity into his works. "I don't meet expectations", Walkowiak comments his work. The significance of this work grows in interaction with the viewer, who is challenged to apply his/her own cultural knowledge on things and on their function in social relations. Despite the openness of the meaning of his sculptures in the Transtone exhibition, it is possible to find in them a repeated interest in cultural codes related to the economics of desire and the fetishization of mass-produced

items. Walkowiak examines the ambivalence of the world of objects which we have created for ourselves and which is getting out of control.

The installation entitled *Electric Ladies* (2009) is composed of metal structures in pastel colours that resemble tripods, each of which has within it an “embedded” rubber model of the female genitalia which can be bought in erotic shops. Equipped with an electric cable, they look like household electrical goods. The machine becomes a source of bodily pleasure and a vision of fulfilling sexual needs whenever and wherever. Just plug it in and use.

The right to pleasure in a society of hyper-consumption has changed into a marathon of compulsory pleasure, and as Gilles Lipovetsky writes, after the era of sexual revolt, it is the turn of the commercialisation of erotica, the period of “high-performance, hypertechnical and effective sex”. The imperative of performance is no longer limited to the area of business and top sport, but has also taken over our intimate life. It is no coincidence that the metal trestles in *Electric Ladies* look like an exercise machine. Walkowiak’s interest in the economics of sport also resulted in further objects such as *Ich Ich* (2008) and *Trousers* (2011).

When trying to interpret *Electric Ladies*, wider references to the “achievements” of technological development in medicine and science, in fields such as genetic manipulation or transplants and plastic surgery, are possible. The two last fields in particular are experiencing a particular boom and disturb the borders that once existed between nature and culture, between man and machine. Together with their expansion, the questions of “natural” and “artificial” identity come up more and more intensively. In the installation *Mise en scène* (2009), Walkowiak has created a scene made out of metal stands on which women’s wigs are hanging. Their different colours and styles give the opportunity of choice; the absence of a body in the space and the human size of the stands invite interaction. The viewer’s movement across the scene fills up the empty space and gives a performative dimension to the static installation. Hair is a complex cultural “material”; its rich symbolism opens up several levels of meaning from the ideal of beauty to the source of strength and the object of adoration and desire. In combination with the title of Walkowiak’s work which refers to the world of the theatre and cinema, the installation can be seen as a metaphor of the changing identity of the postmodern subject which like an actor in a film can turn into someone else with the help of props. Just like Yilmaz, Walkowiak too is interested in today’s practices of putting on a show, which know no limits.

Gabriela Kisová
Curator of the exhibition