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A Story about Hair

“The warder who came in to prepare her for the sixth session of exorcism found her dead ... in her bed ... Strands of hair gushed like bubbles as they grew back on her shaven head.”
(G. G. Márquez)

The writer’s pen turned a sensational newspaper story into a miniature masterpiece that speaks about a beautiful twelve-year old marquise who was bitten by a rabid dog and in accordance with local beliefs subjected to an inhuman healing ritual. The master discovered sources for it by coincidence when he happened to be present during the emptying of the crypt of an old convent: a stream of living hair the intense colour of copper and with a total length of over twenty-two metres spilled out from behind a tombstone.

Human hair continues to grow after death, sometimes even at a rate of one centimetre a month, as is evident from all those metres of hair that multiplied over two hundred years. A few lines from a gossip column were transplanted into the world of art and transformed.

Standing in front of the work of Polona Tratnik, we are faced with a completely different attempt at artistic transformation, although it also has to do with the extraordinary growth of hair separated from the living person’s body.

A long time ago, Kant stated that fine art evidences its superiority in the beautiful descriptions of things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the evils of death can be very beautifully described and even represented in pictures. But according to Kant, only one kind of ugliness is incapable of being represented conformably to nature without destroying all its artistic beauty, namely that which elicits disgust. “For, as in this strange sensation, which depends purely on the imagination, the object is represented as insisting, as it were, upon our enjoying it, while we still set our face against it, the artificial representation of the object is no longer distinguishable from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and so it cannot possibly be regarded as beautiful.” (Kant, § 48) Therefore, according to Kant, the art of sculpture, since art in its output is almost confused with nature, must exclude from its creations the direct representation of ugly objects. These can consequently be represented only by means of allegory, or attributes – in other words, indirectly. Although the borders of art have stretched considerably since Kant’s time, echoes of his commandments can still be heard. Here, we must ask ourselves whether the only reason for this is in fact the inability of art to capture and display objects in their directness: to show “It”.

In protest against a Kantian, disinterested critique of art, women artists in particular seem to introduce the body in art in all its distinctly material aspects (bodily fluids in the work of Helen Chadwick, exploration of the abject by Cindy Sherman, the endoscopic journey into the body by Mona Hatoum). Younger generations are now able to use the achievements of biotechnology and their growing applicability in the world of art. Another of these women artists is Polona Tratnik.

The present installation encourages the visitor to establish intimate contact with the life that he or she can sense behind the walls of an incubator. In a Petri dish, the artist's hair sprouts on agar nutrient based on serum from the artist's blood. The visitor can catch only glimpses of the fragile life in a carefully isolated container that simulates the conditions inside the body.

An aesthetic abstraction, rooted deeply in the material, glows in sharp light from behind the incubated phantom in the middle of the gallery: the exhibited photograph enlarges and aestheticizes the object to the extent that it is no longer documentary; although it is a document of the state of things, the photograph is contextualized and mediated by means of the artist's formal language. The photographic enlargement of a hair, emphasised with a bunch of real hair, resembles close-up shots of body parts from *Documents*, a magazine of dissident surrealists from the late 1920s: displayed as an image in a frame – like the object in the incubator – and fixed to the wall of the gallery, it from a distance resembles a relic that can be seen as a document only from one particular angle.

The use of organic material introduces a new form of economy in the world of art, which replaces the traditional economy of the art of imitating nature and the world of people with the embodiment of nature's self-application that includes the becoming of the human body. Tratnik's first work with organic matter is the installation *37°C* (2001): she covered a wax statue shaped as a body part with a gelatine nutrient, on which a layer of skin cells grew in suitable conditions. The artist later employed micro-organisms to explore the micro world of the human body (*Private Micro Organisms*, 2004). Her work appears to be an original version of the fascination with the reproductive and creative aspects of "life" and "nature", which were long ago adopted as a model of artistic creativity and which due to Kant's contribution to the understanding of the beautiful and sublime still represent a source of aesthetic reflection. The Kantian sublime in general refers to that part of nature that goes beyond any imagination or traditional representation, and that transcends individual lives. What we are dealing with here is an attempt at representing the unimaginable, the created presence of something that cannot be present. In the age of the discovery of genetic records, we can conceive of their (non)representability in terms of the Kantian sublime. We can also find ourselves in a sublime "situation" when we encounter the world of micro-organisms from the human body, which we cannot imagine or (re)present in its entirety (this is also true for the encounter with a large close-up photograph that reveals the otherwise unimaginable structure of body parts).

The work of Polona Tratnik as a whole is defined both by the moment of embodiment and the moment of disembodiment, whereas in its repulsive aspect, in its rejection of the participation of the imagination, it is essentially sublime. Here, we are also faced with the material "Other" of the Kantian aesthetic system, disgust with excremental content (the effects of the multiplication of micro-organisms). This excremental content represents the "Other" in terms of the dematerialised economy of our ordinary, idealistic, abstract attitude towards artistic representation of the body and towards scientific handling of organic matter. The idea that excrement can become a sublime object brings the sublime to the point of ironic commentary. This sublime can also be discussed in connection with the Lacanian Real, hidden and traumatic, beyond our existence or sense of reality, whose disturbing effects can be felt in unusual and unexpected places.

The use of organic matter involves Tratnik's work in an intense play of attraction and repulsion: in the installation *37°C*, with its *unheimlich* effects, there is an initial sense of doubt whether something is alive or dead; the unusual horrifying effect is created by

independently displayed body parts (an arm, a breast). The fragmentation of the body somewhat resembles the results of the transformation of the mortal remains of saints into relics.

As it is known, the horrifying according to Freud represents the intrusion of the foreign into the familiar, or the return of once-familiar phenomena and objects as foreign or ambiguous. Surrealists in particular became masters at finding different strategies of presenting something that triggers morbid anxiety as aesthetic. But this aesthetic is connected with the sublime rather than the beautiful. This “convulsive” beauty does not merely emphasise the formless and unimaginable, but blends pleasure and horror, attraction and repulsion; it triggers a type of negative pleasure that is presented by means of feminine attributes. In Polona Tratnik’s further work with organic matter, these *unheimlich* effects are in places transformed with the phenomenology of disgust, through the repulsion and attraction experienced during the encounter with the abject (the “dejected”, “contemptible”). In both, the disquieting uncanny and the disgusting abject, we observe the response of a subject’s defence mechanism to danger that threatens his or her physical integrity. Disgust in particular shatters the ideas of purity and health, its function being the original protection from contamination, impurity and death. If anything, Tratnik’s work entails disgust with the saturation, the richness of life (the multiplication of micro-organisms and growth of skin and hair cells) rather than disgust with decay. From this point of view, we could speak about Tratnik’s work in terms of a form of the aesthetics of the abject.

In her installation *Microcosm* (part of the *Private Micro Organisms* project, 2004), the artist drew closest to the abject through an unexpectedly intensive generation of disgust. This ambivalent experience of disgust is direct and physiological (the degree of aliveness of the material), unlike anxiety, the horrible and discomfort. The ambivalence (the aesthetic/abject) is connected with a certain openness and an unfinished state of the work: the bodily micro-organisms multiply on bathroom furniture smeared with agar nutrient and can be observed forming various colonies; in addition, the micro-organisms create an increasingly powerful smell that spreads from behind the plastic partition as an arbitrary non-aesthetic effect of organic matter, which by causing a feeling of disgust in fact cuts into the privacy of the individual. The abject aspect is in acute contradiction with the aesthetic enlargements of micro-organisms that are projected on the wall of the gallery. This work represents a new chapter in the artist’s quest for the ways of juxtaposing the organic and inorganic, the living and dead, the fluid and solid, the clean and dirty – and last but not least, the public and private.

With the help of Lacanian theory, we could shed more light on the effect of the abject by using the context of the previously mentioned conception of the Real and its signs (in the past, they searched for these mostly in the places of the sacred). In Lacanian theory, the Real is that which eludes symbolisation, which may additionally complicate the issue of how to reflect the poetry of radical realism in contemporary art. Polona Tratnik’s artistic fascination with the Real does not entail a veristic representation of reality. The category of disgust has significantly marked contemporary aesthetic thought, which is forced to abandon idealised contemplation in favour of the exciting experience of a blend of attraction and repulsion. But above all, it is the body that invokes certain primary meanings, no longer only with the attractive appearance of the form, but also by incorporating elements that bring to attention aspects threatening the integrity of embodied subjectivity. Here, the artist insists on the dual nature of the Real, ensuring that her journey on the thin line between formal artistic dynamics and the directness of the living, decaying materials that she uses never becomes banal.

Although in certain places she seems to violate aesthetic and moral codes, she mostly achieves the opposite effect – not of disgust but of harmonic beauty. The aesthetics and cultural taboos are reconfirmed in the moment when they are violated. Anybody who sees only disgust and does not recognise the splendour in the art of the extreme (which the work of Polona Tratnik refuses to be) remains caught in the naïve representation of reality.

The abject aspect opens a gap and creates a void in the signifying web of the world of art: it brings to attention the necessity of a screen between the subject and the Real, while the artistic objects occupy this empty place by coincidence rather than by necessity. In a display of ready-made objects (bathroom furniture, laboratory equipment, photographic documentation) as works of art, these objects do not seem to be dependent on their palpable properties but exclusively on the place they occupy. In the work of Polona Tratnik, the use of these objects should be understood in terms of a re-questioning of the status of an art object rather than in terms of the exploitation and devaluation of a gallery and the world of art. In addition, some of Tratnik's objects reveal the weakness of the screen as they shatter our sense of reality with a threat of possible invasion by the Real. This is not a gesture of radical de-sublimation, but on the contrary, the preservation of the veil of beauty that could be both an intimation and concealment of the "Thing". Despite its harmonic appearance, Polona Tratnik's work preserves the basic tension and instability, and hides a treasure that is accessible only as a blurred premonition.

Instead of making an attempt at a shocking explication of the effects of decay that afflict all organic life, these effects are discreetly classified in carefully prepared wholes or stylised installations; nevertheless, in the work itself, they introduce a fissure that addresses the viewer and awakens his or her fantasy projections. Although this is not immediately obvious, Tratnik's work is about body identity rather than aesthetics.

Consequently, the exhibition asks us what we can say about the materiality of the body if exactly because of this materiality we can never fixate the body in a simple object of thinking. The poetics of New Realism art tendencies seems to reveal how to approach the Real without symbolic intercession, how to pinpoint an existence that is completely independent of thinking. The body as a "hard kernel of existence", which thwarts the operation of sublimation, is finally again presented in art as a "sublime treasure". Is Tratnik's entire work a repetition of the question of why our bodies should end with the skin? The inclusive exclusion of the abject is definitely that aspect that introduces a fissure, tension and instability in the formally perfect structure and that re-examines the (non)danger and (non)harmfulness of the intrusion of the Real in the coded and disinfected world of art, thereby turning the aesthetic work into an ethical inquiry.

The work of Polona Tratnik is not a delicate experiment with life, because organic matter is isolated and left to its own "natural" flow and passage of life. Nevertheless, the work, which in terms of sensory perception can present only part of the hair growth, questions what escapes control and subordination of dynamic reactions and processes enslaved with contemporary biotechnology in the service of the biopolitics that is our reality: A demand that art should be a space of live experience, potentially accompanied with a decisive, subversive throw of the dice? Or an opposition to a fetishist art-object that is given the value of merchandise in the art market (criticism of its own mercantile status)?

The connection between art and life is here literally at work, unlike the observation of avant-garde maxims.

The self-regulating, dynamic and live “plasmatic” (in terms of the living matter of cells and the fluid substance of blood in which blood cells float – in this case the nutrient prepared from the blood serum on which hair cells multiply) is the opposite of the dead, static, “plastic” artistic principles dictated by the rigidity of form.

Environmental aesthetics is also the aesthetics of one’s own living body. Although here it is temporarily captured between the walls of the incubator, it is dominated by the fluidity between interior and exterior. The flesh of the body blends with the flesh of the world through a tactile chiasm in which everything alive is inevitably caught.

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English quotations taken from:

- Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *Of Love and Other Demons*, translated by Edith Grossman, Penguin Books 1996
- Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, translated by James Creed Meredith, eBooks@Adelaide, 2004
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The Hair project – INFO (Tratnik):

Realizations and production:

The Hair project was realized in April–June 2005 in Mala Galerija Ljubljana and in October in Gallery Miklova hiša, Ribnica, and in 2007 at the exhibition VIT<A>RTI in Kemzeke (Antwerpen) KunstKas, Verbeke Foundation, Belgium, as it is also a part of the project Micro Flesh, presented in Cosinus Gallery at European Commissioner for Science and Research in Berlaymont, Brussels, 2008, and at Ars Electronica Festival, The Featured Art Scene, Lentos Art Museum Linz, 2008. The project is also being further developed.

The general production of the project is supported by Kapelica Gallery, co-production: Museum of Modern Art Ljubljana, Gallery Miklova hiša Ribnica.

The essay “The Story about Hair” by Mojca Puncer was written in April 2005.

URL: www.ars-tratnik.si

Short concept:

The project Hair presents a possibility of growing hair under artificial conditions. Hairs are transplanted into nutrient medium, placed in the incubator with 37°C. In the human body, which has a temperature of 37°C, a hair is pumping the nutrition from the root of the hair, which is placed in the hair pouch, which blood capillaries are constantly supplying with fresh nutrient blood. The nutrient medium for the project 37°C is elaborated from the blood serum of the same donor, who has also donated the hair. In such a manner such conditions are created to enable hair to remain alive and to grow, but not also to multiply.

The project reflects the phenomena of fetishizing hair. With constant care and possibility of arranging, each individual expresses him- or herself with his/her hair. Hair can symbolize beauty, eroticism and attractiveness. But hairs are also a direct expression of intimacy, which is shown externally. A contact with another person’s hair could also be perceived as repulsive and disgusting for it represents a direct contact with another person’s body and all the belonging subjectivity.

In the further development the project evolves several blood donors that contribute blood serum for artificial cultivation of hair cells. The functional role of blood is complex – it is a source of life; it is produced by a human organism, but it is produced to maintain the same organism at life. Blood is constituted from the nutritious part – plasma, and blood cells (thrombocytes, leucocytes and eritocytes), which carry the “code” of the donor, but do not have an ability to divide as hair (or skin) cells do. Blood cells therefore die away soon, but hair cells divide and form a specific form – hair. The installation is a kind of “living technological machinery-organism”, in which constant circulation of donated blood is in process, which enables certain cells to live on. The project experiments with the possibility of growing hair and enables observation of this growth. On the conceptual level it stimulates the discourse on artificial life.

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