

Transformism
Melanie Jackson and Revital Cohen
Catalogue Essay
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'Transformism' is the pre-Darwinian doctrine that animal life has evolved from previously existent forms of living matter. And if we understand 'transformism' as an ongoing process then perhaps we can imagine a subsequent metamorphosis, where living organisms coalesce with and return to pre-vital matter. Evidence of the first transformations informed Charles Darwin's (1809 – 1882) theories of biological evolution, now widely accepted and influencing scientific developments in genetic modification and biotechnologies. Conceptualising the next phase, whereby human life might dissolve once more into inert matter, after a stint as appendage to the hyper-evolved machine has provoked speculation, fear and fantasy for centuries. This speculative transformation has inspired much science fiction and provided an extraordinary conceptual paradigm for philosophies of technology, object-orientated ontology and gender politics.

Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1996) was one such philosopher who speculated on these transitions in his essay, 'The Question Concerning Technology' (1954), where he wrote about how technology threatened to complicate and pervert human relationships with nature. Technology must be understood as having its own ontology, its own being and force, he contended, rather than simply to service human life and remedy every malady. Heidegger brings to our attention the similarities of two Ancient Greek terms, 'poesis' (ποίησις) meaning 'to make' and 'techne' (τέχνη) meaning 'the activities and skills of the craftsman [and] the mind and the fine arts'. Initially, both terms described the process of 'bringing forth', or extracting nature's essence. While in poesis this is understood as both a conceptual exercise (the bringing forth or materialisation of an idea into form) and biological act (bringing forth life within a reproductive cycle), in techne this is quite a specific manual or physical gesture of the craftsperson. Heidegger contrasts these early similarities with their twentieth century divergence, where he proposes technology's claims upon nature become ever more forceful but its broader impact on our being remains unacknowledged. It is dangerous precisely because the effects of its progress go unquestioned and quite uncontested. His writing has influenced a number of more contemporary theses about how human life and technology actively co-evolve and how the focus of one is sharply moderated through the lens of the other. Innovatively here though, in this exhibition, two artists 'bring forth' the co-dependence of nature and biotechnology by filtering it through the important comparative frame of 'poesis', or art.

Revital Cohen's projects often test the ethical and conceptual parameters of biological design. Interested in the concept of 'designer species', she has frequently experimented with animals. One work innovated a large play-cage to boost the serotonin levels of rats bred to be clinically depressed in 'Ready-to-Use Models' (2011). An earlier project, 'Life Support' (2008) extended from her interest in the phenomenon of assistance animals (guide dogs or psychiatric care cats) by employing them as alternative devices to life support machines. Accordingly, a retired greyhound was wired to a person whose breathing pattern was regulated by this extraordinary 'Respiratory Dog', or in another part of the project a sheep's genome was modified with the DNA of a human patient so that, during regular nocturnal sessions, its healthier kidney might filter their blood in 'Dialysis Sheep.'

In Cohen's new project 'Kingyo Kingdom' (Kingyo meaning goldfish), she addresses the cultural history and personal motivations of Japanese goldfish breeders, both amateur and professional. Their chosen goldfish is the 'Ranchu', a popular, flat-headed orange fish deriving from carp and bred in Japan since the mid-nineteenth

century. What motivates these people to breed the perfect fish, she asks. What are their design criteria? And, more broadly, what does it mean to make an aesthetic project of a living form? Cohen's installation takes several parts, including a documentary video of her experience at a Japanese goldfish convention and prizegiving ceremony, as well as an animated projection of goldfish onto a bowl of water. The short documentary follows her journey through the different architectures for breeding, from a retired businessman's specially designed domestic suite, to the vast market places where extensive grids of water tanks are ordered according to fish colour and genus, then sold as object-commodities, packed into bags and boxes and shipped abroad. From here, Cohen skips to the goldfish competition, her lens tracing the long benches bearing white enamel bowls on which fish are traditionally displayed for judges. Between sites, she questions breeders on their individual motivations and hears of one man's aspirations that his *Rachus*' heads will resemble those of the mythic 'komainu' (or lion dogs), or another's vision that his fishtails' will resemble the skirt hem of a kimono. Complexities and contrivances abound.

In accompanying work, an animation of a Ranchu swimming is projected onto a white enamel bowl - the same as those used for competition display. The mesmerising, swirling fantasia is derived from Cohen's personal experience of watching the fish from above, a typical perspective since competitions began in an era that pre-dated glassware. This particular inherited aerial view, now ceremonial rather than pragmatic, privileges their lateral silhouettes and their contours are bio-engineered accordingly. Their plump trunks and flat faces are exaggerated to emphasise their line, yet the emphasis impedes their movement as they swim, encumbered by absent dorsal fins (bred into non-existence) and flat brows emphasised by breeders' scalpel. They are clearly show-fish, rather than efficient hydrodynamic vertebrates. Cohen's work probes the ethical and aesthetic parameters of nature's synthesis with technology by pushing or nudging it slightly further. What are the differences between living organism and manufactured commodity? Can we assume any exclusivity between categories any longer, when so much of what we eat, tend or grow now is remedied by biotechnology, biochemistry or bioengineering? And when we continue to design and modify living elements, how might this re-circuit or reflect upon our own standard, quality and conception of natural life?

In a very different installation, artist Melanie Jackson presents work less concerned with the circuitry and legacy of scientific design than the moment or passing during which one form evolves or is modified into another. In her installation 'Urpflanze 2', Jackson returns to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) concept of archetypal or primal plant which he first described in correspondence to his friend Charlotte Von Stein, and shortly before he published 'The Metamorphosis of Plants' (1790). According to Goethe, the urpflanze was an organism that contained within it the genetic evidence of all previous plant forms as well as the potential to generate all future ones; it is a body as anticipatory as documentary of evolution's steady passage. For Jackson the Urfplanze represents an interesting subject both in and beyond natural science, a mode or model for thinking through transfigurations across social, political and artistic spectrums.

Jackson's work here comprises a comic book, a video projection, as well as sculpture and an installation of videos screened on monitors. The comic book animates a roving conversation between the artist and British writer Esther Leslie, the subject of which was expansive, starting from Goethe's originary theory then tracing back to the Greek myth of Proteus as a man with future-telling capability but illusive fluid form, then plunging into the deep aquatic from where Ernest Haeckel's nineteenth century microscopic drawings of single-cell radiolarians were plumbed, and on to Blossfeldt's early and oddly anthropomorphic photographs of plant life. From there the conversation roamed through the catalysis of ancient crystals to London's iconic Crystal Palace (1854 - 1936) and its historical significance for commodity display, from 'folk-lure' and rural idylls of vegetal abundance to the omnipotence of genetically modified

farm produce, and from the first uses of clay to the development of 3D printers and the magnificent malleability of CGI. The focus of Jackson's work is not on these objects or subjects alone, in their entirety or stasis, but on the fluid, liquid or plastic aspects of their forms and the inevitability of their changes. The phenomena presented are often scientific and technological but arranged in sequence, collectively reflect upon the strange question of what it is to make art, the crystallisation process when an idea takes form, and the material and social conditions within which it is produced.

In her video in particular, Jackson pays attention to the texture of these transformations, the complex appearance of fluids as they freeze, crack and melt. Liquid crystals take some prominence, microscopic footage of petroleum colours rippling across the surface, crunching and dissolving at intervals. In one sequence, the crystals harden into the patina and colour of a palm leaf suggesting them as contemporary counterparts to the originary urpflanze. Essentially, liquid crystals are collections of partially ordered molecules that combine the qualities of conventional liquid and solid crystals, the appearance and order of which changes according to their surrounding substrates of either heat and water. Both Jackson and Leslie have studied them at length and in laboratories, during which time this footage was recorded. These crystals are made of both organic and inorganic molecules, the union of nature and science advanced by modern technology. Liquid crystals are everywhere now in display devices from computer monitors and laptop screens, TVs, clocks, visors, and navigation systems. There is the membrane steering one body's vantage towards another, increasingly seen through the monitor or screen. In Leslie's words,

The liquid crystal has seeped everywhere and it has hardened into forms that have made themselves indispensable for modern life. This form can form itself into any form, can carry any message. It can be anything – though it is often also the same thing... Cell membranes are liquid-crystalline in nature. DNA is liquid crystal. We are liquid crystals.

Jackson's is an expansive, ambitious and intuitive work not easily reducible to cursory description. Her attention to the illusory surface textures of protean forms is not solely attentive to liquid crystals but extends metaphorically to other social and scientific developments (a fictional Jack-and-the-Beanstalk becomes a modern genetic scientist, or crystals self-organise into a palace whose display function changes consumer society forever). Perhaps most interestingly, her work carries within it a reflection on the new nature and task of the contemporary artist just as Cohen's work reconsiders the place of the product designer in relation to the modern biotechnologist.

Jackson's real inquiry seems to be about the modified face of representative sculpture in the digital age, from Greek mythology's morphology to natural biology, and from the produce of the clay factory floor to the process of 3D printing. Significantly, her sculptural inquiry is brought forward in video *in conjunction* with three-dimensional form embodying both kinds of contemporary physical encounter, now as often on screen as in the flesh. Here, Leslie's proposition of human coalescence with the molecular structure of the screen's liquid crystal is put into practice; high definition plasma screens represent our features with such crystal clarity it would seem entirely real, its flat frame almost imperceptible. Cohen's work also plays on technology's directives, suggesting that historically how we see or judge might depend on what we're shown. Regarding her work, the viewer's attention is divided between the wall-mounted screen and bowl from above. We assume a very particular view of the Rancho dictated by outdated technology. In both works, technology's ontology might be tangibly felt.

And while neither works seem to be actively forewarning the dangers of biotechnology, neither are blithely extolling its virtues. Both works, in very different ways, provide alternative perspectives on the length and breadth of its implementation as well as its vast capacity for future change. In Cohen's work we stare down on the

bodies we modify and perhaps ask ourselves why, through Jackson's we see modification take shape through the same crystal bodies that in turn, onscreen, modify us. Here, poesis and techne reunite. Perspectives might well change.