

Reiner Maria Matysik

Failed Organisms

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On the Visual and Linguistic Strategies of Post-evolutionary Scenarios in the Work of Reiner Maria Matysik

by Regine Rapp

The Berlin artist Reiner Maria Matysik works in manifold ways with concepts for future organisms. In the course of the last years he has created his own new system of post-evolutionary life forms on the borderline between art and biology. In his installations, videos, actions and publications the term "biological sculpture", coined by Matysik himself, plays a vital role.

The exhibition ***Failed Organisms***, originally realised at Art Laboratory Berlin in Summer 2008 as part of the series *Art and Science*, is now shown in Moscow's LABORATORIA Art & Science (November 25, 2009 – January 24, 2010).

Matysik has here concentrated on one of his central themes – post-evolutionary life forms. Through the specific adoption of object, installation and video he has developed a dynamic scenario of future organisms, which, although foreseen as being of seminal importance, are at the same time identified in their characteristics as nonviable. In this way Matysik creates an area of conflict between promise and failure in a potential bio-technical future. Both the visual implementation and their linguistic form can be recognised here as the essential artistic strategies which Matysik uses as his own interface between the worlds of bio-technological research and pseudo-scientific fiction.

Future Life Forms – the *Prototype Models*

In the framework of his discussion on future life forms Matysik has developed his own individual system in the last few years with a unique iconography of so called *prototype models* which he has named WESEN [Engl. "BEING"].¹ Well over a hundred of these organisms have been created by the artist as models (from plasticine, PVC, epoxy resin, rubber and silicone), and categorised by size, weight, gender, extremities, orientation, mode of life, location, etc. The specific forms of sustenance, preferences, and tolerances of these organisms have also been noted.²

The visual formations and conceptualisation of the characteristics in these combinations are unique; their systemisation – especially their binary form – reflects an intensive examination of the classification systems of Carl Linnaeus from the mid 18th century. Matysik has developed such organisms as the *inokuli* (the eyeless ones): *impigre sudans* (*tireless perspirer/00003*), an organism which develops tube like polyps covered with flowers or gland-like outgrowths; *caecus occultus* (*hidden blind one/00005*) whose combination of eukaryotic and prokaryotic cell structures give it a peculiar kind of mobility; *tracheodus loivaceus* (*olive green rough tooth/00017*), which has an exoskeleton on its back, running out into long ossifications; *clotho exentrica* (*eccentric spinstress/00031*), whose movements are languorous and which is notable for the food crease which develops between the body and extremities of older individuals; etc. The potential future role of these organisms is described by Matysik: "The inner development of the body structure and the external form as well as the interactions of a future organism shall enable it to find its spot in the world."³

¹ Reiner Maria Matysik: *WESEN¹. Prototypmodelle postevolutionärer Lebensformen*. Frankfurt/ Main 2007.

² During a talk with the artist, August 2008.

³ Matysik, 2007, p. 10.

To the *Inokuli* belongs also a group of prototypes presented in this exhibition, but these already fail. The creature *corpus servilis (submissive body)*, for example, with its open brightly coloured body can barely prevent itself from falling from a stack of palettes, due to a strong weariness. Then there is the prototype *suicidus petulans (frivolous suicide)*, which due to its decreasing cell pressure has collapsed in upon itself and whose deeply wrinkled skin is sagging off its body.

In contrast to their predecessors, who as phenotypes of new life forms offer unheard of properties of viability, the prototypes in this exhibition are too weak and are condemned to extinction – Matysik regards them as failed organisms. With this form of staged failure of 'biofacts', Matysik not only refers to the current debate about biofacts but also seems to playfully undermine it. The term "biofacts," made from a combination of 'bio' and 'artefact,' can be described as biotic artefacts with living properties. In both the sciences (biology, computer science) and the humanities (philosophy, art, and cultural studies) the explanatory model of biofacts is currently under discussion. Especially of interest is the technological influence they exert on previous growth.⁴

Matysik's biofacts serve as a model for the upcoming radical post-evolutionary changes of organisms. The failing organisms in this exhibition, though, play exactly with the idea of a failed utopia and the visualisation of laboratory waste. The artistic intervention into this scholarly debate appears refreshingly ironic. Especially significant is a term created by Matysik – *inokuli – the not seeing!* The consciously chosen term *eyeless*, which we as viewers can, in fact, see and study is not least a playful reference that can be understood as a lack of clear vision.

Brave New World – the Rhetoric of Biofacts (Video, 2008)

The Museum of Natural History in Bonn (Germany) recently opened a new department for its collection: in a wing of the museum a collection of models of future organisms was established. In vitrines one could study prototypes of future life forms. Some have already grown out of their vitrines and have mutated into swollen phenotypes, due to their formidable life energy. A scientist explains it all to us: "We are putting together the chemical compounds of life. We are constructing cells and chromosomes. So we are creating life forms that didn't exist before. All this is based on a long time experience with digitalised biology: first we sequenced the genome, and then translated the analogue into the digital world of the computer."⁵ The spectators cannot be blamed if they feel somewhat overwhelmed in light of the insistent tone of this presentation. This propitious oration speech goes on in the following words: "In the museum's Department for post-evolutionary organisms we are showing the models of the first beings whose chemical synthesis is not based on the replication of already existing creatures. With this work we are building functional and capable organisms from the molecular biochemical level."⁶

Of course this addition to the Bonn Museum of Natural History is fictitious, the prototype models are invented, and the 'scientist' lends the staged futuristic scenario a strange aftertaste through her solemn tone when she asserts that "humanity isn't only changing the form of the earth, but also its living creatures and ourselves. We are playing with unconscious processes in our own and foreign organisms. Our understanding and resolve will emerge from this incomparably freer, smarter and more sensitive."⁷

The video, *biofakte (biofacts)* (2008), described here was shown at the Alexander König Natural History Museum in Bonn along with an installation by Matysik in Spring 2008. Through its ironic persiflage, the video message gives a prognosis about future life forms ad absurdum. The auspicious proclamation of future organisms, predicting a brave new world of hitherto unimagined potential life forms, functions like the staging of a phantasmagorical laboratory.

⁴ Nicole Karafyllis: *Das Wesen der Biofakte*. In: Karafyllis, Nicole (Hrsg.): *Biofakte. Versuch über den Menschen zwischen Artefakt und Lebewesen*. Paderborn 2003, p. 12.

⁵ Text of Matysik's video *biofakte*, 2008, p. 1.

⁶ Ibid., p. 1.

⁷ Ibid., S. 2.

Not least, the text carries a consciously overcharged bio-technological lexis coupled with pseudo-scientific passages which form an intrinsic part of this pointedly staged persiflage, as when the scientist closes her discourse with the following statement: "I am life, which desires life, and wishes for life, in the middle of life. We need a biological existentialism."⁸ Finally the circle is closed between the *prototypes of future life forms* that Matysik has created in the last few years and the staged video statement.

Reiner Maria Matysik's piece ***Referendum: For the Legalization of Common Offspring of Humans and Primates for the Formation of a Reproductive Community*** (2009) takes a provocative look into the search for chimeras, not by looking into the bio-technological, post-evolutionary future, but by examining two failed utopian projects from the 20th century. The project proposes a people's referendum about the mating of human and ape. The piece is, at least, in part inspired by the experiments of the biologist Ilya Ilyanovich Ivanov. Ivanov, famous for his successful experiments with artificial insemination and the production of zoological hybrids, spent the last decade of his career trying to create a human-ape hybrid. To achieve this Ivanov, with the backing of the Soviet government travelled to Central Africa, and later established a primate research centre in Sukhumi. Ivanov's attempts at inseminating chimpanzees with human sperm failed.

Matysik also shows an excerpt of a silent B/W film by Winthrop and Luella Kellogg (University of Indiana), who in their studies of primate and human relations chose to raise a baby chimpanzee alongside their own infant son. The film shows infant human and chimp growing up side by side (July 1931 – March 1932). Even more startling, if ultimately unsurprising, the infant chimpanzee matures quicker and towards the end of the film is more developed than his human 'sibling'. Dr. Kellogg and his wife eventually discontinued the experiment due to concern about the long term effects on their son.

Matysik's ***Referendum*** uses the populist democratic institution of a referendum to challenge our notions of our own identity as a species, and provoke a discussion on the borders and possibilities of new bio-technology. By reminding us of the 20th century's utopian view of science (and pseudo-sciences such as eugenics) he challenges our own contemporary utopian notions of science and technology.

The discourse on post-evolutionary life forms in the exhibition ***Failed Organisms*** remains consciously open – which is exactly consistent with the artistic strategy by which Matysik clearly moves between the worlds of bio-technological research and pseudo-scientific fiction.

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⁸ Ibid., S. 3.