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# THE SMALLEST AND THE LARGEST SCULPTURE IN THE WORLD

Since completing his studies in art history and philosophy, Thomas Feuerstein has established an artistic approach that crosses the lines dividing the genres, and is as experimental as it is universalist. He has a wide range of reference points: his works relate to art and cultural history, philosophy, literature, science, economic theory and the economy, but also to the newest media and network theories, current scientific debates, belief systems and even science fiction. Feuerstein is a sharp and attentive observer of our everyday surroundings. In his art, he effortlessly intertwines ancient Greek thought with today's technologized world, while managing to simultaneously include controversial sociopolitical questions. However, he is not concerned with resorting to the system of art in order to illustrate non-artistic issues. Instead, he manages to reflect the connectivity and complexity of our contemporary world in an art that is equally complex. With his installations he creates models of something akin to parallel universes. These are not static and do not try to hold something up to the real world: Instead, they penetrate it, by activating processes set in motion in experimental structures rooted in both art and science.

Certain terms and concepts form constants in Thomas Feuerstein's oeuvre. "Daimonology", a field of research that he opened up some years back, plays a role in all of his exhibitions. For Feuerstein, demons take on the most diverse of forms. In his work, they stand for disparate, often even conflicting strands of discourses, portraying the semantic change the term is experiencing, while also highlighting its double meaning and ambiguities. If in the ancient Greek tradition the demon stood for both chaos and order, functioning as some sort of companion to fate, in Christian belief it embodies the diabolical. However, and this is the aspect Feuerstein is interested in, the demon is not merely rooted in religion, superstition and myth – it also possesses relevance in the information age with its algorithms and action routines, in which computer programs called daemons monitor information processes and, in turn, us as users. They lie dormant, so to speak, in the background of the system, automatically operating and controlling

technical and social everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Feuerstein feels the demon acts as a medium, catalyst or enzyme, bringing about translations and transmutations. “This notion’s varied meanings, historic transformations and applications for technological processes predestine it for artistic narrations that seek to comprehend and relate one’s own culture in a contingent and polyvalent way.”<sup>2</sup>

Feuerstein’s entire oeuvre – characterized in the 1990s by an examination of the media and technological conditions under which a globalized society exists, before he later started addressing biotechnological questions – is based on a special narrative method, which he calls conceptual narration. It allows him to fuse facts and fictions into a dense structure, to dissolve dichotomies and borders, and tell new stories using familiar elements, systems and objects. Materials and shapes, but also social, semiotic or aesthetic processes form the starting points for his artistic test labs, propositions and experiments. Functions, debates and new semantic levels are collected and condensed in narrative nodes as threads from the past and the present intersect and merge with a possible future.

As each of Feuerstein’s works possesses several layers of information and changes in direction, this also holds true for his titles, which are always worth following. The title *Psychopros*, which he has given his latest installation, fuses two notions that subtly introduce the viewer to a particular way of reading the exhibition. At first glance, the show is reminiscent of an austere, scientific laboratory, but the title seems to contradict this impression. *Psychopros* contains the words ‘psyche’ and ‘psycho’, which do not point to objectively verifiable facts but, on the contrary, to emotions and subjective experience. In classical Greek, ‘psyche’ stands for life, soul or life principle, today we equate this with an inner or spiritual life, with personal experience and perception. Feuerstein’s title also references Alfred Hitchcock’s classic horror movie *Psycho*, made in 1960, which creates a subtle feeling of dread through nerve-racking effects. A conceptual narration is put into motion by combining these words with the term *Prosa* (‘prose’), indicating narrative or scientific literature, which invents, explains, comments on, interprets, analyses, evaluates and describes the world.

The show consists of a single installation that branches off into all of the rooms and across all the floors of the exhibition space. It is made up of laboratory vessels, equipment and refrigerators connected through a system of flexible tubes that transports green or colorless liquids from one stop to the next. Everything is in motion, bubbling, festering, boiling, trickling, squelching and dripping, reminiscent of a mysterious alchemist’s workshop. But everything is tidy and ordered, akin to a modern laboratory, and aesthetically arranged as appropriate for an exhibition. In order for viewers to be able to follow the ongoing processes more easily, Thomas Feuerstein has given the individual areas telling titles: greenhouse, gate, laboratory kitchen, cooling chamber, cinema, factory. On the one hand, these titles correspond with the appliances present in the room in question. On the other, they establish cross-links to Feuerstein’s science fiction story *For He’s a Jelly Goo Fellow*, which forms the literary source for the exhibition and which is present in the exhibition in the shape of an audio piece. The technical devices are juxtaposed with drawings, photos, objects and a wall text, in which the theme of *Psychopros* is graphically summarized and branched out further, gaining additional aspects.

1 Cf. Thomas Feuerstein, “Narratives of Art”, Sabeth Buchmann in conversation with Thomas Feuerstein, in: exh. cat. Hans-Peter Wipplinger (ed.), *Thomas Feuerstein. TRICKSTER*, Kunsthalle Krems, Krems, Cologne 2012, pp. 111–126, here p. 123.  
2 Thomas Feuerstein, “Demons of Art. Hartmut Böhme in conversation with Thomas Feuerstein”, in: exh. cat. Alois Bernsteiner (ed.), *Thomas Feuerstein, FUTUR II*, Kunstraum Bernsteiner, Vienna 2013, pp. 45–51, here p. 46.

In terms of content, there were two starting points for *Psychopros*, both of which Thomas Feuerstein has been wanting to implement in projects for a long time, reconciling scientific research and artistic vision with masterful logic. Firstly, his interest in biotechnology, molecules and atoms resulted in the idea of creating the smallest sculpture in the world in the form of a molecule. Secondly, he has been looking into working with slime since 2009. After a long preparatory phase, during which he worked together with a chemist and a biologist, he has now managed to extract a new synthetic molecule which did not yet exist in nature. And after countless series of experiments he has also managed to produce a slime that does not disintegrate instantly. Feuerstein wanted the molecule-as-new-micro-sculpture to relate to perception, to something that influences visual experience and optics. This is why he used chlorella algae and stropharia mushrooms as biochemical source materials. The first is a source of the ‘happy’ hormone dopamine, which can be extracted from the algae via tyrosine, while the mushrooms contain psilocyn, used as a vision-producing drug ever since Aztec days. In turn, the new, synthesized molecule is also a hallucinogenic substance. In reference to its biological parents, the artist christened it psilamine. The slime on the other hand is extracted from the biomass of algae and mushrooms resulting from the production of psilamine, and is consequently named P+. Because the molecular sculpture is not visible to the naked eye for its microscopic size, it would need to be ingested for the spectator to experience its effects on perception. If members of the audience were to do so, they would be confronted with irregularities. Their surroundings would begin to flicker, pulsate and breathe, objects would bulge into space and their experience of time and continuity would be altered. The subject of perception is closely connected to art history, which is concerned with the recognition, interpretation and visual reflection of the world per se, shaping and influencing our view of the world anew in each era. So Thomas Feuerstein now raises the interesting question of what would happen if his sculpture was swallowed, the artwork hereby turned into a drug and the body into an exhibition space. Is art supposed to give us a better understanding of reality? Would the world be altered by the change in perception? The idea of being able to influence matter is also an appealing concept in terms of speculative philosophy and ontology. In the exhibition, it finds its metaphorical equivalent in the theme of slime. Feuerstein draws an analogy between the hypothetical viewer’s altered perception after having consumed the molecular sculpture and the slime’s fluid consistency. The material cannot be shaped; instead, it is constantly moving and only becomes solid when shaken. As it were, the slime then mirrors the inner, psychological process in outer, real space. Using slime as a sculptural material appeals to the artist, and his new sculpture *Astral Jelly*<sup>3</sup>, which sees thick slime, imbued with phosphorescent pigments, dripping over a glass core makes it clear why: the dynamic shapes created randomly look like rags or teardrops and dissolve in slow motion just after they have been formed.

The so-called *Cinema Sculpture* gives off an eerie glow in a dark room named the cinema. But the film associated with the term ‘cinema’ only plays in the viewers’ heads as they listen to Feuerstein’s tale *For He’s a Jelly Goo Fellow* while looking at the sculpture. Questions on form and anti-form are raised, as in abstract art, but through the material used – the slime – they are

3 ‘Astral jelly’ is the term for a gelatinous substance that can sometimes be found on the ground or on trees and which has been described in texts as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is assumed to consist of amphibian innards that have been disgorged by birds and animals of prey because they are hard to digest. Nevertheless, the notion that it may have some kind of connection to meteor showers has persisted stubbornly for centuries.

shown as an actual process. Material plays a prominent role in Feuerstein's work, as a medium possessing specific traits, but also as an element communicating cultural contexts, meanings and thoughts. This is why it is important to Feuerstein's conceptual narrations that the sculptures form collectives, or congregations, due to their ascriptions and that they do so both on a scientific and an allegorical level. In *For He's a Jelly Goo Fellow*, researchers addressing the question of what material we are made of arrive at the conclusion that slime is our primary material, and that ultimately, in the "slime age" all humans and things are covered in a biofilm of bacteria that communicate with one another.

The entire installation serves to demonstrate how psilamine and the slime are produced, and to display the products. The exhibition space thus turns into a studio, into a place where the artwork is made. In the greenhouse, the algae and fungi are cultivated in bioreactors. An older work from the series *Manna-Machines*, which the artist has been constructing since 2004, is deployed here in introducing the single-cell green alga *Chlorella vulgaris* as a culturally and historically connoted material into the art context. The alga has played a part in various chapters of scientific history; it is regarded as a model organism that made it possible to decipher photosynthesis and could yet be instrumental in ending world hunger due to its high protein content. It also works against climate change as a fixer of carbon. As the *Manna-Machine* served to produce painting pigments in earlier installations by Feuerstein, its bioreactors now bring forth materials to be used as the basis for further works once again. Feuerstein considers the apparatuses, which he designs according to his own ideas, as performative sculptures. Names such as Zoé or Éline, which appear as protagonists in *For He's a Jelly Goo Fellow*, anthropomorphize and personify the hybrid sculptures, turning them into assistants or lab workers in the automated production process. Feuerstein's work frequently exhibits these kinds of correlations between nature and culture, living and dead matter, organism and object, man and machine. He questions these dichotomies, formed during Modernism, and plays with the concept of animism, which in the most recent philosophical schools of thought attributes agency to things.<sup>4</sup> Along with their status as performative sculptures, Feuerstein adds further subtexts to the bioreactors. As they are furnished with lights, dipping the room into an atmospheric green, they could equally be design objects, floor lamps or futuristic house plants. The tubes containing circulating substances turn into the lines of a three-dimensional drawing as they snake their way through the exhibition space. From the greenhouse onwards, they lead to a sculpture-apparatus titled *Gate*, where the algae are filtered and the water needed for the slime production is processed.

We meet *Mrs D.* and *Mr P.* in the laboratory kitchen. The two are sculptural laboratory vessels, in which dopamine and psilocyn are extracted. They are shaped according to the spherical elements of the molecule in question, so that the objects' outward shape shows at the macro-level what is happening at the micro-level inside. Refrigerators serve as plinths, but also have a cooling function in the process. The newly extracted psilamine is then presented in two artworks. While *Baby Psi* is made up of laboratory flasks and again visualizes the modular structure of psilamine, *Psiloprose* sees crystalline psilamine grow out of the printwheel of a typewriter painted in black like precious mountain quartz. The theme of the typewriter is repeated in a monumental charcoal drawing. While with the object, the alphabet has been erased by painting

4 Cf. Anselm Franke, "Beyond the Return of the Repressed", in: exh. cat. Anselm Franke, Sabine Folie (eds.), *Animism. Modernity through the Looking Glass*, Generali Foundation, Vienna, Cologne 2011, pp. 167–182.

the keys black, it has been replaced in the drawing by a periodic table listing the 118 known elements. This typewriter of the elements is titled *Arché*, referencing not only Noah's Ark but also the pre-Socratic philosophers' search for the primordial matter from which the entire cosmos derived – again creating a link to Feuerstein's slime, referred to in the story as the world's new primary substance. Here, the typewriter can be seen as an allusion to Feuerstein's narrations, to the term 'prose' in the exhibition title, and by the same token, as indicating that in the future, with 3D printing being developed further, any type of material may well be able to be 'rewritten'.

The artist displays further works on a glass table top that rests on a fictitious molecular sculpture – titled *Laborant* according to its auxiliary function –, which humorously relate to the theme of the exhibition. *Uncle Bib* is a bust made of silicone that is placed on a pedestal, where it is rattled vigorously, its jelly-like consistency reminiscent of slime. *Kalte Rinde* is an object that sees Schopenhauer's complete works infested with a slimy dry rot, appropriate to the philosopher's concept of the world being covered by a layer of mold that has brought forth living and sentient beings. Fungi, generally seen as catalysts to entropic processes, have played a part in Feuerstein's work for a long time. He has often worked with the notion of the mycelium, an enormous, underground fungal network. Fungi link different types of plants with each other, which is why Feuerstein has come to see the mycelium as the biologically adequate term for a networked way of thinking. This also coincides with his interest in the actor-network theory put forth by sociologists such as Bruno Latour, who want to break with the dualism of nature and culture, seeing things and humans in network-like, interactive relationships instead.<sup>5</sup>

The two final stops in the exhibition, the cooling chamber and the factory, see the slime being manufactured and processed. The dimly lit cooling chamber contains innumerable refrigerators that hold the tinned slime. The refrigerator doors and drawers mysteriously open of their own accord, while the stirrer unexpectedly starts to move from time to time. Looking at the monitor connected to a surveillance camera, the viewers see not only themselves standing in the room, but also creatures, avatars, Feuerstein's demons flitting around the room and operating behind the systems. The title, *PSI+*, hints at the fact that we may possibly be faced with a paranormal phenomenon here.

The spectacular *Accademia dei Secreti* forms the conclusion and climax to the entire installation. Here, transparent slime is pumped through enormous glass vessels in vast quantities. But the slime does not stay in the vessels; it oozes out through cracks and pores, trickling along both the inside and the outside of the glass and finally dripping into a large tub before being fed into the tube system once again. In accordance with his narration *For He's a Jelly Goo Fellow*, the artist now introduces his audience to the "slime age", during which humanity will protoplasmically merge to form a new collective. The wall graphic *Psi Love*, in the shape of a psilamine molecule, introduces the works of H. P. Lovecraft as an additional reference point. Slime, semifluid and sticky substances and other disgusting matter are recurring motifs in Lovecraft's oeuvre. The force of Lovecraft's horror hinges on the contrast between scientific description and a violation of the laws of nature above all else.

In *Psychoprosa*, Thomas Feuerstein has once again created a concentrated multi-layered artwork that questions and reframes the notion of materials and the haptic, images and things and art and science. The incorporation into a storyline and the eventful exhibition course

5 Cf. Thomas Feuerstein (see note 1), p. 124.

ensure viewers are not overwhelmed with theories. Instead, they are led on a lighthearted journey through Feuerstein's world of facts and speculations, which the artist uses to examine the social role of science. Feuerstein himself says: "The best works are those that come into being without authorship, that result from processes."<sup>6</sup> And: "When I, as an artist, create a work, I want to transgress certain boundaries and make something appear that exceeds my previous imaginations."<sup>7</sup> With the invention of psilamine, the smallest sculpture in the world, he has now simultaneously created the largest sculpture in the world: the slime. May it never run dry.

6            *Ibid.*, p. 119.

7            *Ibid.*, p. 115.