

Thomas Häusle,
 director of the Kunstraum Dornbirn,
 in an interview with the artist
 Thomas Feuerstein

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TH Your art is difficult to assign to disciplines; how would you describe or characterize it?

TF I'd like to be the dictator over my works, but they don't follow my instructions or any categories and disciplines. They're disobedient and undisciplined and don't fit into any pigeonhole. On the contrary, they themselves want to be a pigeonhole, or a vessel, and themselves determine their form. In this sense, my works are more subjects than objects. The availability of the objects isn't given, because they have their own will. It is, so to speak, the guile of the object that makes it into the subject. In that sense, I'm disciplined by the works and not vice versa; so it's an inversion of the traditional idea that the artist creates and designs something.

TH When we try to categorize, however, it's noticeable that in your work you not only combine classical disciplines but also scientific and philosophical ones. Where does the interest in these fields of knowledge come from, and where the urge to unite these disciplines in your work?

TF My starting point is the

present, and since our world is highly technical I'm passionately concerned about science and technology. Technology has permeated our existence since there have been human beings, and ultimately art and language are also technologies. Put simply, I care more about reality than the refusal of reality. In this sense, my work can be described as a new form of realism.

TH Your artistic approach is experimental, border-crossing and here and there universalistic. What would you say if we compared your art to that of Leonardo da Vinci?

TF The art of the Renaissance marks a turning point. Art becomes a philosophical discipline and goes beyond the artisan executor, working according to a master plan of a client. From this point on, art is busy inventing stories, questioning and designing worlds. Art becomes on the one hand "critical" and on the other "utopian". My work is located in this span between criticism and utopia. But the universalism of Renaissance art is unattainable today. That's why I can approach

the world only as an artist and not as a scientist. This, however, gives me the freedom of humour and irony, of fiction and imagination.

TH What significance do drawing, painting and literature still have for you?

TF My starting point is art and not science and philosophy. As a great fan of nineteenth-century literature, I appreciate the narration of the world in the form of stories that constitute a condensate. Where reality is condensed and culture is compressed through allegories and metaphors, stories come alive and work beyond time. Good stories are vessels that constantly charge things with new meanings. That's why we read Homer or Dante to this day. Meaning and interpretation are never concluded in literature and art. With each interpretation, with each reading and viewing, the work emerges anew. That may be the difference from science. In science, a work has meaning only as long as it's not falsified. If it's considered obsolete, it comes to a paradigm change and eventually the vessel is drunk up. In literature, art and philosophy,

the vessel constantly refills itself.

TH How do you view your work in relation to contemporary art movements?

TF I think we're labouring under an illusion of transparency in contemporary art production. We believe we have an overview of art movements through art fairs, biennials and art rankings. But art movements today are produced by exhibitions, market, discourse and criticism, and less and less by artists. In this respect, all efforts to evaluate art trends lead to capital flows. And capital isn't interested in art but in prestige. That's why I'm interested in works and artists, not trends. There are many good artists who are under-noticed, whether in magazines, exhibitions or collections. That's because artists are faster than capital, critics or institutions. The present of the artist is the future of the viewer. You're always taking a look into the future when you look at art. And when the future, this vanishing point, is reached, the work is seen differently.

TH You mentioned in a conversation that visual art fascinates you so much because it can bring matter to life or change

it. Could you explain that to us?

TF What fascinates me about contemporary art is that it incorporates materialities. Media such as film or literature are great, but they can only narrate matter and related processes verbally and show them metaphorically. Visual arts, on the other hand, can negotiate matter molecularly and make it talk through processes. This is a special power of visual arts that is only now becoming increasingly clear to us. Historically, it was looked upon as a drawback to work with dirty matter and bodies. The visual arts were considered artes mechanicae and not artes liberales, the free, immaterial and spiritual arts. Only in the twentieth and especially in the twenty-first century have we begun to look deeper into matter and to tell something about bodily and material processes or make the processes themselves narrators. In that sense, I see my art as a leap from metaphor to metabolism. Art in the traditional sense has communicated through allegories and metaphors, through images, contexts of meaning and representations. Now something

new has been added, namely that images have begun to produce and transform themselves and so become a performative element, actors, narrators and speakers. This changes the status of art. It doesn't operate on a symbolic and metaphorical level alone, but on a metabolic level as well.

TH Could it be said from your point of view that your art can make things more visible, that it can also bring about innovation and practical insights into practical processes?

TF Whether art has a purely aesthetic value or, beyond that, an epistemic one is an old discussion. The epistemic, cognitive, is usually attributed to science, which in addition to theories results in a wealth of practical, technical products such as mobile phones, medicines and navigation systems. In the studio, this question doesn't arise. In the studio, art is like hunger: is hunger beautiful, does it bring new insights? As with eating, this can be said only in retrospect. That's why I see the art viewer not as passive but as a collaborator. Many people see pictures as laid tables where they

can feast themselves. Ironically, you could say that's why pictures are called *Tafelbilder*, "table paintings". But to look at art doesn't mean just to consume. As at a meal with a companion, talking, arguing, discussing or dancing is part of it. That's what fascinates me about the medium of exhibition. An exhibition is a feast, a gathering of works and people. Exhibitions create their own topology in space, creating unexpected relationships between works and visitors.

TH For the exhibition in the *Kunstraum Dornbirn*, you conceived a large-scale, walk-in sculpture that incorporates all the exhibits. Usually a sculpture is in an exhibition; here the exhibition seems to be in the sculpture.

TF It's exactly this aspect that appealed to me: a sculpture not in the exhibition, but as an exhibition. The essence of exhibiting is the putting in, the placing in, and so seen an exhibition is an enframing. It's no accident that this sounds like Heidegger, who describes the basic ontological position of technology in modern times as an enframing. The enframing of a sculpture

thus has multiple meanings: it stands for the mountain *Kabzek*, to which Prometheus was bound; it hallucinates, as in my science fiction story *The Prometheus Protocols* [*Die Prometheus-Protokolle*], an octopus crawling across the room like a transformer; it's a factory whose eight arms transforms stone into flesh; and finally, the enframing is an allusion to Heidegger's concept of technology, because in "Clubcannibal" man's nature becomes a biotechnological resource.

When Günther Anders, who studied with Heidegger, ascribes a world-constructive character to technology and speaks of a "Promethean gap" between technology and man, because technology makes man appear antiquated, the relevance of the Prometheus myth looms into view. Prometheus was not only the first sculptor, who made human beings out of clay; he was also the first biotech engineer, who made organic flesh out of earth and stone. The Promethean technologies of today are therefore biotechnology and genetic engineering. They

want to liberate man from the antiquity of the body, from disease and death. They don't set technology alongside human beings, like an accessory, as do Heidegger and Anders; they set it in human beings. That is, they en flesh technology and make it part of our body and our identity. Thus the enframing in which the exhibition is set is both a technically functioning apparatus in the sense of factory as well as metaphor and conception of a changed *conditio humana*.

TH Your installations are reminiscent of oversized laboratory situations. Here at *Kunstraum Dornbirn* you prefer the term "factory", but you once called the laboratory the theatre of the twenty-first century. What do you mean by that?

TF Theatre is a simulation machine that plays through possibilities. It stages the great dramas and catastrophes in the mode of as-if. It's in this sense that I understand the laboratory and the white cube of art, because the great dramas happen better in the experiment, in exploring – including all errata – than in reality. In this

way the laboratory isn't an ivory tower but a think tank, a field of experimentation, a space for mistakes, errors and failures; and so it's better to negotiate the state of the world in the laboratory than outside in the world, on the battlefield, in politics and economics.

TH How can we imagine the process that leads to your works? How did "Clubcannibal" come about?

TF There are different threads that come together in a project, connect and form a knot. They can be inspiring conversations with great scientists, as specifically with the biologists Thomas Pümpel and Thomas Seppi, or an amusing evening over beers with friends. This creates a tissue, a text of images and objects, stories and myths, utopias and dystopias. I call this artistic method of turning works into transitional objects that weave threads from history into the present with a possible future "conceptual narration". In this way the works become knots, dense descriptions of our reality, and the exhibition becomes a narrative that works on different

levels. Essentially, there are three levels: first, as in most exhibitions, a pictorial, iconic level that incorporates sculptures, graphics and objects; then a linguistic level, which is realized here in the head of the octopod in the form of the radio play *The Prometheus Protocols* in the installation “Pandorama”; and thirdly, a processual and molecular level. This third level is particularly important to me because it lends visual art a specific quality. Matter, that is to say, stuff, materials, molecules, and the associated chemical and biological processes, aren’t means to an end, that is, blatant signifiers of symbolic messages. They themselves become storytellers and produce a story that goes beyond images and words. This marks the already mentioned aspect of the metabolic and clarifies the change from symbol to “metabole”. The term “metabole” doesn’t really exist, but in this context it’s apt for what happens here.

TH If you deal intensively with the exhibition situation, this also means for me that your exhibitions are narratives. What story are you telling with

“Clubcannibal”? What knowledge is being visualized? Is a possible future being considered?

TF For me the exhibition functions as an organism: the enframing forms the bones; the cables, wires and hoses the blood vessels; and the works and objects the flesh, the organs and muscles. Together, they enable a process that I understand as a materialized story, as a narrative written with molecules rather than with words. In the beginning are chemolithoautotrophic bacteria. We usually associate life with photoautotrophic organisms such as plants, which provide us with food and raw materials via light and photosynthesis. Chemolithoautotrophic organisms, on the other hand, live in the dark of the earth’s crust and feed on inorganic substances such as minerals and metals. They stand at the beginning of evolution and make it clear that life comes not from heaven but from the depths of the earth’s crust, from hell. It’s estimated that up to fifty per cent of the total biomass of our planet exists invisibly in the Earth’s interior. To connect this

shadowy world of biology with the titan Prometheus fascinates me and forms the starting point for “Clubcannibal”. In the radio play *The Prometheus Protocols*, Prometheus, who in Kafka grows together with the rock and becomes one with it, provides the template for a genetic fusion of human cells with stone-eating bacteria. This transforms man into a chemolithoautotrophic organism that no longer has to exploit foreign life, neither plants nor animals, to feed itself and gain resources. Man eats himself and becomes a cannibal. We connect the premodern and the savage with cannibalism, that is, with civilization’s lowest point, where people slaughter and eat people. To this day, it is perhaps the greatest taboo that we know in our culture. But in the exhibition and the story, which oscillates between science fiction and horror, the result is a cannibalism that is highly ethical. Under the assumption of a so-called cellular economy, where all products of daily use such as food, clothing and energy are bred in bioreactors, new horizons and possibilities of biological and

economic existence emerge. We no longer have to eat pigs and cattle, we don’t need a genocide of plants. We feed ourselves ethically with the material whose authorship we own, our own body cells. There are about 300 different cell types in our body; from muscle cells can be made steaks, from skin cells leather for shoes, and from bone furniture and other goods. Savage and premodern cannibalism suddenly proves to be highly moral and correct. This is the field of tension in which the story is told with simultaneous irony and seriousness.

TH In the visual arts, it was frowned upon for a long time to tell stories. What interests you about narrative in art in general and how does narration work in the exhibition?

TF When images and sculptures in modernism became non-objective and abstract, a purity requirement came into the art. Stories were considered pollution and an aesthetic disturbance. But exactly abstract art needs epic stories for its understanding. Only theories, social and art historical contexts turn the objects into works of art.

What would a polished stainless steel ball or a black square be without these latent stories? To this day, some artists maintain that their works are anti-narrative. But whether we like it or not, we're always telling a story and our only choice is to do so explicitly or euphemistically. Perhaps anti-narrative art is so successful just because capital values works of art that work like money. This kind of art and money meet in the anti-narrative because they don't want to tell or criticize, but to be a mere object of exchange. In this sense, anti-narrative art tells a hard story that cannot be negotiated. For me, art and science, in contrast, tell open stories that can be edited and rewritten at any time. As an artist, I'm not a dogmatist and am not proclaiming fundamentalist truth. That's why I'm interested in having different voices and actors in the exhibition speak, actors and voices that produce a story through processes and find new forms.

TH The story begins in the exhibition with the work "Kabzek". Kabzek is the mountain in the Caucasus where, according to myth, Zeus has Prometheus

chained to the rocks to punish him for bringing fire to man. To intensify the punishment, every day he sends the eagle Aithon to eat Prometheus' liver. So-called chemolithoautotrophic bacteria grow in the bioreactor – "litho" in Greek means "stone" and "autotrophic" "self-nourishing". What do these bacteria tell us?

TF The bacteria in the bioreactor feed on pyrite, also called Leberkies in German, "liver gravel", and enrich their metabolism with sulfuric acid. The water is pumped to a marble sculpture where the acid reacts with the limestone to form gypsum. The pH value of the water thereby increases and in turn allows the continuous growth of the bacteria in the reactor. In some areas, this process creates geological erosion and cave systems. In my case it results in a zombie-like appearance. The bacteria become sculptors and sulfuric acid becomes their hammer.

TH The special thing about your works is that they make connections of content and function with each other. There are transformations and

metamorphoses that are both technical and semantic. What happens in the sequence with the plaster that comes from marble?

TF In a sculptor's studio you usually find plaster models at the beginning and the marble sculpture at the end. With me it's the other way around. I use the plaster on the one hand for a sedimentation sculpture that grows in the "Ovidmachine" and on the other hand as a material for crayons. I press the coloured plaster together with iron oxide, which also results from the metabolism of bacteria, into crayons and produce drawings on paper, which are, among things, models for the posters here in the exhibition. This works perfectly, since artist's crayons are made of a mixture of plaster and pigment.

TH The liver plays a central role in the myth of Prometheus. In antiquity the liver was a synonym for life, because even then it was known that the liver regenerates very quickly. The organ also served in hepatoscopy, as an oracular technique for seeing into the future. What role does the liver play in the exhibition?

TF Symbolically and

metabolically, the liver is for me the organ used to inquire into the future of the human body. The challenge was, contrary to the myth, not to have the liver be eaten away but to breed it artificially. Thomas Seppi from the Medical University of Innsbruck has succeeded in cultivating human liver cells with nutrients extracted from chemolithoautotrophic bacteria. This works because liver cells in our body act as a waste incinerator. First, the cells were propagated into a large biomass, in a liquid culture, then allowed in the second step to colonize a three-dimensional culture. Out of this grew the sculpture "Octoplasma".

TH In the story The Prometheus Protocols a fundamental shift occurs from petrochemistry to "petrobiology". Everything we need to fuel our cars, feed ourselves and meet our daily needs, is produced by human body cells with chemolithoautotrophic properties in vitro in bioreactors. A simultaneous, as you put it, utopia and dystopia. How can this be tracked in the exhibition in

the form of objects and sculptures?

TF “Clubcannibal” is speculative fiction full of horror and irony. All works are connected by tentacles and make the factory come alive as an organism. The tubes and pipes form the thread that leads through the exhibition, and the objects and sculptures show the material and symbolic metamorphoses –such as the transformation of liver cells into alcohol. Since liver cells are glycogen stores and glycogen is a form of sugar, it’s very easy to ferment laboratory-grown human liver cells with yeast. This happens in the work “Aithon”, a large bio-fermenter. After the liver cells have been fermented and distilled, you obtain spirituous liquor, a liver schnapps brewed from a self-consuming liver. Following the myth, I call the distillate “Aithon”, a sort of Promethean and biotechnological form of liver cirrhosis. This distillate is a tautological joke, but also a serious taboo, a form of cannibalism.

TH You call the exhibition “Clubcannibal” a factory. This fits in particularly well with Kunstraum Dornbirn, which

was once part of a factory; but what significance does the term have beyond that?

TF “Clubcannibal” is a factory because something is produced. The bacteria work on a marble sculpture and at the same time produce material for a plaster sculpture. The bioreactor grows liver cells, which are fermented and distilled in the sculpture “Liverty”. So we have to do here not only with aesthetic but also with poetic processes. A poiesis on a material and imaginary level, which leads to a story about ourselves. We associate an industrial production facility with the idea of a factory, but I like to take the meaning of the term further. Historically, *fabrica* also described the processes in the human body and the artist’s workshop. Ultimately, for me, the factory is the scenario of our existence, the place where the metabolism of our culture takes place.

TH Thank you for the interview.