

Jürgen Tabor

## LIQUID MATTER

The drawings in Thomas Feuerstein's series *Psipsy. Daimon Cult* were done during an early phase in his meditations on the narrative thread which he has taken as the basis for his exhibition *Psychoprosa*. The drawings can be read together with the novella he wrote shortly after, *For He's a Jelly Goo Fellow*, as the basic conceptual framework for the exhibition, without however presenting a definitive key to interpretation, because his versatile thoughts are made up of mysterious, associative, speculative images from wildly proliferating tangles of forms, symbolic machines and creatures, formulae, concepts and snatches of texts. Just as his trains of thought are aimed obsessively at connecting and linking up, and not at reductive, analytical scrutiny, the drawings always seem to grow forth from a number of intertwining visual and mental levels. The resulting weaves of forms and concepts come across like snapshots of ongoing processes. The pictures, which are done in pen and ink and then manually processed by means of lithographic hectography, receive great definition through the use of a deep black, which is only rarely heightened by other colours, and in some ways give the impression that they have been worked if not scooped from the surface of the paper. The way the visual complexes are developed in the drawings by superimposing illustrative visuals, texts, symbols, and tracteries of lines and structures à l'art informel, seems to mirror the order and entropy of a mind specialized in systems and connections. Similarly, this oscillation between different flows of ideas corresponds to the game with outlines and fragments, with negative and positive contrasts, figures, forms and spaces that are partly developed and partly just hinted at, and that enlist the viewer as an active partner.

The constant focus on intense black and white contrasts, and a style of drawing taken in part from woodcuts and copper engravings, is reminiscent of scientific and literary illustrations from the nineteenth century, of encyclopaedias and science books with elucidatory plates, as well as of the Gothic novel, of horror stories and tales of terror by for instance Edgar Allan Poe or later H. P. Lovecraft, which often came with high quality pictures. The basic atmosphere

of the drawings, their use of a black, almost melancholy tone, and a style which comes close in some motifs and techniques to that of comics or record covers, also prompts associations with sub-cultural pop currents in Punk and Gothic, and in this context also references the genre of the graphic novel, which has gradually risen since the 1980s. However, unlike the graphic novel, which sometimes tells a story solely by pictures, but mostly in a further development of the comic by a combination of text and visuals, Feuerstein's drawings have not been fitted into a linear narrative. Rather they are individual creations which he links together in a mutual context in the exhibition space through the order in which they are placed, or similarly through their positions in the catalogue within his literary tale.

The "Goo Story", as Thomas Feuerstein calls it on the first sheet of the series, which recalls a frontispiece or film poster, has its own inner line of development that unwinds parallel to the story *For He's a Jelly Goo Fellow*. Both the drawings and the story take the formless material slime as a primal biochemical substance and place it at the centre of an approach which is nourished by scientific, technological, psychic and animistic aspects to understand a world that is torn between a longing for nature and technologization.

The story, which veers between penny dreadful, pulp fiction, and scientific or art historical tract, begins like a novel about a relationship in a scientific setting, but rapidly develops into a neo-mystical sci-fi with cascading references to science, mythology, pop culture and art amid sciento-theological prophecies and an ontological mysticism that borders on the ecstatic, exultatory and self-annihilatory: "The slime that is you will save us", we read of Rei, the story's transgenic protagonist. Rei's body comes to be infected by transposons, transferable strings of DNA, in this case from the primal gene pool of a lamprey, a living fossil that has scarcely changed over hundreds of millions of years. As a result, Rei's genome is reprogrammed and by the end of the tale has transformed completely into the psychotropic mucous substance P+, whose molecular make-up was hitherto unknown to nature and which Feuerstein actually produces in the exhibition, and which is employed in the story to "repair and renew humankind": "P+ offers us the opportunity for a short time to be like you, to hark the world's inner voice and to feel being", as a representative of the Accademia dei Secreti explains to Rei.

In the series of drawings, the lamprey rises up on the frontispiece as the quasi-mythological source behind a marriage of humanity and nature brought about by molecular biology, while P+, the abbreviation for the molecule synthesized for the exhibition from dopamine and psilocyn, and which Feuerstein has named psilamine, enters the scene on the last sheet like an occult religious manifestation. P+ is accompanied here by phallic forms that symbolize the ecstasy of change experienced by the mind and the senses, in which the world transmutes into a slimy state. The slime points both to the primaeval past and to the future. As a "superfice", a bio-film that coats all and everything, it has the hypothetical potential for use as a new, interconnective storage and communications medium. The wordplay "Psipsy", which may be seen on the frontispiece under the legend "Goo Story", underlines the intermingling of fact and fiction, of science and speculation that marks every level of the exhibition: the sculptures, the installations, the drawings, and the story. "Psi" is a symbol here for the paranormal or parapsychological, and "psy" for scientific psychology based on experimentation and verifiability, and that excludes anything speculative. The two legends also shown one beneath the other on the frontispiece, "Daimon Cult" and "Matter Does Matter", point to two central aspects of Feuerstein's hermeneutic approach to the contemporary world: firstly, getting to grips with "modern demons", as

Feuerstein puts it in his "daimonology"<sup>1</sup>, which, largely hidden in the background of civilization, control and regulate the day-to-day technological life of machines, computers and networks, and thus increasingly our everyday social lives; and secondly, the importance of matter, material and materiality for our relationship to the world. Slime as the primaeval soup of evolution, as 'star jelly', as a substance hailing from aliens or from the mire of some future Swamp Things, but also as a material which is interesting on account of its molecular characteristics serves as a starting point where mythological and technological aspects interact. The drawing in which a human figure is shown squatting on a clock, locked in a technical apparatus, clearly emphasizes this tension between mythology and hard technological reality. Man perches on time, a demon inscribed into existence that controls fate, while the world and its story blossom forth and take place in a multitude of forms.

The line of development that crystallizes out in the sequence of drawings arises from the relationship between nature and technology. The basic motif that unites the drawings is the confrontation between machines and organisms. The two draw successively closer, grow together and ultimately enter a synthesis in the form of current day biotechnology, which has the capacity to influence the very building blocks of organic and inorganic matter. Already the second drawing shows a creature with octopodous tentacles that is reminiscent of H. P. Lovecraft's literary mythical being Cthulhu – an organism that arrived on planet Earth millions of years ago and remained captive in the ocean – and that appears to be giving birth to a machine. On the following drawings, organic tissue of vegetal and animal origin links up with machines and apparatuses whose construction can be read like a story about their inner life and means of functioning. As the drawings continue, time and again the machines and organs become reciprocal prostheses. One machine is keeping a heart alive and triggering erections – or is it the other way round, that the heart and the erection are setting the machines in motion? Severed hands are converted into tools and connected to an apparatus as sentient organs for touching and writing. Drawings like the one with the loom-like machine titled "Rhetornell", or the one featuring a piston steam engine with governor in a grotto, point to the mechanistic interpretations of world history that coloured art and literature from the middle of the nineteenth century to the dawn of the twentieth. While the governor as regulator – and thus a modern demon – helped the steam engine make its breakthrough and symbolically represents the revolution in civilization ushered in by industrialization, the "Rhetornell" – a portmanteau concept made from 'rhetoric' and Deleuze/Guattari's concept of the 'ritornello' as a factor that mediates between chaos and order – also recalls Marcel Duchamp's Bachelor Machine. While Duchamp's machine was still a pataphysical, dadaist apparatus that was set in motion by the bachelors' desires, and whose absurdity highlights the divide between technology and biological life, this divide now seems to have been bridged by the turning point heralded by biotechnology. In keeping with this, molecular structures and laboratory equipment increasingly gain the upper hand in the drawings. The possibility of influencing and changing materials and organisms on the molecular level stimulates the imagination to states verging on ecstasy, as is manifest in a drawing in which a seething, ever-proliferating laboratory is shown growing up to the heavens. Another drawing seems to say that the die has been cast: the transition to biotechnology has been wrought, the molecules are somersaulting, matter can be influenced, made both metaphorically and literally

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Thomas Feuerstein, URL: [http://daimon.myzel.net/Daimon:Über\\_Daimon](http://daimon.myzel.net/Daimon:Über_Daimon)

liquid – and ultimately slime. By means of genetics and molecular technology, the bachelor machine has found a terrain that is simultaneously real and imponderable.

The concluding sequence in the drawings themes this situation by taking the newly created substance P+ as a symbol of the capacity of biotechnology to manipulate matter and organisms, and thus of the susceptibility of humanity's material and mental underpinnings to alteration. The laboratory setting with the emblematically employed formula "Psi+" seems to depict a stage of manufacture on the road to the final product, P+. In the drawing immediately after, its newly generated molecular structure links back once again to the creature that recalls the mythical Cthulhu, a link that points out that the new molecule is made up of biochemical components that have already been present in the cosmos since time immemorial. Two more drawings likewise underline the cosmic connection that is conveyed by the minute building blocks of life and matter. In one drawing a constellation of stars seems to be emerging from the face of a figure set beneath the words "Don't look at me, magic". In the story, in which the figure also appears, the pattern consists of beads of P+ that ooze out of the pores of the skin to form in the drawing the barely perceivable word "sex", and point to the substance's psychotropic, hallucinogenic action. Beneath the figure is a rhyme by the Scottish poet Sir John Suckling from 1641, which refers to the legend surrounding the so-called star jelly, a gelatinous mass that falls from the sky and is linked in folklore and popular culture with meteor showers. Escaping from a kind of primordial mouth in the next drawing are tongues and other flowing forms or creatures, as well as ancient Greek demons who were viewed in antiquity as responsible for allotting and meting out fate. The picture picks up on the myth of creation and casts it in a psychedelic, pop culture mould.

The final drawings improvise in visual-narrative speculations an unforeseeable future bound up with biotechnology. A machine bearing the title "Psi" appears like an abandoned apparatus that is overgrown with spawn cultures or other unicellular organisms. The last sheet but one in this group has a structure similar to a tissue section. A naked figure from which lines of plants and trees are issuing is looking out at a space that has been formed from the finest branchings and interweavings. Under the gaze of the figure, who perhaps embodies the viewpoint of a contemporary molecular or nano scientist, this partly organic, partly machine-like space seems to dissolve into tiny molecular and atomic particles, without however losing its cohesion. The individual black dots and circles in the foreground can be read in this context as a zoom into the molecular and atomic structure of organic and inorganic matter, which as a result of the new technologies can be viewed, researched and not least manipulated on the molecular level. The final drawing in this group, in which P+ appears like the symbol of a new cult or religion, emphasises the fictional, fantastic side of these new possibilities for learning about and influencing the world, while in the exhibition's lab-like installations and apparatuses the potential for molecular manipulation in organic substances is presented for real.