

WHAT WE KNOW

Roberta, Frankfurt

In a city where the art scene is dominated by large institutions and dotted with disconnected artist-run spaces around the Städelschule, Roberta – a new space in Frankfurt founded by Anna Goetz, which occupies a private apartment near the train station – represents an important counter-model. Its inaugural exhibition, entitled 'What We Know', was a seemingly informal but careful selection of works focusing on the construction of subjectivity, juxtaposing artists from three generations: Moyra Davey, Lynn Hershman Leeson and George Rippon.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Roberta shares its name with that of a fictional persona invented by Hershman Leeson in the 1970s: Roberta Breitmore. Portrayed by the artist herself, Roberta moved in the 'real world', acquiring a credit card, a driver's licence and turning up in public spaces. For the duration of the 'The Roberta Breitmore Series' (1974–78), Hershman Leeson produced documentary material around the character's life, including *Roberta's Body Language Chart* (1978), on display here, which comprised black and white photographs of Roberta sitting in various positions during a therapy session, accompanied by short texts offering clichéd interpretations of her body language. Another framed text, titled *Description of How Roberta Wrote in Her Diary* (1975), reads like an extract from her psychological profile. Hershman Leeson's project not only demonstrates how subjects are defined through social and cultural constructs, it also disrupts that same system by introducing a fictionalized character into it.

Davey's film *Les Goddesses* (2011) further probed the paradoxes of presenting autobiography in art. The film is based on an essay written by Davey, in which she interweaves

her own family history with the life stories of Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughters. Among these fragmented narratives, Davey ponders the possibility of conveying an autobiography through text, film and photography, using quotations from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Jean-Luc Godard and Louis Malle. The temporally fractured image sequences show the artist walking through her apartment, followed by close-ups of photographs that she took of her siblings in the 1980s, while occasional shots through the window act as meditations on the present. At one point, Davey cites Goethe's diaries: 'I can say nothing now except I am here.' Like Hershman Leeson, with her anthropological documents of Roberta, Davey maintains a distance from her subject's story: she dictates her essay into a recorder, and then retells it in the film with a monotone voice while listening to the recorded version. The artist, here, is writer, reader and listener.

Rippon's work also focuses on the presentation of autobiography. In his first show at the Städelschule in 2011, while still a student there, Rippon exhibited a letter written to him by his father, regretting their lack of communication and asking for forgiveness. Since then, Rippon has produced unstable sculptures made of related found materials. One such assemblage, *Tree* (2013), shown here, comprises two interlocking, partly charred wooden planks sticking out of a bucket. Rippon correlates single parts to his family members: thus, the 'tree' becomes an abstracted, almost pathetic 'family tree'. Rippon's use of autobiographical documents echoes both Hershman Leeson's and Davey's. While all three artists represent strategies for creating 'authentic' subjective portraits, Rippon's work – the youngest artist shown here – felt the most nostalgic and sentimental.

VIKTORIA DRAGANOVA

TRANSLATED BY NICHOLAS GRINDELL



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INHUMAN

Fridericianum, Kassel

'Inhuman' is the final part of a trilogy of exhibitions featuring art of the post-internet generation curated by Fridericianum's director Susanne Pfeffer. Its title comes from Jean-François Lyotard's 1992 book *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, in which he asks: 'Can thought go on without a body?' Like the previous two exhibitions, 'Speculations on Anonymous Materials' (2013–14) and 'nature after nature' (2014), 'Inhuman' asks us to consider how our world will be transformed by new technologies, changing socioeconomic conditions and advances in neuroscience. But upon entering the museum, my first thought was, 'This is the future?'

In the first room, sets of metal bars, like those used to guard windows, were mounted on or leaned against the walls. Hanging from these, were pink and bluish scraps of silicone, resembling torn flesh or viscera, sprouting human hair. These *Security Window Grills* (2014), by Steward Uoo, are meant to be repulsive – and they are. Turning away in disgust, my eyes came to rest on Jana Euler's *under this perspective, 1* (2015), which is ostensibly a portrait of a woman lying on her stomach, but is so distorted that it looks like two large feet that merge into a penis-shaped body with a tiny set of hands and a small head.

In the next room, Lu Yang's 3D animated film, *UterusMan* (2013), tells a dramatic tale of a kind of anime female superman who takes on the form of a womb and fights enemies by firing egg cells from his/her uterus. Lu's vision of pregnancy, birth and motherhood is a radical departure from traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Cécile B. Evans's video *Hyperlinks or It Didn't Happen* (2014) was a similarly fantastic tale, in which dreamlike images narrate the story of an actor who dies while shooting a blockbuster film series and must be digitally re-animated for the final part of the franchise. Evans's beautiful imagery makes it easy to forget that the video is ultimately about the fate of our online presence after we die. Though Evans's film is gorgeously melancholic, it was an exception in an exhibition of works that were generally sterile, cold and distanced. This sense of isolation was evident in Melanie Gilligan's ten-part video installation *The Common Sense* (2014–15). In Gilligan's sci-fi world, a 'patch' is placed under a user's tongue, enabling his or her feelings and sensations to be shared directly with others. The



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invention raises great expectations for the future of companionship and security, but it soon becomes apparent that the patch is only being introduced to optimize capitalist strategies. The dream ends like so many that involve new technologies: dreams of transparency and closeness give way to control and constant surveillance.

Scraps of flesh, a uterus mutated into a male figure, re-animated film heroes – rarely have the objects in an exhibition seemed so collectively monstrous. Is this really how this generation of artists envisions the future? 'From the perspective of the present, the future of humanity might be monstrous [...] but this is not necessarily a bad thing,' writes artist Julieta Aranda in a booklet accompanying the show. The exhibition itself, however, offered little comfort. Instead, it suggested that new technologies are producing more quasi-objects and quasi-beings like *UterusMan*, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish nature from technology, subject from object. The show also reflected a paradox: the more life is animated and permeated by computer-generated technology, the more confused and complicated the questions of the material and the immaterial, of death and immortality become – even though, ironically, so much technology was developed with the hope of resolving precisely these questions.

NOEMI SMOLIK

TRANSLATED BY NICHOLAS GRINDELL



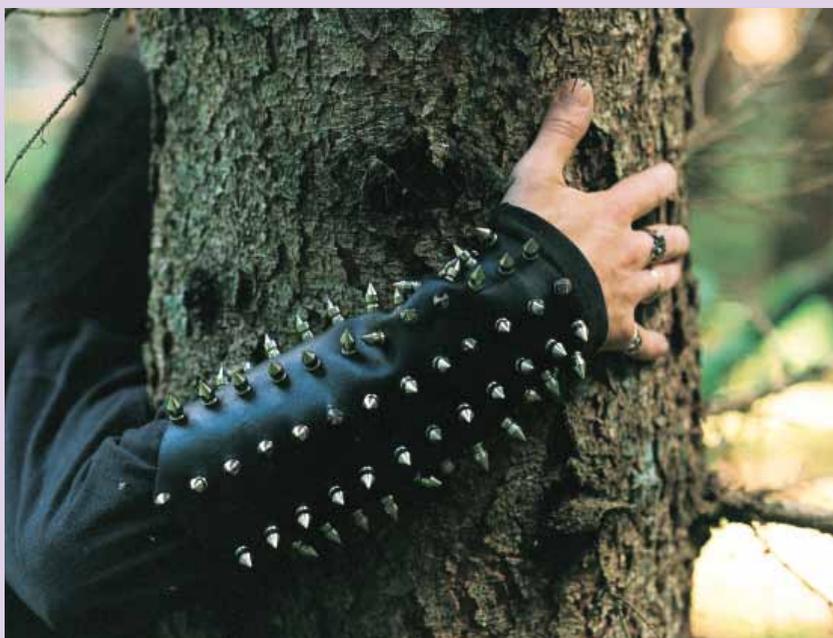
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'What We Know',
2015, exhibition view

2
Lu Yang
UterusMan, 2013,
3D animation still

3
'Inhuman', 2015,
installation view

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Torbjørn Rødland
Frost no. 4, 2001, c-type
print, 47 x 59 cm



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TORBJØRN RØDLAND

Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo

My inability to look away from Torbjørn Rødland's photographs feels like prurience. Many make me uncomfortable, yet I linger over them. His images are slick, controlled and exactly composed, but also outlandish and uncanny. As 'Sasquatch Century', this survey of two decades of the Norwegian artist's output made clear, Rødland has always been an exemplary analogue technician. What has developed over time is his talent for conveying textures, devising peculiar juxtapositions and revealing the underside of desire – qualities that evoke conflicted responses like mine.

Rødland's photographs often include people, yet they're not exactly portraits. Few of his human subjects look directly at the camera and most are in bizarre poses or circumstances. In *The Measure* (2010–13), a shirtless, mop-haired blonde boy sits patiently inside a dog cage, his hands clasped on his lap. A muscular black man with his head bowed likewise has *Folded Hands* (2012), yet the tight black briefs that encircle his wrists contradict the piety of his gesture; they're all he wears. In an untitled photograph dated 2009–13, a naked young woman in a forest wears socks and shoes over her wrists and hands. Bending forward, her four limbs akimbo and her head tucked behind one arm, she looks like a hairless fawn struggling to right itself.

Rødland's photographs of objects are, likewise, not quite still lifes. In one image, several oranges are coated with fine, sandy-blonde hair. The title, *Trichotillomania* (2010–11), names the disorder that compels people to pull out their hair. In another recent photograph, *Napkins* (2011–12), six crumpled napkins have ineffectually wiped up chocolate syrup poured on stone tiles. Incongruously, downy white feathers stick to the liquid. The abject elements in both pictures suggest anxiety or pain just beyond the frame.

There's something 'wrong' with all of these photographs, which capture or create scenes most of us would not find picture-worthy, yet each is beautifully staged and shot. Similarly, the installation decisions, which the artist made together with curator Milena Hoegsberg, appeared odd at first but were patiently worked-through. The white and mint-green walls came together at strange angles; the photographs were hung lower than is typical; small black and white pictures punctuated the larger colour prints. Though the show forwent chronology and thematic groupings, its unusual atmosphere proved a carefully plotted corollary to Rødland's art.

One challenge seems to be that most viewers think about pictures, whereas Rødland seems to think through them. He uses the camera to resolve questions no one else would imagine asking. Some are practical, having to do with achieving certain qualities of light or ensuring a remarkable depth of focus. Some are sensorial: how can a flat, texture-free surface create physical empathy, phantom sensations? What sets Rødland apart from other contemporary photographers who skirt the edge of propriety is his professed lack of irony. Don't mistake this for a lack of sophistication. Rather, it's a deliberate reaction to postmodern predecessors and to the hollow criticality of contemporaries using tired strategies.

As Rødland has said: it's harder today 'to come to terms with the complexity in a photographer's approach to a breathing world of beauty, life and consumption'. His most captivating photographs use conventions like genre to explore what sensations the camera can convey. Some of his best images meld portrait and still life. In them, he treats bodies like objects, cropping them to render his subjects unidentifiable. What's left – a woman's toes encased in gelatinous-looking ice; a forearm entwined with an octopus tentacle – are like undiagnosed fetishes. We can't be sure that what's wrong with these photographs might not dwell within us, too.

BRIAN SHOLIS