

## THEORY

NINFA ÆTERNA:  
THE HUMAN BETWEEN  
THE ANIMAL AND THE EXTENSIVENESS  
OF THE UNIVERSE

by Eva Skopalová

**The Ancient Greek nymph is a creature half human and half in possession of cosmic elements. In this day and age contemplating such mythologies becomes considerably relevant. A reflection essay on the boundaries of the animal, the human, and that which exceeds human, on the formlessness of the human body and the body of nature, opens up new possibilities as to how to think about the current climate crisis in relation to contemporary art (Michele Abeles) and the historical avant-garde (Raoul Ubac).**

In Greek mythology, nymphs are beings whose existence is on the border of two worlds: the world of humans and the world of elements. Nymphs are half human and half nature itself, and therefore have no soul: in order to obtain one, they must beget a child with a human. This is how Paracelsus described nymphs in his book *Ex Libro de Nymphis, Sylvanis, Pygmaeis, Salamandris, et Gigantibus, etc.* (1566). The true nature of the nymph is elemental (*Elementalgeist*), i.e. it belongs (traditionally) to four elements.<sup>1</sup> This was what fascinated the German art historian Aby Warburg (1865–1929), who devoted much of his life to studying the iconology of this Greek (quasi) goddess exiled from ancient Greece to Renaissance Florence. Warburg studied the movement of the accessories, jewelry and drapery in which she was dressed. His method was to follow the formulas of pathos, the system of primitive affects materialized in works of art that survive across time and migrate through space. That is why he turned to the ancient goddess in Renaissance exile. More recently, this project has been taken up by Georges Didi-Huberman, who, in a tetralogy of books, traces the nymph in the modalities of the four elements: earth, air, water, and fire.<sup>2</sup> While in European tradition the number of elements has stabilized at four, an essential part of Asia's cosmological systems is ether, also called quintessence, which has its place over all elements. Ether or αἰθήρ in ancient Greek meant "clean, clear skies." It is finer than light itself, as Robert Fludd writes a few centuries later.<sup>3</sup> The fifth, heavenly nymph, will therefore be one that stands on the border of man and the universe, just as man himself is between animal and god. The drapery of this *ninfa æterna* will not only be the cosmic clouds, but also the whole of living nature standing before the apocalypse.

Mankind has its animal side and its divine side, which emerges out from a clearly defined form of body. Georges Bataille expressed this tension using the term *informe*, formlessness. Bataille concludes in his dictionary definition of formlessness that "the universe resembles nothing at all, it is only *formless* [...]"<sup>4</sup> The human body, its centrality and formal definition are at the heart of Rosalind Krauss's deliberations. In her 1985 text, *Corpus Delicti*, Krauss examines the boundary nature of the human body in surrealist photographs.<sup>5</sup> According to her, the formlessness of the naked human body "reveals itself as animal" yet is also transcendental like the whole universe.<sup>6</sup> Krauss therefore proposes making use of a Wittgensteinian seeing *as if*, which spans the paradox of micro- and macrocosm literally mirrored in the human body.<sup>7</sup> The body emerges from itself, which is characteristic of surrealism, in which the subject is still the center of all rationalizing. But what if it is now the other way around and we live in a reality

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "Nymphs", in Jacques Khalip - Robert Mitchell (eds.), *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media*, Stanford 2011, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Serially published as *Ninfa moderna* (Paris 1999), *Ninfa fluida* (Paris 2015), *Ninfa profunda* (Paris 2017) and *Ninfa dolorosa* (2019).

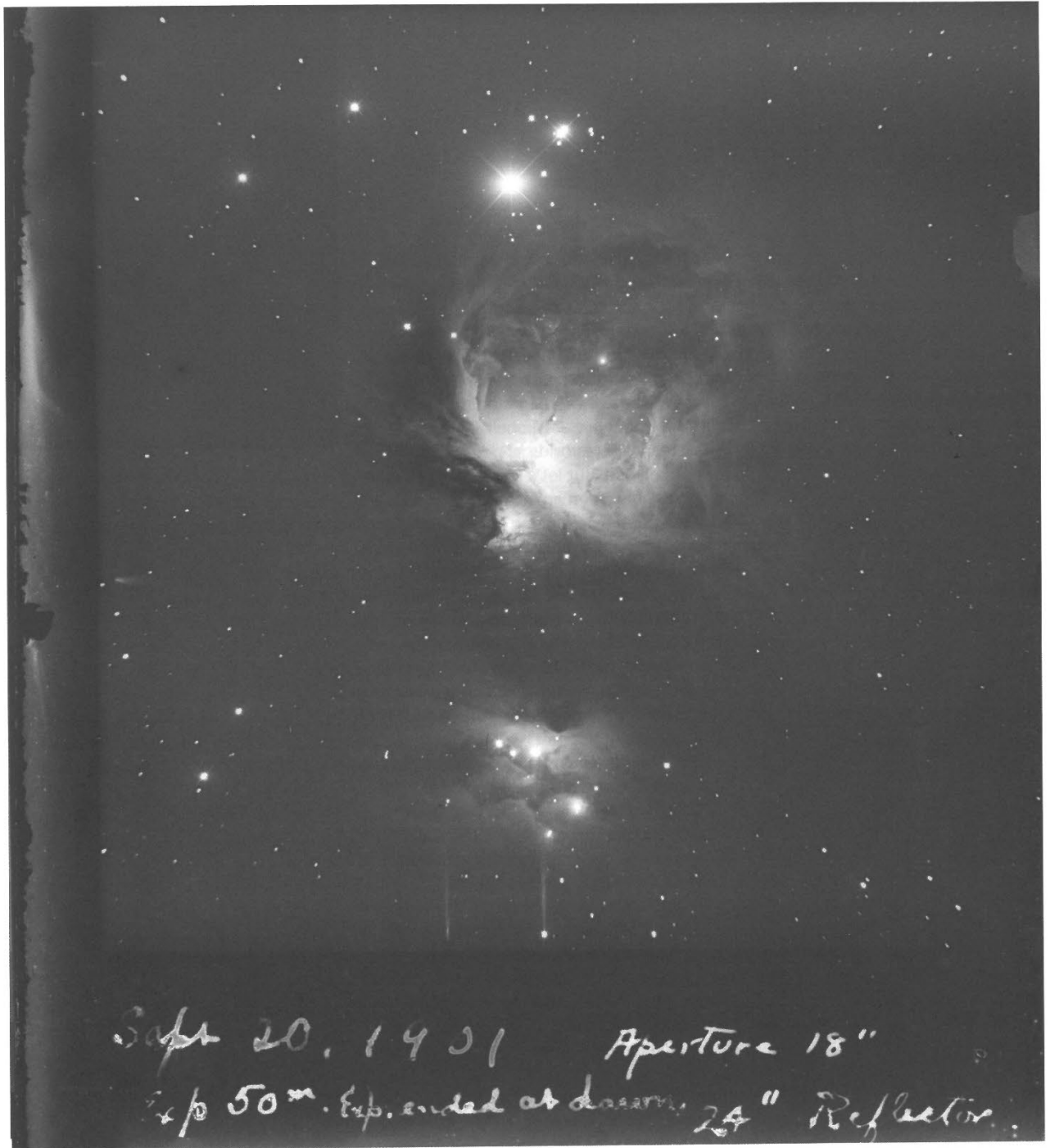
<sup>3</sup> Robert Fludd, *Mosaical Philosophy*, London 1659, p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, "Informe", *Documents* 7, 1929, p. 382.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delicti", *October* 33, 1985, pp. 31-72

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



George Ritchey, Yerkes Observatory, The Orion Nebula, 1901, digitization project: W. Cerny, R. Kron, Y. Liang, J. Lin, M. Martinez, E. Medina, B. Moss, B. Ogonor, M. Ransom, J. Sanchez (University of Chicago), copyright Czech Astronomical Society

that is stranger than fiction—where imagination does not allow us to describe our life, where the subject comes out of itself, and where the relationship that Krauss has described is inverse?

In Krauss's analysis of 1920s and 30s photography, four works stand out in this regard. They are by Raoul Ubac (1910–1985), a Belgian artist who experimented with the technology of photography and the corporeality of man reflected on photosensitive paper. In my view, these works find their counterpart in photographs by the contemporary American artist Michele Abeles, who brings the imaginary *ninfa æterna* to the virtual hyper-worlds of post-internet collages, to a contemporary waiting for apocalypse. But let's start in sequence. In 1939, Raoul Ubac created his *Nebula*, a body between an interstellar cloud and a female figure, a nymph, *in exile*. Ubac proceeded by exposing a negative of a standing woman to the heat of a small burner.<sup>8</sup> He burned a space nebula into the nymph's body. A similar formlessness, the boundlessness of the universe reflected and lost in the animal-human body, was found by Steve McQueen in wet asphalt. His diptych *More* (2001) captures a *ninfa æterna* that literally fell to the ground. Instead of looking into the endless distances above us as George Ritchey (author of the first 1901 nebula photograph), McQueen looked down at the wet sidewalk, reflecting the glowing depths of the nymph's drapery's folds. The *formlessness* of her body and her dress is all-encompassing enough to accommodate life itself in the smallest detail.

The formless body of the *ninfa æterna*, half human and half of nature, which has its likeness in many living beings inhabiting the universe, can also be bound and trapped as a caged animal. Raoul Ubac's *Mannequin* is a nymph enslaved by man and robbed of her clothes. Thus *Nebula* and *Mannequin* depict the dialectic of nature and culture, of *zoē* and *bios*. These terms referring to life in classical Greece open the book *Homo sacer* by Giorgio Agamben. *Zoē* literally denotes the bare life that is common to all living things (both animals and humans and gods), *bios* refers to the particular form or way of life of an individual or group (Aristotle's *bios politikos*, *bios theōrētikos* and *bios apolaustikos*).<sup>9</sup> Agamben argues that the bare *zoē* has entered the sphere of the *polis* (*bios politikos*) and that this "politicization of bare life as such [...] constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought."<sup>10</sup> The *ninfa æterna* gained a political dimension – the politics of survival, or the preservation of bare life, *zoē* as such. Ubac's works *Ophelia* (1938) and *Battle of the Amazons* (1939) have their anthropomorphism in common; it is a personification of life in the sense of nature. The ocean nymph, *Ophelia*, today shares with the *Battle of the Amazons* (i.e. the battle for the Amazon rainforest) the immediate danger of extinction in terms of the entire ecosystem changing. The metaphorical lungs of the Earth, the lungs of the *ninfa æterna*, are now a condition of bare life. And this is true despite the fact that we surely do not read these works today as we did in 1938/39—even though the common denominator, a concern for the preservation of bare life, remains: in the late 1930s it was Europe's fall into fascism, today it is the threat of complex climate change.

As a formless body, the human is between bare life and politics. It pertains to the nymph, which is half human and half nature in its form of four, or five, elements. It is on the borderline between nature and culture, between the *zoē*



Raoul Ubac, *The Nebula*, gelatin silver print, 40 × 28.3 cm, 1939, acquired through the generosity of David Dechman and Michel Mercure, acc. no.: 90.2016, New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). © 2020. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

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*Ibid.*, p. 43.

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Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, 1998, p. 1.

10

*Ibid.* p. 4.

11

cf. *Ibid.*, p. 6

12

My use of the term anonymous relates to "anonymous materials" – a concept used by Susanne Pfeffer to mark a return to the material substance of artworks, but one that is simultaneously influenced by shapelessness, abstraction, or the "anonymity" of the virtual environment. Susanne Pfeffer (ed.), *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, Kassel 2018.

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Katja Novitskova, "The Ecological Principle" in Susanne Pfeffer (ed.), *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, Kassel 2018, p. 171.

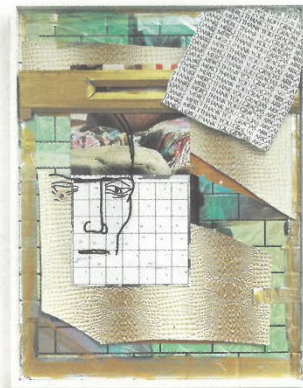


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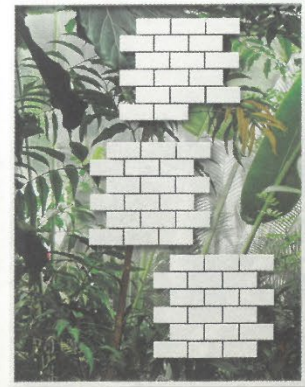
and *bios* that blend in it. The modern state places biological life at the center of its calculations;<sup>11</sup> the individual's capitalist well-being does not respect the sustainability of life and kills its own body as an animal but also as a universe. That imaginary center, hitherto situated in the subject, must be turned around: man is a product of micro- and macrocosm, and only because he is a universe and an animal at the same time can he be human—and himself a part of the *ninfa æterna*. This inverse concept of the subject, of the nymph, is present in photographs by Michele Abeles. In her post-internet, largely formless—anonymous<sup>12</sup>—collages, I find, anachronistically, the same dialectic as in Raoul Ubac. Except that here sur-reality has been replaced by hyper-reality.

Michele Abeles' photographs use strategies similar to those of surrealist photography (montage), although surrealist photography is more an anonymous than an imaginative collage of hyperreality. Abeles presents both the human and its gender identity, as well as fauna and flora. The nymph and her drapery are fighting for bare life on the border between the virtual and the real. In her text *The Ecological Principle*, Katja Novitskova considers man and his "ever-expanding capacity to manipulate matter and energy on planet Earth and beyond."<sup>13</sup> With its biopower, the human ceases to be an animal and violates the natural balance. Returning to *zoē*, to bare life—finding of one's own animality—is perhaps the only way to achieve the balance of the *ninfa æterna*. In her poetic water lilies from Monet's paintings (the Latin name of *nymphaea* is indeed derived from mythological nymphs), Abeles deals with boredom and anonymity, which entails waiting in reception halls. Abeles has abstracted the anonymous image hanging above the desk (often Monet's water lilies) and supplemented it with a clock to conceptualize, and also poetize, the actual wait. In this context, boredom and inaction only count down the time for us "before it is our turn." It is not only a metaphorical wait (as that connected with Ubac's *Nebula*), but also a literal waiting for the *ninfa æterna* to finally ignite and destroy all life, *zoē* and *bios*. The only possibility is for humans to rediscover their ability to be animal again: to give up the excessive *consumption* of the universe in late capitalism in order not to pay the highest price – the price of bare life.

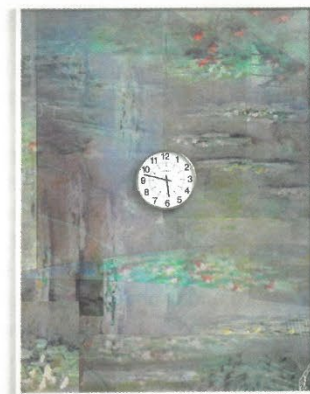
EVA SKOPALOVÁ is an art historian and theoretician. The main focus of her work is the issue of non-linear time in visual art and the modalities of mutual interventions between the past, present and future. At present, she is working on a PhD at the Institute of Art History at the Charles University in Prague. She is also an independent curator and art critic.



Michele Abeles, *Alligator mississippiensis*, mixed media, 114 x 87 x 9 cm, 2018, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Robert Glowacki



Michele Abeles, *Jungle #02*, archival pigment print, ceramic tiles, mirror, 108 x 83 x 4 cm, 2014, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Robert Glowacki



Michele Abeles, *Nymphaea tetragona*, archival pigment print, clock, edition unique, 203 x 152 x 9 cm, 2018, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Robert Glowacki