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Paper Title:

LEDA MELANITIS

Rare Butterflies, Timelessness and What has Once been Human

*I confess I do not believe in time.
I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose
one part of the pattern upon another.
Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness – in a
landscape selected at random – is when I stand among rare butterflies and
their food plants.
This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to
explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love.
A sense of oneness with sun and stone.*

Vladimir Nabokov
Speak, Memory (1966)

The absence of the human reveals what has been human and, as Derrida proclaims, 'the trace I leave signifies to me at once my death, either to come or already come upon me, and the hope that this trace survives me.'¹ The Melanitis leda Project is a transgenic model of the Leda Melanitis butterfly (named by Linnaeus in 1758), that employs one of the artists' genes. The gene of the artist Yiannis Melanitis, who shares the same name as the Leda Melanitis butterfly,

¹ Naas, Michael. *Derrida From Now On*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008: 5.

becomes the trace that the artist leaves and the trace that will survive him in eternity or in a timeless sphere.

The term **Melanitis**, derives from the Greek root melas (μέλας), meaning dark and deprived of light; a property that most likely attracted the Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus in naming the inspected butterfly.

In our biological system lies the essence of human experience, nonetheless, the hybrid human body discloses a subjectivity that is beyond embodiment. Substituting animal genes with human ones triggers an inquiry into the complexities of a “hybrid form life” as an area of cross-disciplinary focus. But in what ways can a human identify with a non-human species like a butterfly and what are the implications of an artistic project that initiates the breeding of transgenic butterflies containing a gene of human origin, that miss expresses a protein to acquire ectopic eyes.

The critical point in researching and representing the notion of “hybridity” is the meeting of art and science that includes finding adequate procedures and materials to transpose scientific processes into the artwork. Yiannis Melanitis’ aim as he mentions is to see ‘all biological interferences as changes in the entropy of the artistic set.’ Artistic sets, he defines as ‘environmental time-space events that have a precise starting amount of entropy without a known conclusion. The

purpose of an action in the arts has to be considered and possibly measured by the amount of escape from 'normality.'

As we can see in this unorthodox project the aesthetic set exchanges insights with the scientific set and the integration of the philosophical perspective of "entropy" and "abnormality" into artistic inquiry allows the researcher to imagine and to construct a connection between a scientific and an aesthetic paradigm.

Biological metaphors are often manifested in discourses of the relations of human nature to art and various biologically based theories of aesthetics see biological phenomena and aesthetic practices in a shifting and reciprocal relationship to each other. Moreover, there is an ongoing parallel between the "visualization of hybridity" in the scientific and artistic domains. The preoccupation with the visual as paradigm is found in both domains; however, in the artistic domain there is a belief that the primacy of visual perception (the interplay of the dark (melas and light) maintains an ontological status.

The Melanitis leda Project radically critiques the idea that the individual human subject is the center of all things by inventing and formulating a new aesthetic species that integrates a human substance that comes so close to another form of life, yet retains, in some strange and stunted fashion, a meaningful semblance of humanity. At the same time, the artist experiments with the nature of art per se, in

the extent that he makes it hard for us to imagine art more calculatedly eviscerated of everything the world has always thought of as art.

This transgenic butterfly that challenges artistic production and even genomic practices aspires to invent new conceptualizations of the notion of the post-human by formulating a correlation or by defying the boundaries between humanism and anti-humanism and by going beyond the reliance on representation, spectacle and the art market.

The influence of the post-human in the work of artists and theorists and its manifestations in art and culture has not yet been extensively theorized. In a sense we are always already post-human insofar as we are controlled by discourses (history-ideology-language). Human always remains human, as Boulter argues, but only as phantom, as trace, as spectre. As he writes:

the figure of the posthuman is always a figure of the boundary or limit: she exists just at the threshold of the recognizable at the limit of what we expect to be the human (the figure of the ghost, the specter – the literal post-human).²

Yiannis Melanitis, for all his interest in the limits of the human, in what Boulter has been calling the posthuman, thus really does remain fundamentally a humanist like Samuel Beckett. As Boulter writes about Beckett, 'indeed, the trajectory of his

² Boulter, Jonathan. *Beckett*: 12.

career demonstrates that posthumanism, defined in a limited sense as the elimination of the human – its body; it claims to a transparent consciousness – is a patent impossibility: traces of the human, of the (spectral) body, of (spectral) desires, insistently reanimate what seems to have vanished.³

Posthumanism is defined as the theory that radically critiques the idea that the individual subject is the center of all things, the beginning and end of all knowledge and experience. Thus, this is a radical critique of humanist philosophy which would posit, as Boulter argues, 'the human's reason and rationality as being transparently available to the thinking subject. Posthumanism begins by countering humanism's belief that the human is self-producing, self-coincidental, that it is somehow responsible for the production of its world and its experience of the world'.⁴

The wide acceptance of anthropomorphism that is currently monitored could be interpreted as a manifestation of the increasing intention for art to have agency. The use and omnipresence of the mannequin in contemporary installation practice and the revival of a minimalist vocabulary that embraces anthropomorphism are signs of tendencies to reconcile minimalism with the presence of the human figure. This new artistic convention becomes rather

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

questionable when discussed in the light of theorists like Michael Fried who intended to eliminate anthropomorphism. Didi-Huberman acknowledges minimalism's anthropomorphism, but in contrast to Fried, instead of the presence of objects, he supports their subject-like power and the notion that artworks have agency, that objects are quasi-subjects.

According to the artist, the project Leda Melanitis initiates a dispersion of homonymic information between organisms. The aim of Leda Melanitis is to interweave language and life not as bio-laboratory exercise, but in the tradition of a modernistic art strategy and practice. Therefore, Melanitis' concern with the limits of the human and of other living organisms discloses his preoccupation with language, modernism, history and humanity, despite the fact that as the artist proclaims the "extraction of a vocabulary out of its environment, transforms the amount of information it carries."