

## **Decadence Now! Visions of Excess**

**30.9.2010 – 2.1.2011**

**curator: Otto M. Urban**

Decadence is a highly relevant subject in contemporary culture, or rather, one which is relevant once more. The apocalyptic sense of ruin and crisis within our civilisation has inspired a heightened interest in the dark side of both the human soul and of the world as such. From the 1970s onwards, one may observe a continuous attempt to address archetypal decadent themes in a wide range of artists, among them Jeff Koons, Cindy Sherman, Nobuyoshi Araki, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Robert Mapplethorpe, Damien Hirst, Zhang Peng, Keith Haring, Andres Serrano, Ivan Pinkava, Jiří Černický, Gilbert & George, Gottfried Helnwein, Josef Bolf, Jürgen Klauke and others. In this respect there is also a visible increase of interest on the part of both scholars and the general public. Exhibitions presenting works of decadent art generate an enthusiastic response as well as provoking scandal. However, they invariably open further debate on many key themes such as alienation, repugnance, beauty, hallucination, death, pornography, violence, drugs, disease, or madness, questions which inform and underline numerous issues in contemporary culture and society. It also becomes evident that issues which are seemingly obsolete and irrelevant, exemplified by censorship (both internal and external), have once again come to the fore in the context of new political correctness. Decadent art is subversive and insurrectionary; instead of indifference it demands that the viewer articulate a clear stance. In this sense, decadence is radical, being extreme as well as provocative. Alienation, an apparent sense of detachment or a depersonalized voyeurism, also represent a clearly articulated decadent stance towards society.

The subject is divided into five basic sections, tracing a sort of imaginary journey of a contemporary artist – *Excess of the Self: Pain, Excess of the Body: Sex, Excess of Beauty: Pop, Excess of the Mind: Madness, Excess of Life: Death*. It winds through the labyrinth of crucial questions connected to the very essence of our existence. However, it chooses to partake of a route whose meaning is often elusive, a journey which is no less tempting for being dangerous. It is a quest which finds images hitherto unseen, re-opening time and again the eternal debate of the very meaning and *raison d'être* of art. Sexuality and anguish represent two of the main themes of contemporary decadence, hereby in fact co-defining it in retrospect. Though often interconnected with other issues, these themes nevertheless always derive from a radical stance on the part of an artist.

## **I. *Excess of the Self: Pain***

The self-portrait was the original sin of art, a sin with the seductive appeal of the blasphemous. It was the first attempt to challenge the dominant status of the artistic ideal. The self-portrait was the first attempt to render art more human. For a number of artists, the self-portrait constituted one of the main themes of their work, signifying a concrete identification between the artist's work and their life. By obliterating the distinction between illusion and reality, the role of identity in self-portraiture observed no limits. The artist could thus be anything, everyone, or nothing. The decadent self-identity is a defiant and rebellious one. It is also insecure and tormented, seductive and repulsive, attractive and ugly, exquisite and abominable; it is ambiguous.

In the last thirty years, there have appeared a number of self-portraits utilizing an edgy, dark and provocative stylization. New technologies and forms of visual manipulation have opened up new perspectives of representation. Most remarkably, popular culture has also adopted this negative stylization, in all its vibrant variations. References to *fin-de-siècle* Decadence can also be found in David Wojnarowicz's cycle *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*. A similar nexus also revealed itself with great intensity in the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, particularly his photographs of the 1970s. At the time, Mapplethorpe was preoccupied with the figure of Des Esseintes, anti-hero of the novel by J. K. Huysmans *A Rebours* (*Against the Grain*). Equally silent and taciturn is Catherine Opie's self-portrait *Pervert* (1994), where the face is itself in fact invisible, hidden behind a shiny and tight-fitting leather mask. It was also in a mask, albeit one which does not cover the entire face, that Joel-Peter Witkin portrayed himself in his 1984 *Self-Portrait*. Masochistic objects in self-portraits sometimes acquire an almost therapeutic role, as do bandages and other medical equipment. Similar allusions are frequently used in the self-portraits of Gottfried Helnwein. Jürgen Klauke explores this new sexuality in detail in his early 1970s performances and series of photographs. The first distinctive project in this vein was his 1973 triptych *Transformer*.

The artist's own face, mutating into a variety of appearances and stylizations forms the core of the oeuvre of the French artist Orlan. In her 1994 programmatic text *Carnal Art Manifesto* she perceives all of her art essentially as a self-portrait executed through the devices of new media. A similarly remarkable transformation and exploration of self-identity takes place in the work of Genesis P-Orridge, one of the key figures of contemporary alternative thought. The artist's own face, or in fact her entire body, also forms the primary theme of the work of Cindy Sherman. Yasumasa Morimura intervenes with the canonical images of Western painting and photography. His Oriental face changes imperceptibly these universally known pictures. An obsessive fascination with self-identity and its metamorphoses led Gilbert & George to explore the contextual borders of the explicitness of representation. The self-portrait *Le Totem* (1983) is one of the first works of the duo Pierre et Gilles, clearly foreshadowing their subsequent major subject matter, inspired by world religions and mythologies. A self-portrait stylization is one of the themes running through Matthew Barney's five-part cycle *Cremaster*. Barney here is a creature of many faces and characters, his metamorphoses giving rhythm to the narrative. Self-portrait would

appear to play no great role in the work of Damien Hirst. One of the few exceptions is the 2008 *Self-Portrait* series of light-boxes. Hirst exploits here his favourite motif of the skull, this time his own.

## II. *Excess of the Body: Sex*

Similar to the self-portrait, eroticism is one of the oldest themes of artistic representation. Still, it was not until the liberal 1960s that a new perspective on erotic art became possible. Subsequently, the history and theory of art was forced to grapple with issues of sexuality and pornography more often, in proportion to the growing number of works addressing these themes. The change in the representation of eroticism which occurred in the 1970s is essential in nature, and it is aptly summarized by Marc Bijl's sculpture *Porn* (2002), a clear commentary on Robert Indiana's famous *Love*. Free love in communes was replaced by the gloom of pornographic cinemas, the cold detachment of peep shows, the alienation of S/M salons. Yet even here the explicitness in the portrayal of the body must be seen in a broader context, as in the Jeff Koons cycle *Made in Heaven*. Koons's large canvases represented the adoration of his new relationship with the Italian porn actress and politician Ilona Staller, performing under the pseudonym Cicciolina. Sexuality also informs the entire oeuvre of Andres Serrano, who dedicated to the subject an entire cycle, entitled *History of Sex*. The Chinese painter Tsang Kin-Wah offers a peculiar game with the viewer's perception. In his cycle *White Porn Paintings*, he directly alludes to pornography; however, the images change within space, as the viewer first sees a blank canvas, and only from a certain distance does the painting reveal itself. References to pornography have appeared since the 1970s in the work of the duo Pierre et Gilles. In this sense, the figure of the martyr St. Sebastian presents a strong appeal to Pierre et Gilles, who have dedicated to the portrayal of the saint a number of works. Still, the 1987 variation remains the most compelling. Motifs of bondage are frequently addressed by the Japanese photographer Nobuyoshi Araki. In Araki's work, bondage takes on a profound spiritual dimension, one which is at times difficult to comprehend from the perspective of the Western civilisation.

Fetishistic stylizations run through the oeuvre of Joel-Peter Witkin, who meticulously assembles and constructs a concrete composition; his preoccupation with form brings him close to the Old Masters. Fetishism is directly linked to transformation in the sculptures of Jake and Dinos Chapman. *Fucking with Nature* (2009) presents the insane idea of the serial reproduction of mutant-animals. Animal allegories are far from exceptional in contemporary art, as is the method of taxidermy. The latter provides one of the main themes of the Hungarian artist Géza Szöllősi. His method, or its use, however, is closer to the scientific experiments of Dr. Frankenstein. In his cycle *Flesh Project* (2003), Szöllősi created female torsos by aligning the flesh and skin of animals. The motif of a man-made creature whose primary role is to fulfil the function of a sexual object appears throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most frequently mentioned in this context is the American artist Cindy Sherman, in particular her cycle *Sex Pictures* (1992). The body of Orlan is a projection screen of the

surrounding world, a sort of transformer of all available impulses and information. A special place in the context of her work is occupied by the photograph *Origine de la guerre* (*The Origin of War*, 1989), as Orlan addresses the male body only exceptionally. She responds here to Gustave Courbet's notorious *The Origin of the World* (1866), a painting which was perhaps not meant to be revealed to the public, intended to remain hidden in the penumbral boudoirs of Orientals or philosophers. The Belgian artist Wim Delvoye found new images of sexuality in his cycle *Sex-Rays*, by using X-ray technology. Erotic images are directly connected with the motif of death (the skull) as well as references to medicine. Fetishism as a game, at once entertaining and dangerous, is present in the sculptures of the Italian artist Niba. Her terracotta torsos transcend into other beings, becoming empty, mutant forms which still await having life breathed into them.

### III. *Excess of Beauty: Pop*

In the last decade, popular culture has undergone a seminal transformation. Technological progress has ever more profoundly pervaded into and influenced everyday life. Firstly the mass dissemination of television beginning in the 1950s, the spread of digital technologies a quarter of a century later, and eventually the rise of the Internet have not only provided a major influence on art, but have in fact redefined its social role. Mass-produced art is meant to be entertaining, not to disturb or provoke. The banality of popular culture is in sharp contrast with the tantalizing world of stars and celebrities. For many artists, however, popular culture presents an enticing inspiration. They make forays into the world of pop and find there a wide range of motifs which they then refashion within different contexts, infusing them with new and often surprising meanings. The apparent simplicity of the reality of the present in fact gives rise to its greatest problem. Difference becomes dangerous, perceived by some as a threat to abstract notions of purity and uniformity, a disruption of the social and cultural canon, any alteration of which is perceived negatively.

An unambiguous success was the "seedy" aesthetic of punk, as visually defined by Vivienne Westwood, together with the graphic designer by appointment to the Sex Pistols, Jamie Reid. Symbols hitherto considered sacrosanct, such as the national flag or the portrait of the Queen were combined with a rough, crumpled and dirty look. Punk tested the limits of how far it was possible to go with the aesthetic of ugliness, where the motif of the swastika merges with the corporate logo of McDonald's or Coca Cola. Punk also showed disrespect to famous and popular figures, as well as to celebrities. In a similar spirit of irreverence, the Italian sculptor Paolo Schmidlin portrayed both Queen Elizabeth II in *Porn Queen* (2006), and Pope Benedict XVI. In both these sculptures, however, the question arises as to what extent one should identify a work of art with its model. Princess Diana is among several aristocrats portrayed in the cycle *Royal Blood* by the Dutch artist Erwin Olaf.

The French artists Pierre et Gilles have been exploring the world of popular culture ever since the late 1970s. Collaboration with iconic figures of pop culture forms one of the essential components of their work. A similar sensitivity to the glamorous world of the stars

also appears in the photography of the American artist David LaChapelle. Few artists can manipulate their models into such bizarre situations. LaChapelle has in fact created a new star of his own in the model and singer Amanda Lepore. It is not only the portrait of Amanda Lepore, however, which links David LaChapelle with another American artist, painter Terry Rodgers, whose paintings represent a kind of post-modern take on details from Thomas Couture's famous work *Romans in the Decadence of the Empire* (1847). In such a world, people are more prone to succumb to a variety of pitfalls. The Ukrainian-born painter Shimon Okshteyn dedicated an entire cycle, entitled *Dangerous Pleasures* (2008), to the theme of drugs. Okshteyn's paintings represent a structured and composed pictorial whole, whose realism gains new meaning by the use of a mirror, on which they are painted. Historical references, in particular to Weimar and Nazi-era Germany, are employed in the pictures of the Slovak painter Martin Gerboc. A critical view of religion has long been present in the work of Gilbert & George. In this sense, his cycle *SONOFGOD* (2005) is significant, and in particular the work *Was Jesus Heterosexual?*. It is no accident that in the 1970s, corporate logos were increasingly appropriated by works of art, as were political or ideological symbols. Boaz Arad created a mundane rug bearing the portrait of Adolf Hitler. There gradually emerged various offshoots and variations on Pop Art, such as the Sotsart of Russian painter and sculptor Alexander Kosolapov. Combining notorious advertising slogans with the face of the Communist leader Lenin or with Jesus Christ, Kosolapov achieves a peculiar tension. His works derive from the seeming contrast of symbols and ideologies. A similar combination is exploited by Gottfried Helnwein in his portraits of Marilyn Manson, particularly by combining him with the cartoon icon, Mickey Mouse.

#### **IV. *Excess of the Mind: Madness***

Regardless of the fact that Western Civilisation is becoming ever more fragmented spiritually, the role of religion in the contemporary world continually gains new contexts and meanings. Religions appear to be in parallel to scientific knowledge, or rather, they seem to have arrived at different perspectives. A certain incompatibility is, however, the result of different points of departure. The spiritual drift of individuals has even more serious consequences in the society of fear. Terror and fear easily project themselves into madness. Decadent art often makes recourse precisely to the combination of madness and religion. This is not some self-serving exploitation of religious symbols, but part of the generating of new and different contexts. Religious symbols and images are as it were laid bare and examined from angles which until only recently seemed unimaginable. It would be easy to label such works as blasphemous and offensive.

New contexts are not sacrilegious, but on the contrary, can be liberating and reflective. In his performance *Grüsse vom Vatikan* (Greetings from the Vatican), Jürgen Klauke combines Christian symbolism with fetish motifs. For David Bailey and Damien Hirst, in their joint cycle *Stations of the Cross*, Christianity is linked, alongside sexuality, also with notions of violence and the aesthetic of blood and garbage. Christianity is thus brought in close proximity to a range of various spiritual schools and doctrines which frequently refer to the

movement of *Modern Primitives*. Pain and self-mutilation become one of the significant means to achieve spiritual epiphany. Pain loses its negative associations, and evolves into a mediator of knowledge and ecstasy. Performers such as Franko B. or Ron Athey interpret their projects in precisely this sort of broader spiritual context. That which elicits displeasure and disgust in some viewers is an essential step towards the larger spiritual contemplation for the artist. From some perspectives, this sort of self-harm is itself a variation on the Christian idea of flagellation. In this respect, androgyny, today most frequently linked with trans-sexuality, also plays a significant role. A number of artists thus see trans-gendering as part of the broader artistic context of their oeuvre. Androgyny, which was also a large part of the Decadent aesthetic at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for instance in the texts of Josephin Péladan, has become relevant again today. A whole host of such beings appear in the work of Matthew Barney, in the *Cremaster* cycle in particular. His world is inhabited by peculiar creatures who generate their own mythology. A similar world all his own can be found in the photographs of the Austrian artist Joachim Luetke; of exceptional quality are his portraits of the German composer and performer Anna Varney.

In recent decades, the work of Francisco Goya has seen a great reverberation. It was in fact contemplation of the role of Goya's work in recent culture that provided the initial inspiration for the examination of decadence in contemporary art. A similarly real world of madness exists also in the sculptures of Jake and Dinos Chapman. Their earliest works from the first half of the 1990s already form part of an original world of uncommon encounters. In the following years, the artists revisited Goya several times, for example in their macabre variations of their previous sculpture entitled *Sex*, or the multiple with the symptomatic title *The same thing, only smaller* (2005 – 2006). As a matter of fact, for many years now, Gottfried Helnwein and Yasumasa Morimura have also been preoccupied with Goya. The portrayal of a child in danger is the main subject of a cycle of photographs by the Chinese artist Zhang Peng, entitled *Red* (2007). Young children, particularly girls, are confronted with an abnormal environment, thus losing their natural innocence and becoming vulnerable in the new context. The idea of the endangered child also appears often in the work of the Czech painter and sculptor Josef Bolf. The motif of suicide is tackled by the Dutch sculptor Jan van Oost. His sculpture of a hanged woman is part of a loose cycle of statues in which the same form features in moments of collapse, agony and death. Oost's sculptures in fact invite in-ostensible installation, appearing as it were in passing, in corners or next to walls.

## **V. *Excess of Life: Death***

Death is defined as the irreversible end of life, and as such it exerts a fundamental influence on life. As with the representation of sexuality and religion, a major shift has taken place in the representation of death in recent decades. One of the great taboos of modern society has gradually and imperceptibly permeated everyday life, becoming a major source of fascination within contemporary culture as a result. Death is broadcast live, becoming the backdrop to daily reality, which in its quotidian banality then loses its appeal. Despite a certain inflation of death in contemporary culture, there are still artists who approach the

subject with solemnity and respect.

In its latent, i.e., non-depicted form, it is present also in the work of photographer Ivan Pinkava. Death is omnipresent; empty interiors with a discarded piece of foam rubber or a crumpled blanket exert the strange power of the unrepresented and unsaid, and thus imagined. Foisted on the viewer are questions as to what has happened, and what it is about, unsettling questions concerning the unknown. A similar void emanates from some of the recent paintings of Damien Hirst. He worked with the motif of his own skull in a 2008 series of light-boxes *Portrait*. A silver skull entitled *The Fate of Man* (2007) also formed part of Hirst's exhibition *New Religion*, a key theme of which was the conflict between scientific knowledge and Christianity. *The Fate of Man* also forms an interesting counterpart to the more well-known sculpture *For Love of God* that Hirst created in the same year. An important influence on Hirst was the London-based South African artist, Steven Gregory. In fact, Hirst contributed an essay to the catalogue of Gregory's exhibition *Skulldoggery* (2005). Gregory's skulls are adorned with gems, semi-precious stones, gold and silver; their decorativeness and ornamentalism is thus even more aestheticized, referencing not only the Baroque *memento mori* but also the symbolism of the composition of the Baroque still life. In his sculpture entitled *Tick- Tock* (2006), he synthesized human remains into a compact entity symbolizing time. The entire composition of intertwined skeletons has a peculiar dynamic, evoking as it does ceaseless movement, the unstoppable passage of time, which Death alone can epitomize. A place all his own in this particular context belongs once again to Joel-Peter Witkin. In the precision of his still life compositions, everything has its place, including the harmonious balance of light and shadow. Witkin incorporates parts of dead bodies into classical compositions and contexts. His vision is original and recognizable; in fact, his style is much emulated and copied. No matter how macabre his photographs are, in this area Witkin searches for and finds new harmonies of form, light and shadow.

Among other contemporary artists to tackle the theme of death was the painter Keith Haring. In 1989 he created the diptych *Untitled (For James Ensor)*, in which he paraphrased famous genre scenes from the lives of skeletons, such as were produced at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Belgian Decadent artist James Ensor. Both of these black on white drawings offer to the viewer a full range of levels of interpretation, in spite of their apparent simplicity, and almost ironic content, this work forms both the artistic and the human testament of an artist fully aware that he was dying due to an untreatable disease. The photographer Václav Jirásek likewise works with allusions to the Decadence of the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The dead, lifeless face has frequently formed the subject of his photographs. More than anything, these are portraits of the dead, following the almost extinct tradition of portraying the dead, a theme close to the idea of the death mask, capturing the face in the moment of final demise. The photographs are reminiscent of Baroque reliquaries, stylizing death into a precisely composed aesthetic entity.

## **Imprint**

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Project Decadence Now!:

Galerie Rudolfinum – Decadence Now! Visions of Excess, 30. 9. 2010 – 2. 1. 2011

UPM – Decadence Now! Visions of Excess (“Room 13”), 30. 9. 2010 – 2. 1. 2011

The Brno House of Arts – Joel-Peter Witkin, 1. 10. – 28. 11. 2010

DOX – Gilbert & George: Roads, 7. 10. 2010 – 2. 1. 2011

the Gallery of West Bohemia in Pilsen: Where the place – Upon the Heath (Ivan Pinkava, Josef Bolf), 5. 10. 2010 – 6. 2. 2011



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