

H A N S   S C H E I R L

## The Earth is pregnant with Art. A trans-... world

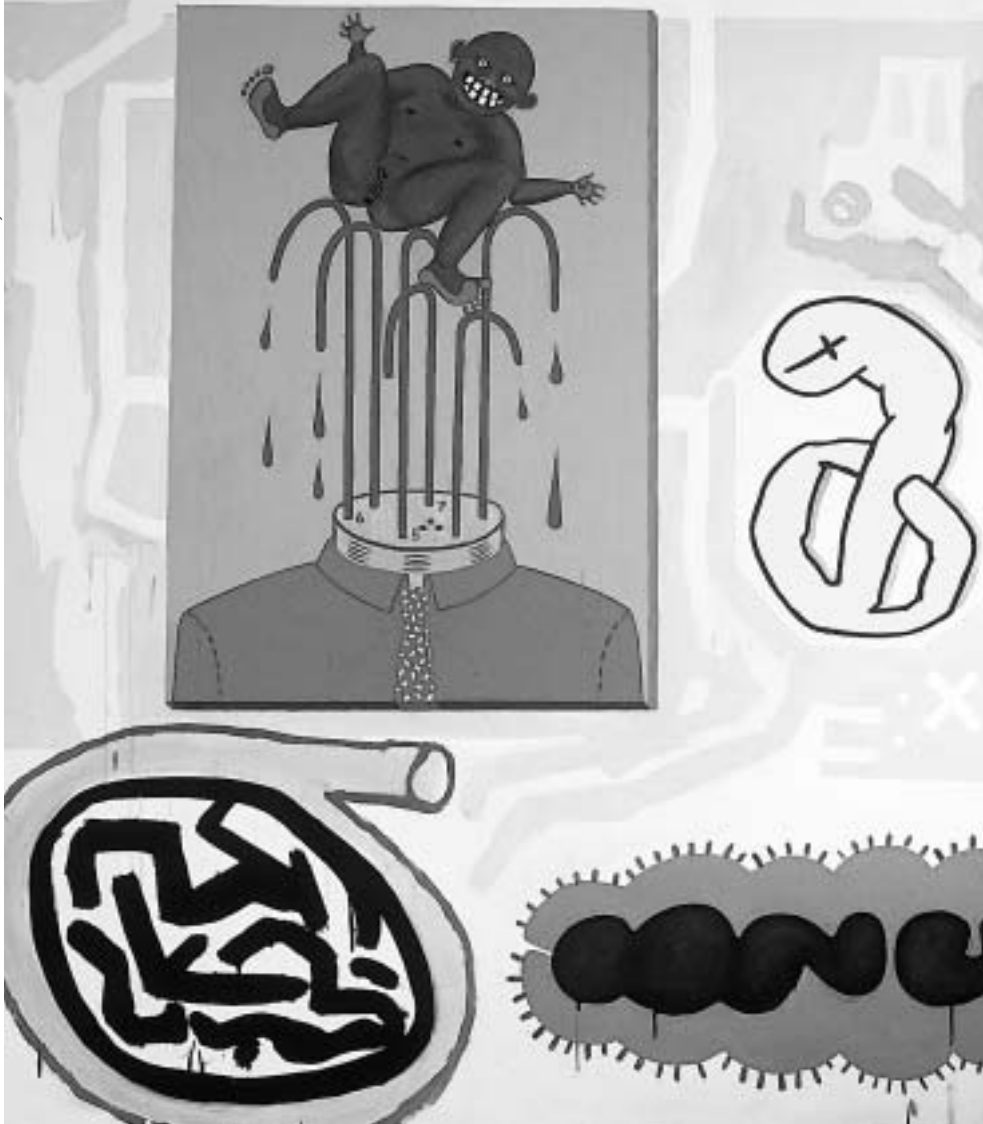


The title of my talk, *The Earth is pregnant with Art*, derived from this drawing [1] which I have always liked for its simplicity. Only recently I realized that there is the word 'art' hidden in the word 'earth'. I also found the word 'pain' in the word painting and the word 'monk' in the word monkey. Word-games as meaning-making. In Zen philosophy, life is seen as a rich and meaningless eternal presence. So, maybe the reason for our being here is to do and undo meanings over and over again.

While language is necessary to organize social life, it is also limiting us. Like every person has to be either 'he' or 'she', there are no other genders in language. Definitely in English or German, which are my main languages, gendering happens whenever you talk about another person. (Apparently there is less of that in the Basque language! Does it make a difference, I wonder?) It becomes vital to find ways to make language work for us, to play with it, let it surprise us. Another word-game I play is with s/hit: she+he+it=s/hit! According to Freud, the anal phase is the confused time before a child enters the system based on two genders, and has to follow the behaviours of either the father or the mother. David Mann writes: 'the perverse individual is trying to free himself from the paternal universe and the constraints of the law, and attempts to de-throne the father and create a new kind of reality,'<sup>1</sup> which is exactly what I am doing!

In the catalogue to *Dandy Dust*, Alice Kuzniar points out a word-game I wasn't aware of: the main character is called 'Dandy', but he, she, it—s/hit!, has 14 different personas. One of them is the 'Mummy', a mummified corpse that has come back to life. 'Within the perverse familial ties governing the action, Dandy is thus, both his mummy [mother] and, by one letter, his daddy.'<sup>2</sup> ▶

This paper was presented at the seminar, "The repoliticisation of sexual space in contemporary artistic practices" held at Arteleku from 8 to 15 September. Here, the author examines the influence of social organisation in language, of partial and agreed identity and of his performance-related and creative work.



*Babyfountain 2000*

This painting is called 'babyfountain' [2]. It shows the mixed race herma-phroditic baby being born out of the bloodfountain of the beheaded capitalist. The word 'capital' comes from the latin word 'caput' which means 'head'. I struggled with the colour of the neck which was supposed to be white or pink. But that did not work, because the background is already pink and white. I tried many different colours. Then I found that something similar to my own skin colour, a beige, was the only colour that fit. Beige? I can't stand beige. Do I belong to a race of beige people? In the end I painted the neck gold, which has a similar colour to beige, but also makes the neatly-cut neck look like a coin. Capitalism and castration seem to be closely interlinked. But more about that later. The dots in 'Trans... world' stand for -gender, -race, -age, -genre and -media. I think it is important to create a dynamic between these areas of conflict so that we get out of the dead-end of the old feminism or leftism and avoid orthodoxies and other systems that are based on exclusion. The Trans... in my own artistic practice zigzags between painting, film, manifesto, drawing, installation and performance/life-art. What especially fires my work is the dynamic between colour, body and language. With 'body' I mean not just the human body but the human body in interaction with the body of the art-work, its diverse technologies, body-parts and waste-products, pointing towards the trans-human and the cyborg. But more about the cyborg later. One of my favorite books is *Art & Agency* by Alfred Gell. He talks about the art object as a 'person', in the sense of a 'social agent'. In the foreword to this book, Nicholas Thomas points towards the '...categorical rejection of the linguistic analogies that have been mobilized by so many semiotic and

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symbolic theories of art. And this is perhaps the sense in which this book is most radical. For many scholars and, indeed, in much common-sense thinking about art, it is axiomatic that art is a matter of meaning and communication. This book suggests that it is instead about *doing*.<sup>3</sup> There is a major shift underway from the old communication paradigm to the paradigm of interactivity. I see it like that: communication is like handing over a parcel of information from one person to the other, whereas interactivity is already much more a fluxus-thing involving countless co-agents of the situation, intensities flowing in different directions at the same time. The linguistic turn is over! Synaesthetic<sup>4</sup> resonances are swinging when we use or hear words, even if we are not aware of it. I suggest that it is Alfred Gell's simple concept of 'relationships between relationships' that will help us out of a very narrow-minded concept of communication.

In this studio installation [3], a dynamic is set up between black and white and red and white and also between drawing and painting, language and colour. The adjustment to a multi-racial, multi-cultural<sup>5</sup>, polyphonic society is encountering (often violently) e/motional resistances within individuals and social groups, so that the words 'black&white' and 'colour' reverberate with these issues. In 1998 I was asked to do a performance at a club called 'Mother' to celebrate the *Dandy Dust* premiere in ►



» New York. Until two days before, I didn't know what I was going to do. Then I found this monkey in a shop in Chinatown and I knew there was going to be at least one monkey at Club Mother! (I'm also a monkey in Chinese horoscopes). In the book *Vitamin P - New Perspectives in Painting* Barry Schwabsky writes:

"Whereas a modernist like Barnett Newman could claim, We are making [our work] out of ourselves, today's painters might with more justice say, We make ourselves out of our work"<sup>6</sup> I think it's a two-way and sideways thing: we are making ourselves out of our work and we are making our work out of ourselves and out of everyone and everything that has agency in that specific situation.

Now I would like to show you the beginning of the short film, *Summer of 1995*. 1995 was the year the drag-king scene lifted off with Club Naive in central London and later at the famous transgender club Madame Jo-Jo's in Soho. I won the drag-king competition at the gay and lesbian film Festival with a special-effect performance of suicide and erection by hanging. Later that summer in Los Angeles, the artist, Catherine Opie, helped me to photographically create the 'dirty old man' persona with a fat grey moustache. In 1996 I started injecting testosterone. As an experiment.

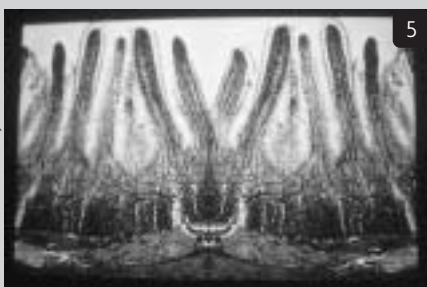
In the film, *Summer of 1995* you can see my friends and myself having a Dada get-together, a few glimpses of De La Grace Volcano, Tina Keane, Sue Golding, aka Johnny de Philo, Gianni Cipriani, Svar Simpson, Jason Barker, and others. Coming back to the idea of 'relationships between relationships' I would like to briefly mention the development from psychoanalysis to psychodynamics. One of the directions psychoanalysis has taken since Melanie Klein and the British Object Relation School is to put the emphasis away from the drives and their –mostly repressed– sexual goal towards relationships. In *Sexuality and Object Relations* Robert Royston writes: 'Could one argue that Freud's view ... that sexuality plays a central role ... in people's lives, though scandalous, is less threatening than that of object relations theory — that vulnerability, dependency and need are the states against which the strongest defences are erected?'<sup>7</sup> Psychodynamic therapy, a widely used contemporary practice (which I have done for half a year) is altogether situational. What is required is to set up a workable dynamic between the basic relationships relevant to the situation. The key is movement: without seeking resolution, quick jumps are facilitated from one area to another. Usually the focus is kept on the basic triangle: relationships 1. to parents 2. to significant others 3. to the therapist. The technique of (psycho)dynamics can be applied to life and work. It is the ability to put (and keep!) the elements –that is, relationships to people, situations, things, self, sub-selves– in a dynamic interplay, so that any, even very small change effected in one of the situations effects change in the others.



*Spidercuntboy, Dandy Dust 1998*

Now I want to talk a bit more specifically about the gender thing which as we know is not so much a natural thing, but has a lot to do with certain rituals that come with certain special-effects and prosthetics. Take for example 'Spidercuntboy' [4], a character from *Dandy Dust*. Originally he was supposed to be 'Spidergirl' but, while making the film, Svar Simpson, who plays this character had also started taking testosterone and had transformed from being a 'she' to being a 'he', an act of inversion. The word 'invert' was used in earlier times in England for homosexual people. On the digital editing system which I used to edit *Dandy Dust* there was a button called 'invert' that changed all the colours to their complementary hues. But as we want to get away from the binaries it is helpful to put them into a dynamic with the inside/outside and the big/small relations. In *Dandy Dust* the relationships to father and mother are supported or juxtaposed by spacial situations: spaces within spaces and the inversion of space: how inside becomes outside in a Trans... world. For example the 'Planet of Blood&Swelling' is where Dandy is living with his/her father Sir Sidore. To create this time/space we took photos from medical books showing bloodvessels from inside the lining of the intestines and manipulated them on the computer to look like a blood-shot sky and a forest [5]. It is implied that the sky and the forest are at the same time inside Sir Sidore's arse.

The idea is that the macro-universe and the micro-universe are intimately linked up - through technology. New technologies allow us to venture into ever smaller areas which are just as infinite as the bigger universe. As the story 'progresses' we learn that the mother, 'supermother Cyniborg', was killed by Dandy the jealous infant and got buried in the family crypt. She is so angry at her death that she lifts off, out of the ground, taking a piece of graveyard with her. This is the birth of 'the mothership' which is from now on cruising time and space [6]. Inside the uterus of the space-craft Cyniborg sets up the laboratory where she is stitching back together the family clan. In the family crypt which is in the belly of the ship she finds bits and pieces of dead ancestors. Here you see one of the many ways we used to invert space [7]. The foreground is the background: it is a miniature-model, built around the video-monitor where the action which was filmed earlier is re-played.



*Dandy Dust 1998*





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This is a picture [8] from the recent group exhibition *New British Painting- Part 1* at the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton, England. I did an installation and called it: *Inside a painting's mind - a psychodynamic model*, suggesting that my painting is a walk-in painting. I covered one wall with hessian [9], which is similar to canvas, but rough and a bit like a close-up view of canvas. Here again I'm suggesting that the limitless universe continues just as well through the microscopic as through the macro-world. Some more views from this installation [10] point towards the next thing I want to talk about: the relationship between bodies and bodyparts, bodies and separating body-parts, like: waste-products, as well as bodies and prostheses. Which moves us towards the idea of the cyborg, a mythological creature performed into existence by Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* written in 1984. 'The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity'.<sup>8</sup> The cyborg is not a being, but an interface between beings, not just the old human/machine interface but any interface with feedback potential between bio/techno systems.

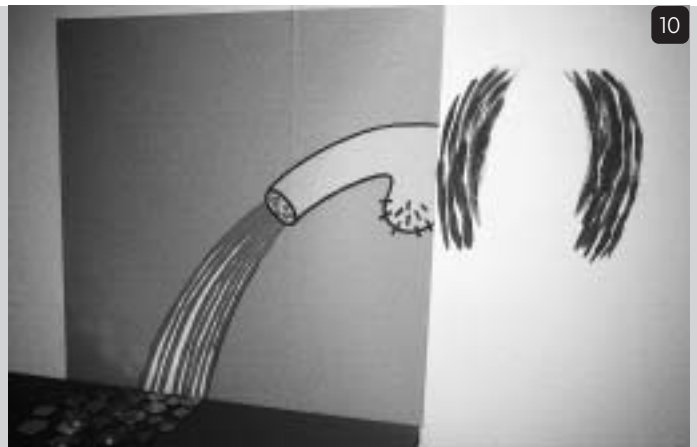
Now I want to show you a brief excerpt from a splatter-film called *Braindead* by Peter Jackson<sup>9</sup>. Splatter-films have developed out of horror-films and are, it seems inspired by radical body-art (e.g. Grand Guignol - a theater in Paris at the end of the 19th century and the Viennese Aktionists at the end of the 60s). In Splatter the psychoanalytic content of horror is inverted: instead of ~~not~~ showing the monster and creating fear, the splatter-film works with disgust and humour. The horrible is graphically displayed and highly exaggerated. Loss and becoming are one process: mutilation is loss and becoming at the same time: if you lose an arm you become a fountain, if you get blown to pieces, you find yourself in a new shape, if you get killed you become eatable left-overs for other creatures to appear, and above all, mutilation allows hybrids to be created. Films like that show off their own body, the body of cinema, which is a cyborg interface. They take the practice of cutting up time and space literally mirroring our cut&paste lives: Flesh and technology cannot easily be separated anymore.

I think the sort of capitalism we are dealing with at this point in time on a global level takes apart, 'castrates' the big narratives we used to hold on to. Like economic narratives, how to become rich, for example; religious narratives with their morals; Hollywood narratives with their single climaxes and perfect resolutions; narratives of science which made us believe we can understand the world; the colonial attitude, still based on the binary of good and evil, us and them. And, as the recent invasion of Irak showed, these narratives are utterly prehistoric and destructive ways of making meaning in the world. But how can we live with these ever shifting realities, this cut&paste patchwork of bits&pieces of old and new narratives? Are we going mad, or will we buy into fascistic simplifications? In and with my work I am trying to show or rather perform a dynamic schizophrenia which is 'natural' for the cyborg. Identity is partial and layered and only meaningful in the performance of its event. ◀

HANS SCHEIRL is an artist. Director of *Dandy Dust* (1998), a film inspired by Japanese and Hong Kong action cartoons, horror films, the homosexual underground, feminist art and the Wiener Aktionismus. He lives in London.



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#### NOTES & REFERENCES

- 1 MANN, D. *Psychotherapy, an erotic relationship*, London : Routledge, 1997.
- 2 KUZNIAR, A. *Scheirl's Hermaphroditic Cinema: From Super 8 Girl Games (1985) to Dandy Dust (1998)* in BRAIDT, A. B. (Hsg.), *Cyborg. Nets/z. Katalog zu/Catalogue on Dandy Dust (Hans Scheirl, 1998)*, Wien, 1999, p. 57.
- 3 GELL, A. *Art and Agency, an Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon press, 1998, p. 166.
- 4 'Synaesthetic' means involving different senses at the same time: colour, vibratory sense, body-position, equilibrium, temperature, taste, smell, touch, pain (!). etc.
- 5 I know cynical people think it is old-fashioned, but I strongly believe in it!
- 6 SCHWABSKY, B. *Vitamin P - New Perspectives in Painting*, London : Phaidon 2002, p. 8.
- 7 ROYSTON, R. "Sexuality and object relations" in *Sexuality, psychoanalytic perspectives*, HARDING, C. (ed.), London : Brunner-Routledge, 2001, p.51.
- 8 HARAWAY, D. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Free Association Books, 1995.
- 9 *Braindead* New Zealand 1992, Dir: Peter Jackson.