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THE REPRESENTATION OF INTERSEX BODIES IN KLONARIS AND THOMADAKI'S MULTIMEDIA PRACTICE

Abstract:

The visual representations of intersexuality are inevitably involved in delicate philosophical, social and cultural issues. These images are therefore challenging to the art historian, opening a wide spectrum of methodological questions. From which perspective should these pictures be analyzed? How is it possible to develop a suitable interdisciplinary approach?

The multimedia practice of the artist duo Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki is a very good example of how these issues can be integrated. Two series of works, *Cycle des Hermaphrodites* (1982-1990) and *Cycle de l'Ange* (1985-2003), focus on intersexuality, and both question in different ways the problem of the migration of images and ideas. The result is a work which not only addresses concerns of gender and (post-)identity, but also technological, intermedia and interdisciplinary issues related to artistic practices. The aim of this article is to analyze both these cycles in relation to more general theoretical and methodological issues concerning the understanding and interpretation of these kinds of visual representations.

Keywords:

Intersexuality, hermaphrodite, androgyne, body, identity, intermediality, interdisciplinarity

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The notions of metamorphosis and renewal are central to Maria Klonaris' and Katerina Thomadaki's artistic practice and theoretical thoughts. Their manifest desire to question the common comprehension of sexual and gender identity and to reconstruct "a post-patriarchal unconscious"¹ is only imaginable through a revival of ancient, pre-patriarchal mythologies and cosmogonies. This return to old values and beliefs is important for them because they consider fundamental cultural components to be too often marginalized "by the amnesia of modern occidental technological societies"².

Concerning the temporal evolution of their production, Klonaris and Thomadaki stated that there is a chain of subjects moving through their works, creating a multiple mirror effect of expanding gender. They have expanded a single gender identity (the feminine) to include a sexual synthesis (the hermaphrodite), which has collapsed into an in-between condition (intersex).³

One of the principal aims of the artists is to propose new visual and metaphorical interpretations of some archetypal figures in order to denounce the objectifying gaze of which women and other individuals are often victims. They explain:

"The tyranny of normality is exerted at first through the gaze. The gaze is trained to look for the norm (...) and to decode subjects in terms of their conformity to it. Non-conformity generates rejection. (...) Consciously and unconsciously we have been elaborating reflexes and

strategies in order to free the gaze from the burden of norms – cinematic norms, visual norms, gender norms, anatomical norms.”⁴

In other words, they want to destabilize the codes, which usually characterize our visual knowledge.

In this process, the body plays a central role, undergoing many transformations and becoming “a mobile screen of inner visions”⁵. Klonaris and Thomadaki call the subjects of their works *personae*, or “mirrors of the self”⁶. Thanks to their visual reinterpretations, these are no longer mere objects of representation, but real subjects, able to express inner layers of the Self through their bodies and attitudes. In this respect, the artists actually say that “the language of the body materializes the language of the unconscious”⁷. The triangular connection between man, body and image central to the anthropological approach of Hans Belting has therefore a lot in common with their preoccupations⁸.

Starting to present the feminine as “a whole” (as opposed to Lacan’s statement about the woman being “not-whole”⁹), as an autonomous and therefore ultimately double gendered identity, the artists were successively interested in the mythological figure of Astarti – Artemis, the moon goddess of the Mediterranean who represents a matrix of concepts around the pre-patriarchal feminine, which is often described as androgynous. This idea of a double-gendered or androgynous Self finally brought Klonaris and Thomadaki first to the figure of the hermaphrodite and later to that of the intersex.

The *Cycle des Hermaphrodites*, realized between 1982 and 1990, is the first series of works explicitly focused on a sexually ambiguous subject. In this respect, the artists explained: “For us the concept of the hermaphrodite originated from the androgynous feminine, like the orphic egg from the night (...).”¹⁰ Here, the reference is an Orphic belief, which states that the Night of itself conceived and gave birth to an Egg from which Eros was born. They distanced themselves from the idea of the Hermaphrodite as an effeminate and weakened man – coming from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* – and went back to the idea of the ancient Greeks who saw double-gendered mythological figures as symbols of completeness and fertility.

The first work of the *Cycle des Hermaphrodites*, *Mystery I: Sleeping Hermaphrodite* (1982), was a multimedia projection installation created for the Twelfth Paris Biennial. The starting point of this cycle was the Hellenistic sculpture *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, perhaps the most famous representation of a Hermaphrodite. The white marble

statue, found in Rome in 1619 and successively laid on an extremely refined mattress sculpted by Bernini, was reconstituted in Klonaris' and Thomadaki's installation exclusively through projection (*Figure 1*). Illusion effects typical of both Hellenistic and Baroque times were created by different projections – loops of films and slides – the various surfaces of projection – tulle screens, walls or black Plexiglas – as well as the objects themselves installed in the rooms. Ambiguity was suggested not only between feminine and masculine, but also between real and projected objects, materiality and immateriality. The visual universe was reflected in sound: continuous loops of baroque music, voluptuous voices and fragments of repeated texts. Alchemical references were present in both the iconography and the texts, evoking the idea of the hermaphrodite – or the androgyne – as the *coincidentia oppositorum*. The oneiric universe suggested by the sleeping body was intensified by the nocturnal and mysterious atmosphere emanating from the installation, together with the ghostly images inhabiting the exhibition's space. The principal aspects of *Mystery I: Sleeping Hermaphrodite* have clearly been formulated by the artists themselves: “This was not merely a transposition of the statue in the time and space of art history, but also an



Figure 1: Klonaris / Thomadaki, *Mystery I: Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, 1982, multimedia installation sound and cello player *in vivo* (©Klonaris/Thomadaki).

immersion into something magical, a recalling of a lost harmony, an amorous quest, a work about the ungraspable.”¹¹

The second step of the *Cycle des Hermaphrodites, Orlando – Hermaphrodite II* (1983), was inspired by a passage from Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando*, in which the male hero wakes up as a woman. Klonaris and Thomadaki regarded *Orlando* as “a contemporary archetype of the desire for destabilizing gender assumptions”¹², and they decided to make this desire visible through cross-dressing (*Figure 2*). The two artists, together with Syn Guérin, had to embody *Orlando*, and were filmed or photographed using different registers of cross-dressing according to their personal gender ambiguities. The hero of the 1928 novel, as well as the cross-dressing artistic practices emerging in the 1920’s, were reformulated in the projection performance. If the black-and-white images of this work were clearly inspired by the photographic cross-dressed self-portraits by some artists of the Nineteen Twenties, particularly those of Claude Cahun, they were created through a peculiar use of innovative projection strategies. Seated on the proscenium with their backs to the public, the artists themselves operated all projectors manually, creating a moving collage with slides and film juxtaposed and superimposed. In addition to the three protagonists, in this multiplicity of immaterial images, appeared nocturnal city illuminations, light calligraphies, blow-ups of fragments of pages torn from Woolf’s novel, winter trees and felines. *Orlando – Hermaphrodite II* clearly wanted to go beyond the duality traditionally associated with the hermaphrodite body, suggesting the multiple nature



Figure 2: Klonaris / Thomadaki, *Orlando-Hermaphrodite II*, 1983, multiple screen projection performance for film, slides and sound, 45 min (©Klonaris/Thomadaki).

of identity through kaleidoscopic and mirror compositions as well as a multimedia approach. By posing and acting themselves in these images and by being personally implicated in the projection process, Klonaris and Thomadaki offered a personal physical commitment to the questioning of traditional sex and gender identity.

In 1985, the artists started a new series, the *Cycle de l'Ange*, which currently includes more than twenty works. The starting point of this cycle was a clinical photograph of an intersex subject, found by Maria Klonaris in her doctor father's archives. This image of a male body with a female sex (*Figure 3*) is a typical medical picture (*Figure 4*): the focus is on the anatomical features and not at all on the individual inhabiting the body, as the blindfolded eyes prove. Klonaris and Thomadaki wanted to finally impart an identity and a voice to the represented person. In this regard, the artists said: "The object of scientific observation became the subject of a mutational process."¹³ And they specified: "S/he transcends the



Figure 3: Klonaris / Thomadaki, *The Angel. Body of Stars*, 1997, black and white photographic print on aluminium, 120 x 170 cm, Paris, Coll. du Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, (©Klonaris/Thomadaki).



Figure 4: Abb. 212. *Männlicher Scheinzwitter als Mädchen erzogen mit weiblichen Brüsten*, F. L. von Neugebauer, *Hermaphroditismus beim Menschen*, Leipzig: Verlag von Dr. Werner Klinkhardt, 1908, p. 400.

medical context to make a philosophical statement on the limits of the human-gendered condition.”¹⁴ The intersex individual symbolized for them “a collapse of gender”, “an in-between state”, evoking “the contemporary contest with sexual dichotomies” and the “late twentieth century private and public dream about a restructured sexual identity – double, multiple or neutral”¹⁵. They thus associated this subject with the angel, the archetypal figure of the in-between, presenting a transcendental quality, which the artists translated in various visual and conceptual ways. The original photograph underwent many iconographical and technological metamorphoses, resulting in innumerable visual variations.

One of the most interesting and richest works of the *Cycle de l'Ange* was the site-specific multimedia installation *Night Show for Angel*, realized in 1992 in an abandoned public bathhouse in London. The building was entirely darkened and, once again, the visible emerged from a nocturnal, mysterious universe. The visitor was immersed in successive dreamlike environments animated by images, sounds, instrumental music, recorded texts and light devices. Klonaris and Thomadaki state: “The space incorporated inner memory – some kind of reimagined Genesis, originating from the intersexual Angel figure.”¹⁶

For example, the installation (Figure 5) evoked Plato's theory of the origin and nature of the cosmos, claiming that the world was the creation of a Demiurge who fashioned the universe out of materials provided by a pre-existing *chaos* and organized it into four elements: earth, water, air and fire. In fact, these four elements have all been integrated into the installation



Figure 5: Klonaris / Thomadaki, *Night Show for Angel*, 1992, partial view of the site-specific environmental installation (large scale photographs, projections, embalmed animals, water, bowls of fire), Islington (London), Hornsey Baths, Edge Biennial (©Klonaris/Thomadaki).

Night Show for Angel in a physical way or in an immaterial way, through projections. The presence of celestial and cosmic images proved that the artists have very likely also considered the fifth element, added by Aristotle - which he called *aether*, meaning the substance of heavenly bodies, such as the moon, the planets, the sun and the stars. These still and moving images were superimposed on the original medical photograph or projected onto the floor, the walls and the objects characterizing the installation's spaces. In this way they elevated the intersex subject to a transcendental and universal dimension, clearly associated with the typical angelic environment. The wings superimposed or projected onto the ambiguous body of the picture connected it even more to the angel figure. But these wings were also a reminder of the alchemical androgyne. Looking at one of these representations (*Figure 6*), one can



Figure 6: *Book of the Holy Trinity* (BSB Cgm 598), 2nd half of the 15th century (not before 1467), p. 220 (Munich, Bavarian State Library).

observe that other traditional elements of this iconography have been reinterpreted by the artists: the moon and the sun, respectively associated with the feminine and masculine identity, have been revisited through cold and warm light atmospheres alternating all along the installation's path and resonating with the feminine nature of water and the masculine essence of fire. The alchemical universe was also suggested by other visual or technological metaphors, such as the glass test tubes and bowls evoking substances, mixtures and transformations or the perpetual alternation of still and moving images symbolizing the harmony of the opposites, the *Chemical Wedding* and finally the inner transformation of the soul.

As a conclusion, one could quote a significant statement by the artists: "The dialectic of mobility/immobility has philosophical implications. It implies opposing energies that, in our approach, exceed the dualistic division. We establish constant back and forth movements between fluidity and rupture, fluidity within rupture and rupture within fluidity – violence within serenity, melody within screams, difference within

repetition, wholeness within fragmentation.”¹⁷

Furthermore, the immateriality suggested by moving images related to traditional iconographical motifs seems to clearly represent the idea of the “errant ghost of survival”¹⁸ suggested by the concept of Warburg’s *Nachleben*.

This concept, together with the anthropological approach theorized by Hans Belting, seem to offer efficient instruments for the interpretation of the series of works *Cycle des Hermaphrodites* and *Cycle de l’Ange*. It is nevertheless necessary to combine them with the theoretical assertions made by the artists themselves in order to arrive at a thorough comprehension of their visual world.

With their desire to free the gaze from the burden of social and cultural norms, Klonaris and Thomadaki address the very nature of visuality itself and open up a variety of new figurative and theoretical perspectives on intersexuality. In other words, they use the transforming potential of image and sound technologies to reactivate latent cultural memory and give it a contemporary political and social subversive power thanks to formal and conceptual metamorphoses of intersex bodies.

Notes:

¹ M. Klonaris, K. Thomadaki, “The Feminine, the Hermaphrodite, the Angel: Gender Mutations and Dream Cosmogonies in Multimedia Projection and Installation (1976-1994)”, *Leonardo*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 1996, 275.

² Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 275.

³ Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 273.

⁴ M. Klonaris, K. Thomadaki, “Dissident Bodies: Freeing the Gaze from Norms. On a Cinematic and Visual Practice”, I. Härtel, S. Schade (eds.), *Body and Representation*, Leske + Budrich, Opladen 2002, 143

⁵ Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 274.

⁶ Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 274.

⁷ Klonaris, Thomadaki 2002, 145.

⁸ In this respect, see: H. Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (translated by Thomas Dunlap), Princeton University Press, Princeton 2014, 9-83.

⁹ J. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York 1998, 81.

¹⁰ Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 275.

¹¹ Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 276.

¹² Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 276.

¹³ Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 278.

¹⁴ Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 277.

¹⁵ Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 277.

¹⁶ Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 278.

¹⁷ Klonaris, Thomadaki 1996, 280-281.

¹⁸ G. Didi-Huberman, “Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time”, *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 9, Issue 2, Spring 2003, 280.

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REPREZENTACIJA INTERSEKSUALNIH TELA U MULTUMEDIJALNOJ PRAKSI UMETNIČKOG PARA KLONARIS - THOMADAKI

Sažetak:

Vizuelna reprezentacija interseksualnosti je nezaobilazni deo delikatnih filozofskih, društvenih i kulturnih pitanja. Budući da otvaraju široki spektar metodoloških pitanja, ove slike predstavljaju izazov istoričarima umetnosti. Iz koje perspektive se ovakve slike mogu analizirati? Kako je moguće razviti odgovarajući interdisciplinarni pristup ovakvim slikama?

Multimedijalna praksa umetničkog para koji čine Marija Klonaris (Maria Klonaris) i Katerina Tomadaki veoma je dobar primer za integraciju pomenutih dilema. Sve serije radova: *Cycle des Hermaphrodites* (1982-1990) i *Cycle de l'Ange* (1985-2003), koji se fokusiraju na pojam interseksualnosti, u pitanje dovode različite načine na koji se migracija slika i ideja problematizuje. Kao rezultat, nastaje rad koji se odnosi ne samo na pitanja roda i (post-)identiteta, već i na tehnološka, intermedijalna i interdisciplinarna pitanja umetničkih praksi. Cilj ovog teksta je da analizira ove dve serije radova u relaciji sa opštijim teoretskih i metodološkim okvirima za razumevanje i interpretaciju ove vrste vizuelnih reprezentacija.

Ključne reči:

interseksualnost, hermafrodit, androgenija,
telo, identiteti, intermedijalnost, interdisciplinarnost