

FIGURE

Issue 9

**CONVERSATION WITH
MARIE MUNK**

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A KICK OF PHYSICALITY (DETAIL)

Installation, 2016.

**CONVERSATION WITH
MARIE MUNK**

Indira Béraud

You first studied fashion design in Copenhagen, what made you decide to turn your practice towards fine arts? How does this subject influence your practice?

Marie Munk

My bachelor was in Fashion, and then I studied at the Royal College of Arts in this course called Mixed Media, which was also a part of the design school. When I did my BA in Fashion, I realized that I was more interested in the body and how we manage to express ourselves through it rather than making the casing. My project has always been art works, but I somehow managed to do this within the design world. I very much use influences from product design. But in the design process, you need to analyze who is going to use this product, why, etc. to design it, and art is the opposite. However, I design experiences for people and I always consider how they are going to experience the piece I am making. This is something that has influenced my practice directly.

Indira Béraud

We can clearly see that in *Moments...*

Marie Munk

Yes. In a way, many of my artworks are designed projects, almost



MOMENT
Installation, 2016.

like I was solving something. But in the end they are completely useless. What I do is maybe between art and speculative design. The way I execute things is full of the design language. It is nevertheless art because this experience hasn't been designed within the commercial field. There is a tension between those two.

Indira Béraud

In your work, the subject identity disappears completely behind the physical aspect of the body: the skin, the flesh, hairs and organs. You present organic sculptural shapes without any face or gaze. Can you tell us about this process in which the physical overwhelmed the being?

Marie Munk

At some point I realized—which is a topic that never goes out of fashion for many artists—the tension between the mind and the body. There are many ways of looking at it but I was very interested in the idea of a sadomasochistic relationship between the body and the mind. The mind is capable of controlling a lot, wandering away and do everything. It has fewer boundaries than the body. And at the same time, it is the fleshy body that makes us alive. This tension between those two is intense. In that sense, I am very interested in how the body is a fleshy, heavy kind of thing that we have to carry. Especially nowadays, we are surrounded by the digital world made



PLEASE LEAVE YOUR SHOES
NEXT TO MATTRESS



PLEASE LIE DOWN
COMFORTABLY ON MATTRESS



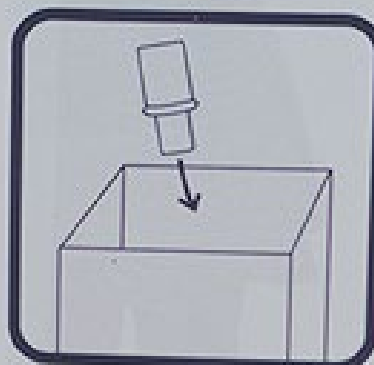
PLEASE INSERT MOUTHPIECE
IN BLUE BREATHING-TUBE



PLEASE STICK MOUTHPIECE
IN YOUR MOUTH AND BREATHE



RELAX, BREATHE AND ENJOY
AN INTIMATE MOMENT



PLEASE USE PROVIDED DISPOSAL
FOR USED MOUTHPIECE

MOMENT (DETAIL)

Installation, 2016.

for our mind. Our body is just helping us to do the tapping of the keyboard. Making no identity in forms of flesh is because I want to identify our substance, the material of the body itself.

Indira Béraud

I see that you have this sketching of female period in your wall...

Marie Munk

I had this moment when I was so obsessed with blood. At that point, I was really interested in the female process because it is something that leads to the basic of our materiality. We are bleeding, we have this machine, we can make new people. I was trying to get to the core of what it means to be physical, fleshy, human beings with a beating heart. What is the core of that? I still want to work with blood, I just don't know how at the moment.

Indira Béraud

Your body sculptures are lacking sexual attributes. How do you apprehend the question of gender in your work?

Marie Munk

For now I am not so interested in genders and all those cultural aspects. I think that this is even thrown away. What is left is just that lump of flesh. I want to explore the living body more as a thing

on its own. We are going through an identity crisis related to having a physical body in a digital world. That does not need the gender stamp.

Indira Béraud

Donna Haraway sees the cyborg as an alternative to patriarchy, racism, homophobia and anthropocentrism. What do you think about it? Is your work influenced by her theories?

Marie Munk

I read a bit about her, but not too much. However, I have looked a lot into cyborgs. I was very interested in the guy who invented the Google glasses, Thad Starner. He has been wearing the Google glasses for more than twenty years before it came out into production. He thought he was a better person because he was able to remember the people he met and what they talked about last time they spoke. He would get the clue from the machine, then ask: “Oh, how your mother is doing? I remember you told me last time that she was sick.” He felt smarter and better socially and couldn’t see any negative aspects. It is a complete mixture of the digital and physical. The digital is helping him, but he is still a person. Obviously robots and AI are going to take over a lot of things that we do now. Researchers are looking into the way the machines can be emotional or feel empathy. How is this going to

affect us? Technology is becoming more and more human, but at the same time technology makes us less and less human. The cyborg thing sits somewhere in-between. Is it still sweet that this guy asks me about my sick mother while he actually does not remember her? How does this change my perception of him as a person? Is it still cute that somebody remembers my birthday when Facebook reminds them about it? We are getting used to this, nobody cares. It is also kind of a cyborg thing actually. We are getting used to being more and more digitally altered, without even thinking about it.

Indira Béraud

It is also important to forget things. Our brain decides to forget some content to protect us...

Marie Munk

That is how our brain is made. We remember the things that matter to us. That makes us who we are. But maybe in fifty years, it will be something else that makes us who we are. It is changing all the time, and it has already changed a lot in the past fifty years. It is hard to hold on to our conception of things because it is going to differ, not necessarily to the worse. This happens every time there is a massive invention that is completely changing our society and the way we live. Humans need to adjust to it, and there is always somebody against. When the type machine was invented, with the

apparition of the book, some people were against it saying that nobody was going to look each other in the eyes anymore or having a conversation. Now we cannot even understand this thought.

Indira Béraud

In *Natuurlijk Draagbaar* (Naturally Wearable), you reshape the body to isolate certain parts of the anatomy. They appear framed as they would in social media. How does social media and technology alter the human image?

Marie Munk

I think that people pay more attention to their appearance now. When I see the new generation, I am super impressed. It is crazy how they grew up in a different world than I did. I was past my teenage years when we first got Facebook. The teens now are constantly aware of how they present themselves in a different way than I was. At least, they all know how to pose in front of a camera. I feel a bit sorry for them, but at the same time some of those young people really do use social media to experiment with their identity. I don't know if it is a good or a bad thing. But we do see this younger generation being more self-aware and depressed, feeling too much pressure. I do think that it is a tougher world than it used to be. *Natuurlijk Draagbaar* was very much about the clash between reality and what we present in social media. In the physical



NATUURLIJK DRAAGBAAR

Photography : Nikki Leyen, Model : Annette Oerlemans, 2013.



NATUURLIJK DRAAGBAAR

Photography : Nikki Leyen, Model : Annette Oerlemans, 2013.

world there are some things we can do, but in the digital world it is so much easier. We can edit. In the physical life, we lie in bed and cry ourselves to sleep but we will not put this on social media, unless we want some kind of attention for it. We only share when we fly to the Bahamas. We use social media to alter the image of ourselves, but this is also dangerous. Even though I know this is not reality, I look at other people's pictures and I think that they have such a great life, and that mine is so miserable. But I don't see their whole life, they don't post something every minute. Everybody has to lie about themselves. It is a weird world.

A lot of my projects talk about how we present ourselves. I also made a project called *Body Manipulation*. I used Barbie elements, which is kind of a cliché of the perfect body.

I also did *Magic Wand* to illustrate how the body is completely fragmented in the digital world. We select what we want to show and we put this into the screen. The body becomes suppressed.

The background of the installation and the stipple lines are visual elements taken from Photoshop. The performance, which was shown during Code Art Fair 2017 in Copenhagen was very effectful. The performance was presented in a cold digital environment, and sometimes the performers were actually falling asleep in their boxes. Visitors would touch them, thinking it was a super-realistic sculpture and would scream in surprise when the body would suddenly move. I love this uncertainty of realness.



MAGIC WAND

Performance installation, Annka Kultys Gallery, Code Art Fair, Copenhagen, 2017.



MAGIC WAND (DETAIL)

Performance installation, Annka Kultys Gallery, Code Art Fair, Copenhagen, 2017.

Indira Béraud

For this last exhibition “Synthetic Seduction”, you worked with Stine Deja, exploring the question of love in a post-human world surrounded by artificial intelligence. Can you tell us about the way you two worked together and how you conceived this project?

Marie Munk

We wanted to do a project together because we were working on the same topic but in completely different mediums. Stine is working in the digital, and I am working in the physical. I wanted to get the digital as well as she wanted to get the physical. It therefore seemed natural to pair because we wanted to mix these two worlds. So that was the starting point. We met up and talked, did a lot of research. We got the opportunity to show Synthetic Seductic at Annka Kultys gallery in London and soon it is going to Copenhagen at SixtyEight Art Institute over summer and during autumn it will be exhibited at KH7 art space in the second-largest city in Denmark, Aarhus. The fact that digital animations are dialoguing with physical experiences works very well in our show. Because we work in different mediums, we would work separately developing ideas and the show them to each other. Stine would do something that would really inspire me and then I would create something that made her think about something else and so on. We had this ping pong relationship, speaking together but without

trying to be each other. Working in duo can be very restrictive if you try to make every decision together. We felt the same way, that in order to make something, you need your own space. We understood at an early stage that we did not need to integrate each other in every aspect of our individual process. It came along quite naturally, and the story just evolved. We wanted to make a fully immersive experience, an alternative reality. The medical environment evokes the human vulnerability, and at the same time it is also a place for experimentation with human beings. A suitable backdrop for our work.

Indira Béraud

Your sculptures are made to be experienced by touch. We can literally lay down on them or hold them. In your exhibition “Synthetic Seduction” made in collaboration with Stine Deja at Annka Kultys Gallery, the surface of the sculptures were vibrating: it felt as if their flesh had a pulse. How does this relation to touching, which is quite uncommon, define your work?

Marie Munk

When we started this project, we were talking a lot about how technology is an easy way to escape reality. It makes emotions easy. It is easy to break up on Facebook, for example. There is an urge to do emotional stuff via technology. And at the same time, we use



SYNTHETIC SEDUCTION

View of Stine Deja and Marie Munk's exhibition, Annka Kultys Gallery, London, 2018.



SYNTHETIC SEDUCTION

View of Stine Deja and Marie Munk's exhibition, Annka Kultys Gallery, London, 2018.

surrogates to replace physical contact. It is not something that is commercialized out there yet, but there are research groups who try to invent something to replace physical contact. It could be mini versions of a couple for those who are in long-distance relationship. Whatever the person would do, the mini-version of themselves would do it as well. There is also this robot that would follow you around that can actually spark the same hormonal reactions as you would achieve when touching another person. Physically, our body needs contact with other people, otherwise we get depressed if we don't get those oxytocin hormones. That means that it would even take away the physical need to be with other real humans. There is also a teddy bear for kids that vibrate when their parents cannot be there enough. Parents would press a button and they would feel like they are there for their children. All these solutions are such good examples of how we use technology to solve some problems that technology actually created. All the solutions that are made to replace the physical contact, they are touching upon a core aspect of what it means to be human. It is so interesting that we would accept these kinds of things. I feel that we are not supposed to do it, that it is wrong in a way.

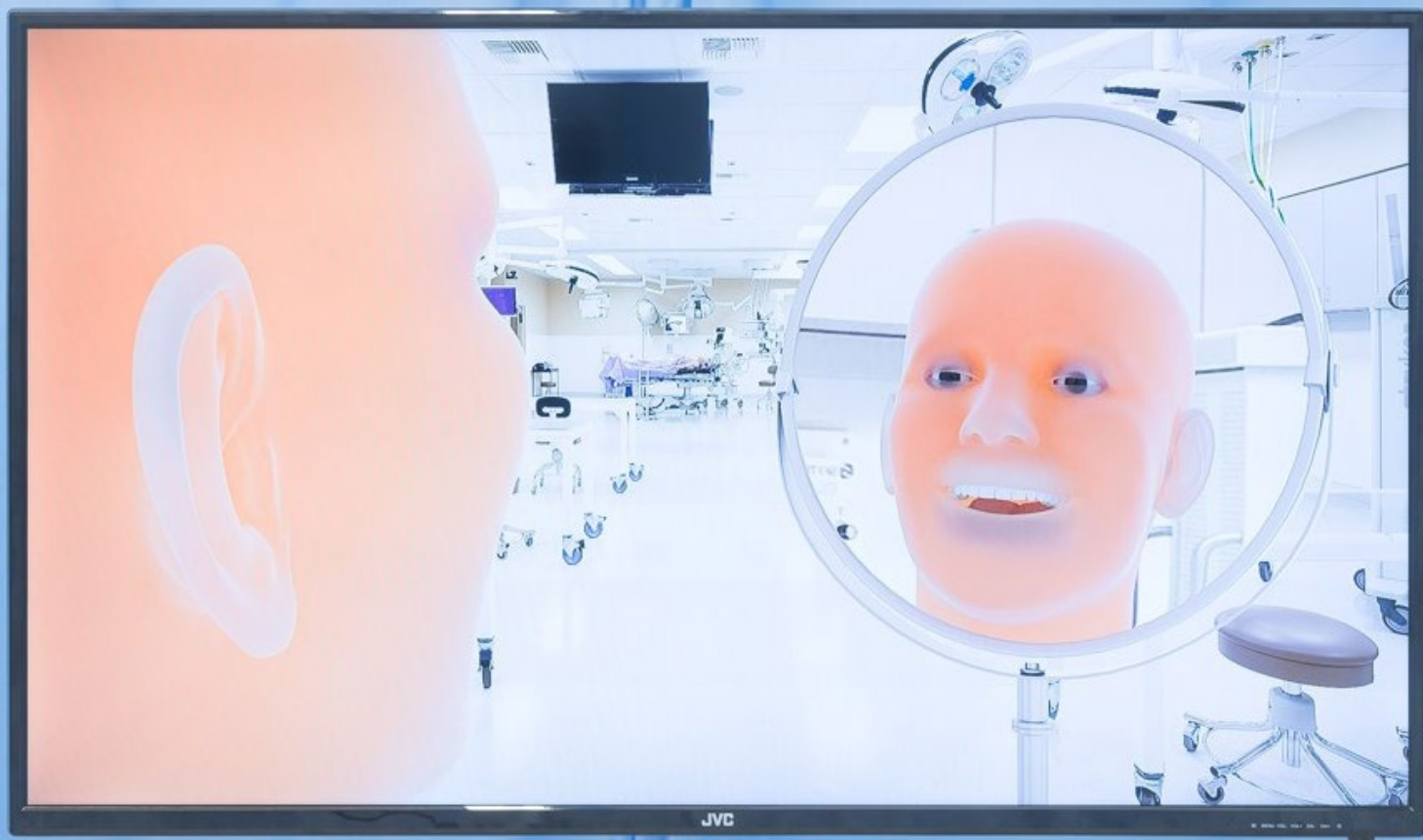
My artworks for “Synthetic Seduction” were actually made as solutions that could go on the market. Therefore, we were looking to make a super synthetic experience that would make the visitors feel ambivalent about whether it is a pleasant or an unpleasant



QUALITY CONTROL

Video, electronic microscope, perspex, silicone, pigment, and wadding, 120 × 30 × 30 cm, 2018.

experience. We wanted to create an absurd situation. The aim was to make the figures so humanlike that they would almost feel real, while simultaneously giving people a highly synthetic experience. There is this confusion in what we want. Why are we trying to copy human beings? What is it for? There are people who have serious relationships with real dolls. We humans have a very weird brain that can make up scenarios and accept this kind of thing because we have a strong urge to be in control. The digitalized world allows us to be in control all the time. In Japan, we see more and more people who choose to be alone without children, because they want to be in control of everything. Physical contact is accepted but only when it is scheduled. For me, technology is very much empowering the part of us which want to be in control. It does not necessarily make us happy. It is isolating us and we try to solve the new problems using technology. It is also sly and crafty when technology is presented as human, we have a reflex that makes us treat them as human but at the same time it leads us to become less human. It can make us less empathic with other human beings and this is dangerous. It is a counteraction, which is confusing our mind in a level that we are not even conscious.



STINE DEJA, *THE INTIMACY PACKAGE*

Video, 5 min 11 s, 2018.

Indira Béraud

Trans humanist thinker Mark O'Connell wrote: "I wanted to learn what it meant to be a machine, or to think of yourself as such."

Why do we want to make machines our alter ego? Why do we try to create machines that react just like us?

Marie Munk

That is a good question... I think it is not very far from religion. Humans are very clever and are usually confused about why they are here. We want to create machines that react just like us to replicate the humanity. We don't get the complexity of humans so maybe if we can recreate it we would be able to understand our condition. We search for answers in technology like we do in religion, trying to understand what it is to be human, and to understand why we are here.

Indira Béraud

The sensation of the skin is quite impressing, can you tell us a bit about the technique and how you work with the medium?

Marie Munk

When I was doing my graduation project for my BA, I was very interested in the skin, the texture, the way we can put anything underneath. People put silicon and botox to edit their body. Orlan



MOMENT
Installation, 2016.



BEATING FOR YOU TOO

Silicone, pigment, wadding, and electronics, Ø 15 cm, 2018.

did all those surgeries, her work really inspired me. I also looked at the artist Patricia Piccinini who creates super-realistic sculptures. She works with this idea of everything being possible with genetic manipulation. I became very interested in silicon as a material because I wanted something that could illustrate synthetic skin. I started exploring the material and continued at the Royal College of Art, but actually I developed the most when I was working with Stina Deja on the *Synthetic Seduction* exhibition. I was exploring the imitation of skin aiming to create both a very inviting and recognizable texture people could relate to, while being very repulsive and weird at the same time. Stine and I really wanted to achieve this kind of tension. The aim was also to do something very realistic, and at the same time very much made by someone. Normally with silicon, people would make a mold and cast the silicone in it. But I found this method being very restrictive. I needed to find a more intuitive way of building up the skin, and the figures little by little like I was doing a sculpture of clay. So I did the opposite process, I made the shape first and then I put the skin around it. In a way it is a bit like putting paint on a white canvas, at the end you might end up with millions of layers of paint to achieve the right expression. It is the same with the silicon, I put very thin layers and at the end I maybe have twenty or more layers of silicon and I adjust, detail by detail. The skin has so many nuances of colors. I wanted the skin to look real but at the same time synthetic.

When I was making all these shapes, I sometimes had to cut up and add something under the skin, I felt like I was actually working on a real body, like a surgeon. I can see how some people are able to build up real relationships with real dolls.

Indira Béraud

You often create a medical sanitized atmosphere in which are presented your biological experimentations. How do you conceive science in relation to art?

Marie Munk

I look a lot to science and biotechnology. It inspires me a lot. I am very fascinated by the developments within biotechnology, now we can print organs. At one point I wanted to work with biomaterials, but I quickly understood the complexity of working with such material. I couldn't really speak what I wanted, it is really restrictive. I did a residency with Interact Lab, a science lab in University of Sussex. Working side by side with all the researchers really made me understand that our way of approaching the same topic is completely remote. When I say body they understand something else than what I do. At the Interact Lab, I was very interested in their Technology "Ultrahaptics". Using ultrasound waves, they are able to create three-dimensional shapes in the air which you can sense with your palm. It is both digital and physical at the same

time, and therefore the technology appealed to me. But there are a lot of restrictions in this world, I couldn't really do what I wanted to. At Royal College of Art I was very obsessed about working with science. I contacted a research lab at Queen Mary University and I was very impressed by the email I got back. She was literally talking shit to me, saying: "Do you really think what you are doing is art? Because what I call art is this picture of a brain!" Even though it was a beautiful scan, for me this was not art, so there is clearly a cultural gap to overcome when merging science and art.

Marie Munk, Figure Figure 2018
Courtesy of the artist

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ONESOME-FITS ALL

Installation, 2016.

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