Mixed realities, border crossing,

Jana Baumann

A futuristic-seeming pictorial world first opens up in Louisa Clement’s series Head (2014 –15), with its enigmatic reflections on the surfaces of nonhuman heads with blurred contours. Monochrome backgrounds intensify the feeling of a vague, undefined location but also herald attra ctive spaces of potential. To judge from the relationship between figure and space, Clement relates on the one hand to early modernity, where the figure was already being used as an abstraction of the human body: as ist plastic representative.1 On the other hand, the unsettling quality that her paintings emanate can be traced chiefly to the style, which suggests a digitally

processed image. The inanimate figures she chooses, as in Head I (2014, pp.13ff. see fig. 1), function as alienated proxies and are stylized into icons in a digitized world that has spawned new cultural tech nologies, codes, and systems of thought. The featureless faces repeatedly appearing as sexless identification figures in a postindustrial, highly commercial ized present generate an explosiveness in terms of humans as material and of the politics of body, origin, and power.

Just as in the Avatar series (2016) or Gliedermenschen (Limb Beings, 2017, pp. 26–31), mannequins from department store windows serve as a basic motif for reproduction via a smartphone camera, thus demonstrating the completely different conditions that creating a photographic image involves. In particular, Clement reflects on the radically changed scope of the photographic medium: how its integration into mobile devices endowed with computer functions is more or less equivalent to a metamorphosis.3 User-friendly controls have made digital operation the norm, transforming our entire global communications culture. These crucial

consequences for a contemporary concept of reality, and its effects on the world we live in, caused Clement to question the fundamentals of her previous artistic work. Clement took as her starting point the status quo of digital image production, and in her creations she not only raises the question of the extinction of analogue photography but also pursues the debate about the function of the image in the context of digitization. Photography has become part of everyday communication and interaction, but what type of information is actually conveyed via the medium, and what interests are represented, is seldom scrutinized. Clement’s approach, along with her studies at the Düsseldorf Academy, on the one hand, place her in the local tradition of pondering a media-mediated reality and, on the other, reflect completely new patterns of perception.

In her three groups of works already mentioned, the c onstructed images, similarly composed with their motif of anonymous humanshaped dummies, serve as the starting point for locating humans in a digital environment. The figures in the Avatar series are made of monochrome

fiberglass in soft pastel shades like pink, yellow, or green. Two or three figures have always been arranged in a composition, and, due to the chosen viewpoint, only detail shots of the groups and their limbs can be seen. The largely androgynous bodies take center stage, and their

trendy colorfulness, set against the retrospectively altered black background, evokes a resemblance to a motif borrowed from the commercial worlds of pop and advertising culture images. But the dummies are not conveying a sales-oriented message. Rather, Clement is reversing the meaning of the images: the substitute human is acting as a reflection not of reality

but of its simulation. Nothing that advertises a mass-market product is detectable, which nullifies the viewer’s associations and assumptions. But at the same time this act leads to cultural strategies being laid bare: man himself is declared an identityless consumer object, and extinc tion of the subject is being proclaimed. Ultimately, with her hyperdigital image aesthetic, achieved through complex lighting control and manipulative image editing, the artist is leading us into new areas of interaction. The title of the series, Avatar, refers to a term that has become established since the 1990s for an artificial image of a human in the virtual world and in social media. It is a link to self-representation in the virtual world, but it raises a huge discrepancy with reality. Clement turns her attention to precisely this contradiction and focuses on changing social techniques.

Conscious and mindful perception is denied to human beings in the digital world and its social forums. Hence, in the not lost in you series (2017, pp. 34–39) the former puppets are touched and palpated performatively with a real hand on a human body. This exemplifies the missing

physical contact. In one of her earliest Portrait series, Clement had already made detail photographs of body parts covered with sometimes eye-catching clothing like leopard prints. But these images, resembling cutouts or clippings and aesthetically reminiscent of articles posted online, do not reveal the person depicted in their entirety. The works have titles such as liked

(2013, fig. 2) and illustrate the play on absence despite presence. They reduce to absurdity the self-esteem derived from public recognition and the fetishizing of one’s own appearance by means of the new technologies, and conversely they comment on the changed, fake body consciousness and self-embellishment.

In Petite Poucette,5 French philosopher Michel Serres introduced the concept of “Thumbelina.” Contact between one’s own skin and the touchscreen fosters a connection between the virtual and real worlds. This moment becomes an iconic act that opens up new speculations about the

relationship between man and machine.6 Against a background of the dynamic development of new technologies and of a digital revolution, the growing together of body and technology is a highly controversial border line experience. Out of this specific relationship between inside and outside, between self and environment, emerges an interplay that no longer seems to differentiate. Clement addresses this phenomenon impressively in her new work Schmerzraum (Space of Distress, 2019, fig. 3).

In tune with the ever-advancing progress in science and technology and a pre dominantly computer-driven society, Clement makes use of one of the most up-to-date medical achievements: “e-dermis.” This is an artificial electronic skin developed at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore for people with prostheses; its purpose is to restore feeling when they

handle things—to give them back a sense of touch. The sensations of pain and pleasure, both unique characteristics of living beings, can be simulated here and made usable by artificial intelligence. Clement papers a whole room with this artificial skin, thus once more ccreating a reversal of orderliness and conditions. This brings us up against the radical criteria and consequences involved in amalgamating current society and body technologies. The concept of being human is questioned and challenged.What are the consequences of outsourcing our consciousness? What happens when computer technologies are implanted into the human organism? These possibilities have figured in speculative visions of the future in literature

or the cinema and have led to a separate philosophical genre (posthumanism), but they have long since become reality. Louisa Clement takes ethical self-doubt to a climax in her latest

VR-Arbeit (VR Work, 2019). Here, the visitor encounters an artificial species—her invention of the Gliedermensch—and receives, in conversation with the digital being, answers to his questions that, determined by an algorithm, are sometimes truthful and sometimes not. Clement’s work relentlessly seeks to confront the question of human existence in the digital

age. Whether the outcome will be the conquest of man or the victory of humanity remains an open question.