New People?

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Louisa Clement’s artistic education was primarily as a photographer, but her activity has not been confined to classical photography, at least not since she created her mirror objects in 2015. In this analysis of individual groups of photographic works, I shall seek to show how the artist has exhausted a limited, medium-specific concept of the two-dimensional photograph, and at times transformed it, and how this is the almost inevitable upshot of the contemporary sociopolitical questioning that her

approach involves.

Let us begin with an apparently peripheral phenomenon. Even if, in the context of discussion of photography, it is tempting to pass over the question of pictorial content in favor of clarifying technical development, there is nonetheless one technical detail that should be covered first—because it is the hallmark of the artist’s thoroughgoing conceptual approach. In contrast to many well-known photographers (Hiroshi Sugimoto, for example) who use a nineteenth-century plate camera, Clement em ploys

not a large-format camera for high-resolution images but the camera on her smartphone, thus utilizing an everyday object to produce art. This sort of contemporaneity is already discernible in her on one’s way series produced in 2012–13. She shows cut-out-like details of railway train interiors. With these abstracted views—not initially identifiable, but then becoming perceptible for what they are—we can talk of a transformation of the visual experience of everyday things. Sven Beckstette rightly draws attention to the way that Clement here has “chosen perspectives and then edited the images in such a way that the details drawn from known reality dissolve into geometric, abstract compositions. And in the delicate pastel shades that reveal not only the artist’s sensitivity to color but also how Clement’s development started in painting before moving on to photography.“ This painterly look, not at all uncommon in modern photographic history, is emphasized by the use of the smartphone camera and the resulting shallow depth of field of the picture. In this connection, it is also important to recognize that Clement’s photos are generally not the products of a quick, spontaneous act of image formation. It is particularly true of the early group of works on one’s way that the image draws the viewer into contemplative consideration. This engagement with technology and its function would not change in the years that followed.

In looking at the subsequent works, it is important to keep in mind that Clement essentially operates in thematic groups or series of works. This is emphasized in an assertion from early 2018: “My approach is as much conceptual as visual. I see my output as a network, made up of series and works, that grows denser with each item and traces an ever-deepening picture of our times.”

This becomes apparent in the following fifty-five-part series Head (2014 –15), which does not simply mark a crux in Clement’s work at the thematic level. The heads depicted are those of shop-window mannequins. With these figures, determined above all by their arrangement and ordering, we are dealing with faceless apparitions, largely deindividualized and hence also sexless: no more than allusions to human beings. All the same, complete uniformity is fended off with various different colors, shapes, and outer surfaces of the objects, and with the startling variety of image sizes, so that one really can talk of anthropomorphic residues. These allusions

to human appearances generate an emotional unease in the observer that strongly recalls the surreal tradition of the doll photographs of Hans Bellmer (1902–1975).

Fundamental to Clement’s contemporary approach here is a serial presentation, and one that concentrates exclusively on the head. Precisely because of this, the sightless Heads can ultimately be seen as the logical outcome of a society fixated on outward appearances. Here it becomes clear that human beings themselves have turned into goods—cost factors and asset values—and so the thematic approach of using shop-window mannequins is logical. This is continued in Clement’s next series, fracture (2014). Here our attention is directed not to the heads of the mannequins but to their arms and hands. And fracture is not in the strictest sense a series, in that its pictorial organization is not focused on the central vertical axis, for the examination of various details brings in changing groupings, some of them seemingly ornamental. And switching between portrait and landscape formats has the same effect.

At this point, a short, more general digression on the photographic image seems appropriate. A classical conception of the medium, longheld and still accepted in everyday usage in the medium today, takes the photograph as a depiction or reflection of reality. But artistic photo graphy cannot restrict itself to such a concept and, on the contrary, in some of its manifestations (Appropriation Art, for example) diverges so far from it that reality’s reflection is reflected once again. But one cannot grasp Clement’s approach through such a simple dichotomy, for it calls into question the conventional understanding of reality. It is also concerned with content, and only after that with the medium. Since Head Clement has been concentrating primarily on the theme of the body and the inter linked question of the boundaries of what is human. Where is the beginning of the artificial, and where does the idea of the human, its nature, cease?

How are the shifts and changes in the human, the integration of artifi cial elements into human beings, to be comprehended? What social consequences result, or what conceptions of Man and of power are bound up in these changes?

Artificial interventions in the supposed “nature” of humans are not actually at all new; they have long been everyday occurrences, as we can see from a glance at, among many other things, our dentition, with is crowns and ultimate dental implants. And prostheses have been used for centuries to alleviate limitations on bodily mobility. The artificial heart (since 1969) is as little of an exotic one-off as the insulin pump for diabetics (since the 1990s), and it would not be difficult to list more examples. In recent years, though, interventions in the human body by technology

and medicine have taken on a new quality, and as a result the question of the boundaries of the human has acquired an alarming prominence. In its extreme forms, or in visionary concepts, the classical human–machine opposition has been morphed into a hybrid form that focuses attention

on the question of where humanity’s borders lie. The changes to the image of man that have been outlined can be fitted into the cultural-historical tradition of the search for a “new man”

which began (at the latest) with the advent of Christianity, reaching a preliminary peak in fascism’s totalitarian utopia and the October Revolution in Russia, before, via a broad theoretical discussion, continuing in the current technical modification of the human as a (disguised) ideological practice. That art has contributed in many ways to the history of this reflection of human existence is well-known, at any rate in the modern age. So how is the question of the altered image of the human that we have outlined articulated in the work of Clement? Is her explicit artistic purpose to raise questions about the interpersonal and about contempo rary political topics in her work?5 After radicalizing deindividualized heads to monochrome surfaces in the Portrait series in 2015—in the form of city-light advertisement placards following the generally accepted CMYK color model (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, and BlacK)—and thus quitting the photographic medium as narrowly defined, in the same year she went on to alter the form of pictoriality in the plastic work transformationsschnitt (Transformation Section, 2015).6 The intensified question of the image of humanity led Clement, albeit with some difficulty, to give up photography.

In the Head series, we can already see that photographic optics are coupled with various forms of abstraction that concentrate largely on the motif and on the elements of image size and image-capture techn ology. Radicalization is apparent in further photographic works. The Avatar

group (2016) consists of large, strongly colored images. Even an arthistorically ill-educated observer will not fail to see parallels with the dolls of Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943). As so often happens, the reservoir of shattered utopias of modernism serves as a historical wrapper for the creativity of the contemporary artist.7 The emphasis in the fractures group on details and extracts, for example, is radicalized along with the Avatars, so that the ever-changing composition hinders recognition of any reality beyond the image. At the same time, though, the seductive beauty of these sweeping, strongly colored forms on a black, seemingly placeless background creates an eerie effect, with the grouping of two or more figures suggesting a relationship of communication. It soon becomes clear that the anthropomorphic forms are not real people, but, once again, standing shop-window dummies. Their smooth, shiny surfaces, however, only evoke imaginings of (new) humans; they fail to show reality itself. If in the Avatar group the figures largely dominate, and their context (or background) is only recognizable in a few places in the form of black planes, then in the next group, Gliedermenschen (Limb Beings,

2017), things have changed. Rather as in the fracture sequence, in these stretched-format images the concentration of motifs shifts away from the body and toward black arms and joints. The smoothness of their outer surfaces hints all the more at prostheses. To put it in pathetical terms, the forms seem as though “almost completely dehumanized, nothing more than

casings, as though soot-blackened or doused in pitch—hunted, marked by fate, wounded, despairing.” The extracted and cut-out-looking forms emerge entirely through sidelighting. The theme of living together appears in some pictures in the group, particularly in the enigmatic interaction of hands. Following on from this, though even more clearly from the Avatar sequence, a little later on Clement developed the group not lost in you (2017), in which she deserted the medium of photography for short video loops. Here a tight-fitting reddish or black glove bearing a striking ornamental pattern on a white ground interacts with the shop-window mannequins from Avatar. In this confrontation with the moving hand, the figures—all at once seemingly lifeless—are slowly, now and then erotically, grasped and fondled. But how authentic, how human, is this moving hand? Is there a real human hand inside the glove, or is the scene digitally animat ed, thus making it just as dehumanized as the rather alluring and lovely figures,

and thus in glossy-aesthetic mode, animated only by artificial life?

For the viewer the question is left open, although the motion in the work is particularly unsettling.

Louisa Clement has surely not yet pursued her artistic questions about the state of mankind and a contemporary comprehension of humanity to the very end. It is already becoming apparent that her work, both within and outside of the context of classical photographic images, is pressing on into a new sort of artistic image. This will involve interaction and communication with artificial humans. And this interaction will occur not physically but in a visual, even a virtual, space where artificial intelligence will help the robot to become a true counterpart. Louisa

Clement’s art does not reflect this reality, for it is no longer clear which reality it is that we are living in. Will this altered reality go hand in hand with åa change in the idea of what is human?