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*Compassion*, 2011. Potato, soil, blood, sodium chloride solution, and steel, dimensions variable. Photo: Anne Duk Hee Jordan and Matt McGinity, Courtesy the artist

## Anne Duk Hee Jordan: Changes

August 23, 2019 by Joyce Beckenstein

Anne Duk Hee Jordan takes evolution and adaptation as her primary themes, traveling on a personal odyssey from the Neanderthal era into an imaginary vision of a post-Anthropocene future of mechanical anthropomorphic hybrids that she's dubbed *Homo-Stupidus*. The Korean-born German artist mutates potatoes using her own DNA, throws wild-herb dinner parties where guests feast on flora (stems, roots, and grassy tablecloth), and invites viewers inside a tent where they lie on waterbeds beneath a video screen and watch aquatic porn—transgender sexuality among sea creatures. Through multimedia works and installations as seriously and scientifically researched as they are wildly creative and at times uproariously funny, Jordan plunges us smack into the disconnect between intimate and immense experience.

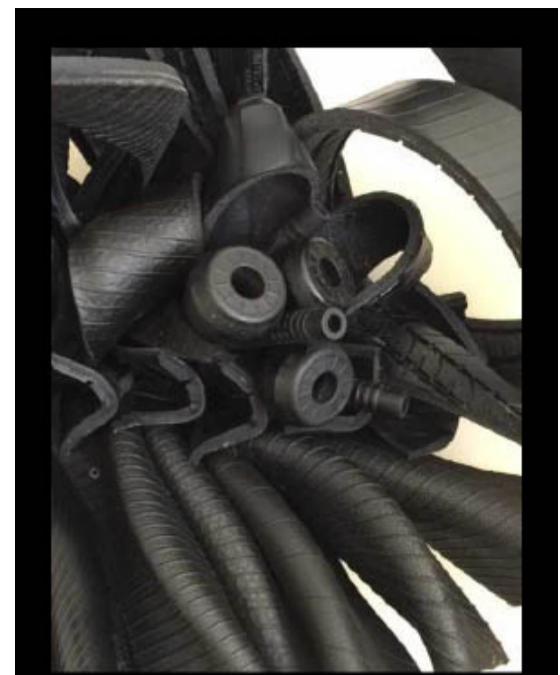
horses and a raven that stayed with me; I liked to drive my father's big construction machines. My parents were quite cool, and I was fearless, but I grew up fighting because kids at school taunted me. They called me 'rice-eater' and 'slits,' but I learned kung fu and built tear gas bombs that I threw into classrooms." Despite a chaotic adolescence, spent unhappily bouncing from low-level high schools to boarding schools, she became a free diver and rescue diver, as well as an occupational therapist working in kinesthetics, neurology, medicine, and oncology, experiences that informed and connected her later artistic pursuits to a broad spectrum of scientific phenomena. Along the way, she began painting, reading widely, and writing poetry. At age 27, she was accepted to the Kunsthochschule, Berlin, where she studied art, and later trained at the Institut für Raumexperimente under Olafur Eliasson.



*Lost Princess of Mongolia, Icarus*, 2014. Single-channel music video, 21:16 min. Photo: Anne Duk Hee Jordan, Courtesy the artist

Jordan compares herself to a humble potato—a vegetable indigenous to South America and introduced to Europe in the 16th century. "Like me," she says, "the potato was brought from elsewhere like a foundling." It's now a staple in Germany as it is over much of the world: sturdy, dependable, adaptable, and prolific, like Jordan, who uses the potato metaphorically to define her identity. For *Mein Deutsches Herz / My German Heart* (2009), she drained a potato of its fluid, sprayed it red, and animated it with a small motor so that it pulsed like a beating heart. This *German Heart* enlivens her artistic and psychic pilgrimage from a place she cannot recall to a destination she does not know. She carries it in *Lost Princess of Mongolia* (2012–ongoing), part of a series of related videos. In another video, Jordan holds the "beating" heart on a glass tray. The ambiguous setting that she travels through could be the outskirts of a city, though the vast fields suggest a far-off ancestral land. She skateboards into the distance, her reliable sheep dog keeping pace. In *Lost Princess of Mongolia, Icarus* (2014), Jordan wanders through the streets of Berlin clad in traditional Mongolian dress. Passersby notice her briefly, then move on. Overlay images of Jordan peeling a potato and washing lettuce connect the social rituals associated with food and dining to her migration: at the end of the video, she tosses the potato into the river, symbolically returning to her origins across the sea.

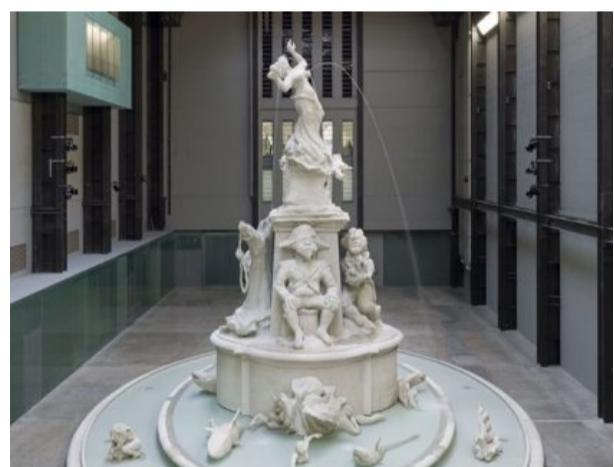
The noble role of the potato in Jordan's work recalls Vincent Van Gogh's homage to the lowly spud in his painting *The Potato Eaters* (1885). His five gaunt figures huddled around a table to share a lean dinner of boiled potatoes occupy a space that viscerally conjures the potato's cold underground womb. The peasants' gnarled fingers and bulbous, sunken features mimic the vegetable they pulled from the earth, the essential root of their existence, which connects them to the land and to each other. The potato similarly functions as a metaphor for Jordan's cultural origins and survival in *Compassion* (2008–12), a series of installations and events merging personal and mythical narratives. Elements from *Compassion* were included in "Of Bodies Chang'd to Various Forms, I Sing," (2014, cubus-m, Berlin), an exhibition that borrowed its title from the prologue of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "Of bodies chang'd to various forms, I sing: Ye Gods, from whom



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## EDITOR'S CHOICE



HYUNDAI COMMISSION KARA WALKER



Ruby Neri





*Metrotopie*, 2011. BVG Metro Tram, various plants, and water, installation view. Photo: Arielle Bier, Courtesy the artist

*Water Me / Eat Me* (2009), the centerpiece of *Compassion*, explored the mutability of all things as presaged by Ovid, from human and animate to animal and inanimate. The installation consisted of an indoor “laboratory” that functioned as a biological circuit for nourishing potatoes, which Jordan infused with her own blood and planted in a “potato field.” Copper and zinc implants placed inside the potatoes and connected by wires helped to generate the energy that in turn drove a watering machine. “The new potatoes absorb my blood through the soil; they contain my DNA, and that changes them,” Jordan explained, adding, “those who eat my potatoes ingest my DNA. I serve them for dinner.” Jordan preserved the skins of older potatoes that died, each one a unique sculptural sarcophagus, a relic of the plant’s energy and her imprint on its evolutionary cycle.

Perceptions since Ovid’s day may have shifted the explanatory underpinnings of existence from a pantheon of gods to mechanical, scientific, and technological powers, but for Jordan, this hasn’t changed the mythic forces exerted on humanity as it attempts to figure out its purpose and destiny. Just as she mechanized the potato, so does she anthropomorphize the inanimate. If we consider the potato as an edible “stone,” we can understand her fascination with rocks and boulders, which connect earth and sky, carrying within themselves the memory of the ages. *Atlas* (2014), a performance for the Marrakech Biennale, merged the myth of Atlas who carried the world on his shoulders, with the story of Sisyphus, who relentlessly struggled to roll a boulder up a mountain only to have it repeatedly slide back down as he neared the top. Jordan used a construction crane to represent Atlas and had it lift a massive stone (1.5 x 1.5 meters) from the Atlas Mountains to a height of approximately 20 meters. It was then dropped and allowed to smash on the ground below. Jordan explains that the atlas vertebra in the neck connects the spine to the head. The allusion to a “neck break” serves to warn against the loss of cultural memory as a consequence of displacement, something that Jordan has experienced personally and that she fears for on a global scale as waves of refugees become stranded in unwelcoming, alien environments.



OLAFUR ELIASSON: IN REAL LIFE



Sheila Hicks: Seize, Weave Space

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*Atlas*, 2014. Atlas rock and Manitou crane, site-specific performance at Marrakech Biennale, Morocco. Photo: Matthias Matschke, Courtesy the artist

Though Jordan's work gestates in a political world, it is not overtly political. Most often it gently and obliquely encourages insightful change through actions and events. The traveling environment *Metrotopie* (2011), created in collaboration with artist Shira Wachsmann, consisted of a tram filled with plant life from different parts of the world. The tram, a symbol for energy flowing through the city of Berlin, also served as a metaphor for the Chinese meridian system, the anatomical path through which life-energy (qi) flows. The transport-vehicle-as-botanical-garden encouraged urbanites to be mindful of nature as it channeled the transitional spaces and still-healing wounds that exist between East and West Berliners.

*Into The Wild* (2017–18) translates environmental mindfulness into an exotic but bizarre series of dinner parties. For these interactive performances (involving up to 100 people), Jordan sets out an extravagant and gorgeous arrangement of edible seasonal greenery, herbs that she says “grow everywhere, but people have forgotten how to use them, or disregard them, as they do night candle because it is an invasive weed that grows everywhere in Berlin.” Documentary photographs of these events capture guests diving into the totally consumable table, absent utensils, with their bare hands and feasting with unexpected abandon. Cultivating simple vegetation for consumption in this fragile ecological environment connects us with early hunter-gatherer populations; *Into The Wild* wittily and seductively suggests that doing so doesn’t require us to sacrifice the pleasures of feasting and fine dining.



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Jordan is a master of visual and sensory seduction. In *Ziggy and the Starfish—How one becomes One with a Fish* (2016/18) and *Changing Sex in Ecology* (2018), installations done in cooperation with independent curator and visual researcher Pauline Doutreluingne, sex serves as a lure for considerations about the impact of global warming. Both works were included in “Sensorium: A Laboratory for the Deceleration of the Body and for a New Politics of the Senses,” a series of sensory-based installations and performances curated by Solvej Helweg Ovesen for the First Riga Biennial in Latvia (2018).

*Ziggy and the Starfish* required months of research as Jordan interviewed marine biologists, deep-sea dived, and filmed along the Basque coast to document the impact of pollution on some of the earth’s most fascinating aquatic creatures. Gender fluidity, which occurs throughout the natural world as an evolutionary adaptation to climatic change, is significantly influenced today by the proliferation of endocrine disrupters—chemicals found in household products and the foods we consume. Visitors to *Ziggy and the Starfish* witness this phenomenon when they enter a darkened tent, lie down on waterbeds, and gaze up at a riveting video of underwater marine sex life. Few are aware at first that they are devoting their rapt attention to hermaphroditic, transgender, and gender-swapping examples of aquatic life, constantly shifting sexual gears to adapt to human environmental irresponsibility.



*Ziggy and the Starfish—How one becomes One with a Fish*, 2016/18. Video installation with bed, fishnet, pillows, two single-channel HD videos, and sound, 16:28 and 21:01 min. Photo: Ivan Erofeev, Courtesy the artist and the Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art

Ziggy, the unseen protagonist in Jordan’s realm, riffs on Ziggy Stardust, the alter-ego of the late David Bowie, who broke boundaries with his transgender sexual personae. Bowie’s Ziggy is an alien arrived on earth to rescue humans, only to become a promiscuous druggie, as corrupt as those he aimed to serve. As Jordan ingeniously shifts us back and forth between our beginnings as sea creatures and our sexual psyches—afloat on waterbeds—her incarnation of Ziggy awakens us to our passage through the world as just one example of human diversity in a much larger universe of shifting identities.

*Changing Sex in Ecology*, an archival video of photographs chronicling gender fluidity in the natural world and in the history of art, appeared at both the Riga Biennial and as part of Jordan’s recent exhibition, “Ziggy on the Land of Drunken Trees” (2018) at Galerie Wedding in Berlin, curated by Ovsen and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung. The title references sub-arctic forests where the melting of permafrost causes once upright trees to tilt and bend. Leap-frogging over whatever remains of this Anthropocene era, Jordan’s expansive exhibition humorously and tragically pointed the wide arc of her odyssey toward a hybrid future world that consists of a dark underground “hydrosphere.” In the show, the *Ecology* video dominated two sculptural arrangements—one representing odd forms bubbling up through methane holes, the other an animated cast of curious latex figures.

forest populated by *Homo-Stupidus*, with a couple of mindless robots fruitlessly spinning about to the monotonous, grating refrain of a mechanical musical instrument and the clacking of “clapping clams.” But Jordan’s possible future was not without hope: a careful look revealed a small army of ants foraging in dried earth. And Ziggy made an appearance in the form of a remarkable cellist, Mikatsiu, during the exhibition opening. She played a plaintive fugue, restoring art and life to this dismal planet, and then appeared among viewers wearing a weird, custom contact lens that obliterated her iris while leaving just a tiny black hole through the white of her “mutated” eye.



*Ziggy and the Starfish—How one becomes One with a Fish* (detail), 2016/2018. Video installation with bed, fishnet, pillows, two single-channel HD videos, and sound, 16:28 and 21:01 min. Photo: Anne Duk Hee Jordan, Courtesy the artist and the Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art

Jordan’s world, as humorous as it is terrifying, takes our worst-case scenarios in stride, presenting them as sorrowful on the one hand, and part of a cosmic evolutionary process on the other. She raises the big question: “How will we adapt?” To that end, we might take our cues from *Disembodiment* (2012), a shockingly [irreverent video](#) showing a potato plant growing in leafy profusion from a human rear end then receding back to whence it came, all to a soundtrack by American artist Jessica Segall singing a rendition of Ella Fitzgerald’s iconic recording, “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off.”

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