

John Isaacs: *Matrix of Amnesia* (1997)



A person, a lifeless body or, more accurately, an amorphous blob, has fallen to the ground. The enormous naked figure appears to be melting, as if it were leaking, like a liquid. The fleshy paunch is spreading like porridge. The whole thing is so voluminous, so formlessly flabby, that balance is in no way possible. The figure has stumbled and lies on the ground, alone, like a giant fallen monster. And yet it is clearly human, perhaps all too human, for "*polla ta deina*," as the choir in Sophocles' *Antigone* cries, "*k'ouden anthrōpou deinoteron pelei*,": "Much is monstrous" as David Constantine translated Friedrich Hölderlin's translation "but nothing more monstrous than man," whereby *deinos* means abominable and awful and also strange. The body lying in front of us is all of these. Abominable its appearance, awful the fate it represents, and unbearable its bloated corporeality, which is nothing other than a representation of human beings ourselves and our overflowing deformation taken to the extreme.

Clearly the small, carefully sculpted feet could no longer carry the heavy load; clearly it was impossible to hold onto a life that had come apart at the seams. And as if the figure had attempted at the last moment to gather together the overflowing fat like fabric spilling over its bounds, the right arm is wrapped protectively around the right breast, holding it in. The figure's gender is unclear, it's lack of form has obliterated such difference beyond all recognition. Neither can the person portrayed be identified. The head, it seems, has been ripped off and in its place is an open, black wound, a gaping cave that is both pleading with us and accusing us. The gaze of the Other is simultaneously what is most familiar and most enigmatic. In another, the gaze is always inscrutable; it expresses the soul but necessarily remains foreign. Here, that "gaze" is a hole that expresses both heightened vulnerability and the lack of a face, of a countenance, a *prosopōn* which literally denotes 'one who looks at', and which is the core of the *persona*.

As a whole, the scene is heartrending. It is a drastic expression of what we perhaps all are, and it touches on our defenselessness. Vulnerability, pain, and affect is the true foundation of humanity. The sculpture is a direct articulation of this; the shock of the overflowing body, a declaration of our life's disease, triggers both abjection and empathy. It seems equally to herald our future and to indict

our present, while also indicating another, unreal time. The figure's malformation becomes a symbol of the *conditio humana*, of our existence amid gluttony, nothingness, monstrosity, and violence. The shapeless form, like the last human being, who has suffered the collapse of humanity in their own self, is spread out on the bare ground and smothered by their own abundance.

John Isaac's life-size (200 x 160 x 60 cm) sculpture *The Matrix of Amnesia*, made of fiberglass, microcrystalline wax, and oil paint and first exhibited in 1997, offers a radical reflection on the proliferation of life, the excesses of our addiction to consumption, and on unbridled surplus production. The unchecked expansion of the body, the foundation of all life, has become our own death. Fat is billowing out everywhere, in a case of dysplasia it seems to have taken over and consumed the entire body aside from the limbs. This bleak almost abysmal work is dominated by the opposition of fat and flesh. This tension gives the sculpture its meaning and its urgency. Biologically, fat conveys energy, which is here so dominant that it has obliterated the flesh. Where there is too much fat, life becomes impossible. Fat does not provide the body with stability, its excess mass is pulled by gravity and hangs like a gelatinous mass, while that which gives the body its form and stability, its framework of bones, muscles, cartilage, etc., seems to have disappeared. Energy proves to be the other of material, just as here fat has become a literal parasite of the flesh, sucking out its ability to live. Fat, then, is *hyperbolē*; when it is the only thing left for the metabolism to burn, it causes its collapse.

Isaacs has taken this opposition to the extreme. And it is just this exaggeration, and the antithesis it contains—one of art's best ways of engaging with world—that makes it difficult to tear our gaze away from the figure. One of art's main strategies of creating fascination—etymologically related to being spellbound, unable to move—is forming unbreakable tension, teasing out antagonisms or paradoxes. There are multiple such conflicts embedded within this sculpture. For one, there is the aesthetic contradiction between form and formlessness. From the beginning, aesthetics has associated form with beauty. In Antiquity, this applied in the main to the human form, to its grace and balanced proportions. The only remnant, if any, of such grace in this sculpture is the feet, which spark a distant memory of what the person once was or could have been, a future deprived once and for all by the overflowing formlessness of the adipose body, knocked down and robbed of the epitome of human dignity: walking proudly upright.

The second stand-out moment of tension is between the genres of realism and allegorical abstraction. This makes it difficult to classify the figure, giving it an air of uncertainty, for neither is it based on mimicry, nor does it qualify as medical observation or fictionalization. The closest genre it comes to is cinematic imagination. Uncategorized, the figure lies flat on the floor for itself alone, a singular object, a "thing" or a memorial, to paraphrase Theodor W. Adorno, "something we know not what."¹ Its "riddleform" seems crystal clear, almost too focused, but at the same time it is not delimited, it crosses all boundaries. It is the epitome of monstrosity. We are most commonly confronted with monstrosity in the form of the uncanny, of which Sigmund Freud said that it is *all too* familiar and yet must *not* be revealed. The duplicity of these two statements, their contradictory simultaneity of intimacy and defense is characteristic for the unconscious processes of repression.

¹Theodor W. Adorno, "Art and the Arts" in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) 368-387, cit. 385.

The sculpture's attraction, what pulls us too it, is this return of the repressed with which it enters viewers and puts them under its spell. For what lies in front of us is the embodiment of ourselves as misshapen, our nature distorted and become monstrous.

A third tension is in the presentation of a heightened, even abnormal, biological dynamic between anabolism and catabolism, which, when one-sided, results either in insufficiency or in the pathologies inherent to the uncontrolled proliferation of adiposity. The excrescence in the case of this silent witness is not the fate of one unlucky person, it is the paradigmatic destiny of humanity and its malaise as a whole. This calamity could be described as the disease 'humanocentrism', if by that is meant, as opposed to *humanum* or the truly human, the rancorous figure of power that ruthlessly puts itself at the center of all creation and of life itself, always ready not only to exploit and consume its host, but now also to recode it. Don't we ourselves—with our consumption, accumulation, and unbridled desire for raw materials, power, knowledge, imagination, and resources—also suffer from a similar insatiable hunger whose excess has exceeded all balance and has, once and for all, toppled us? The overflowing body of the helpless obese person, who, through the black cavity of its decapitated head, seems not only to be staring but almost screaming at us, is in its deformity and lack of contours like nothing so much as our economic insatiability. The sculpture points only superficially at the body and its *metabolē* that has degenerated into lipid production. It aims to a much greater extent at the incurable manias and obsessions of our way of life, our gluttony at any price, that transforms material into energy, energy into performance, and the latter into money that—like the data in the ubiquitous data processing systems—gathers unproductively, deposited and, allegorically, stored as fat. The spreading hyperbolic body is therefore the capitalist body in particular, including its latent will to death. Its corpse lies emblematically at our feet, like the caricature of a humanity that has lost its head.

The figure's isolation, its unbearable loneliness, adds an individual touch to the atmosphere. Does this figure not mirror the loneliness of our species? That which considers itself to be the "crown of creation" lies exposed on the bare floor, with no place and no hope, without any reference point to an Other, to the world, or to a vision for the future, perishing from the pathologies of its chronic excess of fat. The seeming naturalism of the representation underlines this effect. In its overstatement, the figure seems almost surreal; the headless body is equally dehumanized and pitifully human.

Sculpture as an art form is always dependent upon spatial relations; it is first legible in relation to its site and environment. In this case, it is placed in an empty, timeless frame that denies all relationship and that, because there is no reference point, connects mysteriously to our own space, projecting into it like a silent warning. It is this contact that also triggers a strong feeling of pity, so that we cannot but take the figure and its impact personally and reflect on it as if it had something to do with us. This is the site of the work's epistemic dimension: the confrontation with our unbridled alienation from the world. This work is not solely about manifesting an ineffable suffering, or about the dark trauma of physical decadence. It is about the fact that by living a lifestyle that knows no bounds, we are digging our own ecological grave and burdening future generations, the planet, and "nature" in general with the destruction of our means of subsistence. Like a magnifying glass, the sculpture concentrates the invisible progress of our ruin in a view of our selves as a grotesque dysmorphism. It has nothing to offer but a collapsed *imago Dei*.

There is perhaps a fourth, maybe even most important aspect mirrored by the work, referenced by the enigmatic title, *Matrix of Amnesia*. It claims a “matrix” as the fundamental structure of forgetting. In mathematics, a matrix describes the ordering of numerals in a table. In biology, it is the environment in which the cell exists. One should not forget that the sculpture was first exhibited in 1997, so that any reference to the dystopian film trilogy *Matrix* (1999-2003) would be misleading, even if this work is no less dystopian. The first exhibition was at the Consort Gallery in the South Kensington campus of the Imperial College of Science Technology and Medicine, supported by the Department of Biochemistry. This hints at an engagement with undesirable technological and scientific developments, and it does not seem too venturesome to claim that for Issacs, long before *Matrix* was a household word, scientific dystopia was a key inspiration. For the sculpture engages with the ambivalent consequences of a biochemical age in which everything is possible from artificial insemination to artificial genomes and in which biology has been transformed into a total design machine. Technical manipulation of DNA, the recombining of the genetic code, births monsters. The effects cannot be predicted and threaten to transform creation into innumerable headless *panlipids*. The figure simultaneously presents us with its first or maybe also its last sacrifice.

The technological and scientific decisions of the present and their chronic lack of ethics make it impossible to say what will happen in the future. We cannot know what the hubris of our biogenetic interventions might yet bring. What happens in the future is always a break with the present, because the future is by definition completely open and therefore unimaginable. The unlucky figure, the mushy mass of fat with its accusatory hole is only one of many possible manifestations of our approaching end. Changes to the genetic code always necessitate interventions that cannot be anticipated and are therefore dangerous, able to subject the fundamental substance of life to *diamorphosis* or deforming (*Entstaltung*). Usually, we are content to justify such experiments with medical arguments like the improvement of our health or possible new cures or treatments. But *pharmakon*, as we all know, is both cure and poison at once, so that the same thing that optimizes our fitness also serves its destruction. What is more, the side effects and collateral damage of technological developments are hidden behind the stories of their success. Thus, the sculpture is about a collective amnesia as regards the unavoidable flip sides of technological evolution, its disillusionment, which allows the risks to grow with the irrefutable advantages. Whoever makes progress in technology and science but falls back in ethics and reflection, is regressing more than progressing. Isaac's *Matrix of Amnesia* also speaks of that.

Every look into the future is also based on one-sided speculation that is usually no more than a linear continuance of what is already known in the present. For this reason, it is a fatal mistake to think that the Janus face of technology is based only in its dichotomic *use* of good and bad, because that situates technological ambiguity solely in human beings and their intentions. To the contrary, every technology is intrinsically inscribed with a genuine dialectic, so that whether a knife is used this way or that does not depend on what we *want*. Rather from the beginning both and even more possibilities are contained within the technological object itself. For that reason, the praxis of objects is not something external and added to them, but the objects define the practices, including any unintended consequences and effects. Isaac's sculpture quasi exposes a negativity taken to the extremes, a speculative pre-emption of the future perfect continuous in the form of a completed mutation that has degenerated to the point of excess. It leaves behind its indelible trace in the horribly degenerated corporeality of the abused being and reveals its presence as a malformation, as the horror of an irreversible deformation.

The amnesia that Issacs' sculpture thus presents is the act of forgetting the technological and scientific deformation of nature and of ourselves by artificially breeding, which always also means overbreeding, the *bios*. This can also be read in Isaacs' other works. Many of the sculptures he made between the late 1990s and the 2010s present drastic variations on this theme. Although each individual piece stands alone and is part of a richly varied oeuvre that does not adhere to any one style, nonetheless they together make up a series of works that reference one another. These include his 2001 exhibition at the Hayward Gallery or works such as *Bad Miracle* (2002), *The Unseen Structure* (2002), *I Can't Help the Way I Feel* (2003), *Let the Golden Age Begin* (2004) or *In Search of Someone to Lead, in Search of Someone to Follow* (2007), *Everything Given Nothing Lost* (2012) and *The Lie* (2013). All of these works concretize the horror of artificially grown organs, body parts, and pieces of flesh. Also made of microcrystalline wax and oil paint, sometimes with the aid of polyester and foam, they look like industrially produced bloody body tissue or disproportionate body parts: a square block of flesh, a body turgid with sprouting tumors, a geometric wedge of flesh with an embedded drain and spout, flushed-out flesh like factory waste from artificial meat production, or an enormous eyeball that, taken out of its organic context, takes on a life of its own. They are made in a manner reminiscent of eighteenth century wax models, but transferred to the context of modern bioengineering, which is no longer by any stretch of the imagination a thing of the future, and whose surplus lands in the trash heap of the multinational bio-design industry.

This heightening and exaggeration of our abilities, this continuous enhancement, this 'will' to always be more than we are, which Friedrich Nietzsche already castigated as an irrepressible "will to power," not only strikes back at our corporeal order, it also remains as incalculable as it is uncontrollable. In the end, it overgrows our identity and distorts our facial features, making us unrecognizable. Issacs' works are an emphatic representation of this distortion. There is no way not to be gripped by their intensity, because they reveal our own future in the form of an insensible biotechnological megascience in a delirium that crosses all limits to paradoxically completely disfigure and dismantle our 'appearance' or *eidōs*, which makes humans what we are and provides us with a 'countenance'. In Isaacs' *Matrix of Amnesia*, the aporia of our present are uniquely condensed. These will only become more extreme in the course of digitalization, which heightens the tendency of humans to become inhuman, demonstrating our dehumanization at the moment of humanocentric power's greatest triumph.

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