Conditio humana:
The image of the human being in the mirror of hyperrealist sculpture

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The Belgian art dealer Isy Brachot was the first to employ the term *hyperrealism*, in the title of the exhibition *Hyperréalisme: Maîtres américains et européens* presented at his gallery in Brussels in 1973.[1] The show was dominated by the paintings of American photorealists like Ralph Goings, Don Eddy and Chuck Close. The works on display shared in common an exaggerated realism whose photographic precision captivated viewers and lent a sense of objectivity to the subjects portrayed. The works of the American artists evinced a sharply critical analysis of their own circumstances, that is, the "American way of life" of the 1960s and 70s. Alongside the two-dimensional works on canvas, Brachot also presented sculptures by the Americans Duane Hanson and John DeAndrea.

Henceforth, *hyperrealism* became the pre-eminent term in European countries to refer to photorealist art produced strictly from photographic models, though its sense broadened beyond that genre also to include artistic creations whose underlying principle is the precise imitation of real (or realistic) models.

As had already been the case at *documenta 4* (dominated as it was by American artists and featuring works by George Segal among others), the notorious *documenta 5*, titled *Befragung der Realität: Bildwelten heute* (Questioning Reality: Pictorial Worlds Today) and curated by Harald Szeeman, offered photorealists an international platform for the first time. Alongside the photorealist paintings there were also works by Hanson and DeAndrea. A sculpture by DeAndrea representing a nude couple just after they have had sexual intercourse in particular caused quite a stir. The startling effect of the work's corporeal authenticity combined with its intimate subject matter shocked press and visitors alike.

Unlike the photorealist painters, DeAndrea and Hanson did not work from photographs but by making casts of live models. For this purpose they used innovative techniques and materials, like epoxy resins and fibreglass, and they completed the illusionistic effect by means of the laborious application of paint as well as the use of hair and, above all in Hanson's case, articles of clothing and accessories.

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1 *Hyperréalisme : maîtres américains et européens.* Karel J. Geirlandt ; Jean-Pierre Van Tieghem (eds.). [Exh. cat.]. Bruxelles : Isy Brachot, 1973.

Fig. 1
Duane Hanson (1925-1996)
Two Workers, 1993
Bronze polychromed in oil, mixed media, accessories
190 x 167 x 66 cm (figure 1); 130 x 68 x 75 cm (figure 2); 200 x 125 x 59 cm (ladder)
Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, Germany

Together with the exponents of photorealism and pop art, these pioneers of hyperrealist sculpture were part of a movement that had emerged at the end of the 1950s in opposition to abstract art. The context of this gradual revolt against abstraction from the 1950s onward can easily mislead, causing one to ignore the fact that the hyperrealist sculptors in particular continue a long tradition of realist representation whose precursors are to be found even in the earliest civilizations of human history.[2]

Archaeological finds from the third millennium before the Common Era give evidence of a lively tradition of polychrome sculptures that over the course of history—from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman times, and taking on new forms in the Middle Ages and Renaissance—developed numerous techniques to intensify the illusionistic effect of three-dimensional images. In literary history, this striving for true-to-life representation is evident in the work of, among others, Ovid, in whose *Metamorphoses* the sculptor Pygmalion of Cyprus falls in love with an ivory statue he has created and that, at his entreaty, is brought to life by the goddess Aphrodite. In this sense, the myth of Pygmalion is the history of bringing one's own ideas to life and therefore a symbol of artistic creation.

At the time of the Renaissance, Italian intellectuals engaged in heated debates, in the framework of the so-called *paragone delle arti*, regarding which art form was superior, painting or sculpture. In the course of this dispute, the proponents of both genres invoked the great importance of the artistic concept. Sculpture's primary means of expression was seen, from the outset, to be the plastic form, which led to the displacement of polychromy. The discovery of ancient sculptures and the ideal of a marble-white classical antiquity that arose as an erroneous inference based on those discoveries further contributed to the exclusion of colour in sculpture and helped establish mental images of a "classical" aesthetics that for centuries have characterized the way people understand and relate to sculpture. After the World Wars and as human beings and their environment once again became a central object of reflection for sculptors, both historical traditions continued to persist.

Though the human being experienced a marked revival as the subject of figurative sculpture in the 1960s and into the 1970s, in the following decades it became a regressive tendency. Too great were the reservations regarding outdated representational formulas for it to be adopted in earnest. In only isolated cases was the human figure taken up again in the 1980s—among them, that of Katherina Fritsch, Martin Kippenberger, and the early Juan Muñoz in Europe; and, in the United States, the continuing work of Duane Hanson and John DeAndrea, as well as work by Carole Feuerman, Jeff Koons, and Charles Ray.[3] Though not all of them adopted a hyperrealist style, together they laid the foundations for many of the hyperrealist sculptures that appeared beginning in the 1990s.

Gathered together here under the overarching concept of hyperrealism are works in three dimensions that make use of elaborate design methods to transmit the illusion of an actual or possible reality. In the selection presented here, the focus is on the rendering of the human being—of human physicality and human states of mind. Five formal aspects crystallized out of our examination of these pieces, and these features serve to link the different works of art first of all formally while also creating a surface onto which

2   Hirmer Verlag has published an extensive work on this subject: *Die große Illusion : veristische Skulpturen und ihre Techniken.* Stefan Roller (hg.). [Exh. cat., Frankfurt am Main, Liebig haus-Skulpturensammlung]. München : Hirmer, 2014.

3   See James Lingwood. "After the fall : the re-emergence of figure in sculpture" in Ralph Rugoff (ed.). *The human factor : the figure in contemporary sculpture*. [Exh. cat., London, Hayward Gallery]. London : Hayward Publishing, 2014, 34-41.

to project manifold answers to the questions of human existence. The works offer an intimate view of human states of mind in the era of globalism and mass-media connections and therefore also tangible reflections on the human condition during the last five decades. At the same time, they harken back to the powerful desire, thousands of years old, to bring human beings to life (or its semblance) through the act of artistic creation.

Deceptive moves: Human clones

For several decades now, a petite *Woman with a Purse* has leaned against one wall or another in the exhibition rooms of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, looking very much like a mildly exhausted museum visitor. This danger of confusion has now twice proven the undoing of the sculpture executed by Duane Hanson in 1974, for visitors have collided with it on two occasions, having mistaken it for a real person. Upon restoring the work, once in 1977 and again in 1990, the artist left her a few years older each time, thereby creating a humorous companion piece to Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which, instead of the sitter, it is the protagonist's portrait that grows older.

In many ways, the history of this individual piece reveals the particular effect that the deceptively real-looking works of hyperrealist sculptors have on the viewer. The persistent discomfort in the face of artificial replicas forces viewers to reassess their perceptions and increases their willingness to reflect.[4]

Already in the 1950s, Duane Hanson and John DeAndrea devoted themselves to the creation of mimetically exact copies of human characters using real models, in order to arrive at new realities, unravelled through the artistic process. The works of Hanson focus on socially marginalized groups and members of average society [fig. 1]. He thus continues the tradition of the great realists of the nineteenth century, who with the aim of objectivity represented scenes from the life of the labouring populace, in reaction against the idealizing and beatific image of humanity characteristic of the predominant, Romantic mode. His tableaux depicting current social conditions achieve their particular effect through the addition of utilitarian and quotidian objects, and they grant us an intimate glimpse of anonymous individuals at quiet moments in their lives. Hanson once explained it in the following way: "I'm not duplicating life, I'm making a statement about human values. My work deals with people who lead lives of quiet desperation."[5]

John DeAndrea in the 1950s likewise pursued the illusion of physical authenticity. His work is directly tied to the ideals of classical sculpture, and in the years following the Second World War he contributed to a revival of the traditional art historical genre of the classical nude. The exponents of pop art also increasingly made use of the female nude, but they hyperbolized it with garish colours and provocative gestures as an evocation of advertising and consumer culture. DeAndrea's nudes, in contrast, proclaim a natural relationship with the naked body. His nudes are withdrawn and introspective, their poses relaxed, such that the viewer may gaze uninhibitedly at the beauty of pure corporeality [fig. 2].[6]

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4   On the phenomenon of strategically generated discomfort in art, see Nina Zschocke. *Der irritierte Blick : Kunstrezeption und Aufmerksamkeit*. München : Wilhelm Fink, 2006. [Doctoral dissertation, Köln : Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität zu Köln, 2004].

5   Quoted in *Duane Hanson : sculptures of the American dream*. Thomas Buchsteiner ; Otto Letze (eds.). [Exh. cat., Copenhagen, ARKEN Museum for Moderne Kunst; Helsinki, City Art Museum; Völklingen (Germany), UNESCO Kultur erbe Völklinger Hütte]. Ostfildern : Hatje-Cantz, 2007, 69.

6   See Stefan Roller. "Ariel II" in *Die große Illusion : veristische Skulpturen und ihre Techniken*. Stefan Roller (hg.). [Exh. cat., Frankfurt am Main, Liebighaus-Skulpturensammlung]. München : Hirmer, 2014, 194.

Fig. 2
John DeAndrea (1941)
Ariel I, 2011
Oil on cast bronze, soft hair
183 x 91 x 46 cm
John DeAndrea

The principle of the clone has persisted in the development of figurative sculpture, tying current practitioners back to the early pioneers. The American artist Paul McCarthy has opted for a forward-looking technique. The hyperrealist nudes made from silicone that he has most recently created fascinate the viewer with a matchless degree of realism. The work *That Girl (T.G. Awake)* [fig. 3] was created from casts of the model Elyse Poppers and constitutes a direct bridge to the nudes of John DeAndrea. At the same time, it becomes apparent how remarkably the critical analysis of the human body has changed in the last fifty years. The technical perfection of McCarthy's three (almost) identical nudes, coupled with their almost clinical presentation on glass tables, triggers a disturbing effect. The hyperrealist replicas of the same person function like a digital projection and provoke thoughts of virtual realities and artificially generated forms of life.

Fig. 3
Paul McCarthy (1945)
That Girl (T. G. Awake), 2012-2013
Group of three sculptures; silicone, paint, hair, wood, glass, melamine board
78.1 x 74.9 x 141 cm (T.G. 2); 75 x 77.5 x 146.5 cm (T.G. 3); 77.5 x 72.4 x 138.4 cm (T.G. 4); 76.2 x 101.6 x 228.6 cm (each table)
D. Daskalopoulos collection

The French artist Daniel Firman, another representative of a younger generation of sculptors, completely stymies the aggressive nudity of McCarthy's works by fully clothing his sculptures. Characteristic of his works is the systematic concealment of facial features as well as arms and legs. Firman's sculptures, likewise produced by means of casts, do not perfectly imitate the surface of the skin; rather, their mere presence in the room is sufficient to transmit the idea of the human body. The complicated contortions of his clones recall the *One Minute Sculptures* of Erwin Wurm, at the same time that they establish historical relationships both with the famous sculpture of *Laocoön and His Sons* and the further development of the mannerist *figura serpentinata* in the sixteenth century.

Since antiquity, sculptors strove to discover an optimal way of representing the human being in order to fashion symbols of creation—not only divine but also intellectual and artistic. Sculptors' efforts since the 1950s resemble a new chapter in this tradition of human clones, as once again a perfect human replica is generated, now with innovative materials. Together with the enormous advances in manufacturing processes, there is also a palpable change in the understanding of human states of mind that reflects shifts in people's self-image in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Still, the realistic, integral corporeality of these hyperrealist sculptures creates the sense of a physical presence. For this reason, they serve as a mirror for the viewer and allow one to project onto one's own person the states of mind captured in the work of art.

Fig. 4
George Segal (1924-2000)
Standing Woman Looking into Mirror, 1996
Plaster, acrylic paint, mirror
168 x 91 x 69 cm
The George and Helen Segal Foundation and Carroll Janis

Noble simplicity: Monochrome sculptures

Even before Duane Hanson and John DeAndrea, it was the American George Segal who once again—after the long years in which abstraction predominated—turned his gaze towards the human being as a representational subject in the late 1950s. His monochrome human prototypes executed in plaster interact individually or in groups with quotidian objects that serve to situate the figures in an insinuated milieu—which is why the artist designated these works as *environmental sculptures* [fig. 4].[7] The concept of the environmental was applied in the late 1950s not only to the works of Segal but also to those of Duane Hanson and Edward Kienholz, and it served to link works that at their core seek to overcome the separation between object and environment. Segal consciously decided in favour of monochromy in his sculptures. His figures thus remain anonymous and, like Tom Wesselmann's faceless nudes, they become representatives of American society. His monochrome sculptures transmit a feeling of melancholy and isolation, and they deal with the situation of the individual in an urban environment.

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7   Janis Carroll. "Segal Phänomenologie" in *George Segal*. [Exh. cat.]. München : Galerie Thomas Modern, 2009, 7ff.

Fig. 5
Keith Edmier (1967)
Beverly Edmier, 1967, 1998
Cast urethane resin, cast acrylic resin, silicone, acrylic paint, silk, wool,
Lycra fabric, cast silver buttons, nylon tights
129 x 80 x 57 cm (without base)
Private collection, the Netherlands

After the 1970s, when there was hardly an artist who cultivated figurative sculpture, the Spaniard Juan Muñoz was, along with Thomas Schütte and Charles Ray, one of the first sculptors who beginning in the 1980s returned to the representation of the human figure.[8] While Muñoz's early works implied a human presence through the absence of actual figures (an example of which are the two balconies projecting from the wall without any apparent purpose in *Double Balcony*, from 1986), the artist soon began to complete his large-scale installations with figures. Like George Segal, Muñoz also devoted himself to the symbiosis between space and object. His environments present mysterious scenes that generate disturbing percep-tions of space. Especially since the 1990s, groups of dynamically interacting figures increasingly appear

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8   Lingwood 2014, 38.

in his work, and, as is the case with *Piggyback with Knife*, the scenes admit no obvious classification. The monochromy of the sculpture accentuates the protagonists' anonymity, and, silhouette-like, they become stand-ins for human relations.

The American artist Keith Edmier also makes use of the enthralling effect of monochrome sculptures to weave vague and hazy memories from his childhood and youth together with specific moments from contemporary history. He uses opaque resins to cast life-size sculptures that move significant people from his own past and that of his family into a historicizing context. The work titled *Beverly Edmier, 1967* [fig. 5] represents his expectant mother dressed in a copy of the pink Chanel suit that Jacqueline Kennedy wore the day her husband was assassinated. The idea of the environment remains present also in Edmier's work. *A Dozen Roses* represents an object in itself, but at the same time it refers to the bouquet of roses presented to Jackie Kennedy as a greeting at the airport in Dallas. The influence of contemporary history and popular culture on our individual recollections—which since the twentieth century increasingly rely on our visual memory—constitute a fundamental aspect of Edmier's sculptures.

The monochrome sculptures of the post-war years reflect the heavy stamp of the Italian Renaissance on our aesthetic ideas in relation to that art form. For a long time the assumption prevailed that ancient sculptures corresponded to the monochrome state in which they were discovered, and the "noble simplicity and serene grandeur" proclaimed by Winkelmann became a sign of timelessness.[9] The hyperrealistic factor of monochrome sculptures since the 1950s is limited to the accuracy of the figures' design and their frequent integration into a realistic environment. Despite their abandonment of realistic colouring, in the works mentioned here the artists manage to create the presence of a human counterpart, thus linking them back to the principle of the clone. These monochrome sculptures thus become—more clearly even than the polychrome sculptures—surfaces for interchangeable projections that facilitate access to the viewer and leave space for individual thoughts and associations.

Piece by piece: Parts of the human body

In contrast to the integral, life-size representation of the human body, which Duane Hanson and John DeAndrea among others had practiced early on, the American Carole A. Feuerman, herself already in the 1970s, undertook the creation of works in the tradition of high relief sculpture. The characteristic subjects of her sculptures—executed in plaster, resin, and also bronze, and finished in oil paints—are the relationship between man and woman, dance, and, finally, her innumerable swimmers.[10] The series of swimmers in particular play with the effect of something emerging from the water and at the same time the mystery of what remains hidden, offering the viewer the possibility of completing the scene frozen in time according to his or her individual inclination.

The works of the British sculptor John Davies likewise took shape in the 1970s, at the hand of an artist who always veils his "encounters with reality," staging them enigmatically.[11] In the 1970s and 80s he produced

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9   Johann Joachim Winckelmann. *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst.* Dresden und Leipzig : Im Verlag der Waltherischen Handlung, 1756, 21 (1st ed., 1755).

10   Cf. Louise Weinberg. "The art of the figure" in *Sculpture by Carole Jeane Feuerman.* [Exh. cat.]. North Miami, Fla. : Gallerie Ninety-Nine ; New York : Gallery Henoch, [1989], 5ff.

11   Quoted in *Als guter Realist muß ich alles erfinden : internationaler Realismus heute.* [Exh. cat., Hamburg, Kunstverein und Kunsthaus; Karlsruhe, Badischer Kunstverein]. Hamburg : Kunstverein, 1979, 59.

an entire series of isolated heads whose fascinatingly vivid effect is most conspicuous in their inset glass eyes [fig. 6]—a technique that with its effect of realism had historically lent a lifelike presence to ancient statues of the gods and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century images of the saints. Davies's addition of out-of-place objects to his sculptures, like shells and animal masks (his so-called "devices"), produces the feeling of cold indifference. In a manner similar to Davies, the Canadian Jamie Salmon employs the fragmentary to disrupt the impression of a perfectly illusionistic living counterpart. Salmon surprises the viewer with glimpses of the interior of his hyperrealistically executed body parts, which reveal in their fractures and fissures that at their core they are nothing more than artificial materials.

The defectiveness and fragility of the human body and spirit are likewise the focus of Robert Gober, when for instance he has the apparently cleanly severed lower part of a hairy leg, still sporting a woollen sock and worn shoe, project from the wall. This absurdly out-of-place object does not simply lie there inert but forces itself upon the viewer, challenging one immediately to categorize it—which will never be possible, nor should it be. In the mid-1980s, Gober attracted attention with functionless objects like washbasins, thus harkening back to the idea of the readymade. Later, he turned to the representation of isolated body parts. He presented bodies in their pure corporeality, as object and mass, vulnerable and transitory, full of symbolic force and at the same time radically distressing. This aspect of his work acquires particular significance against the backdrop of the emergent period of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, which was accompanied by the vituperation of gay men in the United States—of which Gober's own homosexuality was likewise a target. His works find a precursor in the surrealist sculptures of Hans Bellmer, who composed erotically charged fetish objects from fragments of female bodies likewise partially equipped with accessories like shoes.

With a similarly provocative intent, the Italian Maurizio Cattelan reaches into his trick-bag of reproductions of human body parts. Unlike Gober, however, Cattelan stages his object-tableaux in a very humorous, playful vein. The human being, whole or in parts, as well as taxidermized animals are the focus of his works, which often provocatively allude to current political events and not uncommonly coax a grin from the viewer.

Although the convincingly realistic effect remains a central aspect of hyperrealist depictions of body parts, nevertheless their very fragmentariness more clearly foregrounds the sculptural treatment of the body. In antiquity, the representation of isolated parts of the body was primarily limited to the torso or the bust. The artful *torsi* now held in many antiquities collections are in fact fragments of what were originally complete human figures. Those fragments exerted an enormous influence on later generations of sculptors. Auguste Rodin ultimately revolutionized the idea of the fragment, by making parts of the body stand-ins not simply for the human figure but indeed for human existence per se.[12] Following this spirit, the sculptors from the period after the Second World War mentioned here progressively extended the representation of isolated body parts to include the formal language of hyperrealism.

Change of perspective: Playing with scale

While realistically formed sculptures of body parts reflect an approach that is markedly oriented around concept and composition, a development began in the 1990s that once again returned to the human figure as an integral whole, and it brought states of human existence even more starkly to the fore. Since the mid-

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12 See Josef Adolf Schmoll (Eisenwerth). *Der Torso als Symbol und Form : zur Geschichte des Torso-Motivs im Werk Rodins.* Baden-Baden : B. Grimm, [1954], 18ff.

Fig. 6
John Davies (1946)
Head with Shell Device, 1973-1975
Resin, fibreglass, paint and mixed media
29 x 17.5 x 22 cm
Private collection

1990s the Australian Ron Mueck has created elaborate figures perfectly crafted out of silicone, fibreglass resin, and acrylic that captivate the viewer by, among other things, playing with dimensions in an ambiguous manner. In Mueck's own words, "I wanted to make something that a photograph wouldn't do justice to... Although I spend a lot of time on the surface, it's the life inside that I want to capture." Dispensing with added accessories as far as possible, Mueck concentrates on physical presence and takes as his themes the transitional stages of life like birth, puberty, old age and death, made legible through the defamiliarization of the human body and especially in his choice of size. His *Dead Dad*, from 1996-1997—which represents the body of his deceased father as the artist imagined it, smaller than life-size and completed with hair of Mueck's own—establishes connections with the funerary masks known since antiquity. *Dead Dad* is thus a hyperrealist *memento mori* and recalls the blunt, unsparing representations of the body by artists of the Gothic period like Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein, among others.[13]

After Mueck, the artists Marc Sijan and Sam Jinks—each according to his manner and both with a high degree of technical perfection—have created hyperrealist sculptures whose dimensions deviate from reality. Sijan worked occasionally as Duane Hanson's assistant, a relationship that is highly evident in his early pieces, which he made life-size. His later work deals with fragmentary bodies and also with the human

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13 See Susanne Greeves. "Mueck – Realismus neu definiert" in Heiner Bastian (ed.). *Ron Mueck*. [Exh. cat., Hamburg, Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof; Berlin, Museum für Gegenwart]. Ostfildern : Hatje-Cantz, 2003, 16ff.

Fig. 7
Marc Sijan (1946)
Embrace, 2014
Polyester resin and oil paint
79 x 94 x 79 cm
Artist's collection

figure rendered on a reduced scale. With pieces like *Embrace*, from 2014 [fig. 7], and *Cornered*, from 2011, Sijan's choice of scale reinforces the idea of a fragile existence and the emotionality of human interactions. Sam Jinks also produces touching compositions, and his themes, like Mueck's, include the changes that body and spirit undergo and the fragility of our mortal shells. The small-scale sculpture he executed in 2010 titled *Woman and Child* presents the same person at the beginning and the end of her life, closing the circle with a forgiving embrace.

Sculptural works on a monumental scale witnessed an initial apex in the ancient civilizations of Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt, and were in each case symbols of religious and worldly power. In ancient Greece, the Colossus of Rhodes, measuring nearly thirty metres high, was counted among one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The guiding criterion for monumental art was and continues to be that it should exceed human proportions. A spectacular example of hyperrealist monumental art is the work by Ron Mueck titled *A Girl*, from 1996, which represents a newborn child measuring five metres long. The discrepancy between reality and sculpture could not be more extreme than in this work, which produces a disturbing effect at the same time that it radically underscores the child's helplessness. In the same way, the Macedonian artist Zharko

Basheski exploits the disconcerting effect of oversized representations. His *Ordinary Man*, from 2009-2010, breaks through from under the floor and with his monumental presence defies the very notion of ordinariness.

Beginning in the 1990s, technical advances permitted artists to create ever more precise imitations of the human body, at the same time that the possibility of playing with scale allowed for a new level of impact. In Paris in 1881 the impressionist Edgar Degas presented a girl at the age of puberty with his small-scale sculpture *La petite danseuse de quatorze ans* (The Little Dancer of Fourteen Years). In its original version, the piece was executed in painted wax and dressed in garments made from real cloth, and only after the artist's death was it cast in bronze. Degas received criticism for this work, because in the nineteenth century wax figures were viewed either as preparatory studies—maquettes—for what was to be ultimately cast in bronze or as pieces appropriate only for ethnological and anatomical collections, cabinets of curiosities, and wax museums. In retrospect, one can reasonably claim that, with this small-scale but otherwise true-to-life rendering of the dainty dancer Marie Geneviève van Goetham, Degas became the direct modern precursor of the hyperrealists, who beginning in the 1990s played intensively with variations in scale in order to express human states of mind.[14]

The manipulated self: Deformed realities

What is life? Will metal cyborgs someday be able to develop human feelings and behaviours? Will they be worthy of protection and compassion in the future? And when will that be? These are the questions regarding the value of life to which Patricia Piccinini gives expression with her deformed, hybrid beings that lie somewhere between technology, nature, and humanity [fig. 8]. They are creatures from a possible new world, mutants of experimental biotechnology that confront the viewer and reveal the field of tension in social relationships. Executed in media both artificial (fibreglass, metal, silicone, etc.) and natural (human hair, leather, wood), this artist's figures prove simultaneously alien and familiar. Provocative and contentious, but always fragile, her sculptures represent new conceptions of life and the struggle behind human relationships.

The metamorphosis of real corporeality is also central to the sculptures of Evan Penny. His distorted, confusing representations of human beings are created out of silicone, pigments, hair and aluminium. Almost always they are parts of bodies (usually busts), though Penny has also occasionally made full-length sculptures on a monumental scale. Their distorted forms are misleading, for depending on the viewpoint, they squash up and stretch out, forcing the sculptures back into seeming two-dimensionality [fig. 9]. Clearly evident in this artist's work are qualities peculiar to photography that connect it to the photorealism of Chuck Close and his outsized painted portraits. Penny, however, does not merely extend his works into the third dimension; they also reveal the pronounced imprint of digital media and of innovations in the manipulation of images. The works of this South African artist speak volumes of the misleading reception of reality in the era of digital media and underscore our ambivalent relationship with virtual representation.

The distortion of identity, intensified by the vertiginous advances of modern life, is a theme that contemporary artists have dealt with conspicuously in their works over the last decades. These artistic creations

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14 Mónica Inés Huerta. *Encountering mimetic realism : sculptures by Duane Hanson, Robert Gober and Ron Mueck.* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 2010], 6ff.

Fig. 8
Patricia Piccinini (1965)
Newborn, 2010
Silicone, forton, steel, human hair
19 x 24 x 17 cm
Courtesy of the artist and the Paris Neilson collection

often produce an alienating effect and reveal the urgent desire to find answers and solutions. When in the 1960s a new turn towards realism and popular culture received increasing impetus, already in those days the brash and motley pop art movement promoted, in part, political and social criticism. The British artist Allen Jones shocked viewers in the 1960s with his infamous "furniture sculptures"—*Hatstand, Table, and Chair* (1969)—which have caused such a furore in the context of gender debates in art history that a feminist group went so far as to pour acid on them when they were exhibited at the Tate Gallery in 1986. His work titled *Refrigerator* [fig. 10] once again takes up the theme of women's objectification, in the form of a female figure with smooth skin and a cold expression, wearing a classy imitation leather cat-suit and inserted straight through a wood-panelled refrigerator. Alongside Jones, the American Mel Ramos with his sculpture *Chiquita Banana* makes a similarly ironic commentary on the feminine ideal disseminated in the world of glossy magazines that again and again makes women slaves of the latest fashion.

The artists and works mentioned here make it clear that the deformation of the human figure in art is always influenced by the prevailing spirit of the times. In addition, the existential themes of humanity have, in every age, constituted a mainspring for the work of culture. In the sculptures of Tony Matelli, the physical laws to which we are all subject play a leading role. These apparently fixed laws often seem to exert a contrary force on Matelli's figures, which stand on their heads or are situated in unrealistic states of levitation. It is as if the material and the force of gravity itself have been manipulated. By reorienting our perspective and our view of things, Matelli creates a kind of distorting lens that questions one reality as it generates another. To turn the argument on its head, it becomes clear that existential parameters determine the human condition and that they irrevocably affect our lives.

Fig. 9
Evan Penny (1953)
Self Stretch, 2012
Silicone, pigments, hair and aluminium
122 x 81 x 69 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

Death and transitoriness as inescapable elements of human life are one of the central features of the works of Berlinde de Bruyckere. In her sculptures, this artist works predominantly with organic materials, including wax casts, animal hides and wood, in addition to synthetic resins. Her contorted and wounded bodies present clearly defined areas executed with hyperrealist immediacy, while others seem to blur away into the suggestion of abstraction [fig. 11]. There are complex and multi-layered connections to the art-historical tradition here, and De Bruyckere often takes up themes from mythology or Christianity, among them the metamorphosis of people and animals as well as, more generally, life, hope, suffering and death. As with Mueck and also Penny, the shocking frankness of the Gothic, which represented mortal flesh free of any idealization, constitutes an important source for De Bruyckere. Some of her pieces are exhibited in vitrines, lending them the appearance of anatomical models from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[15] Her works offer a marvellous example of an archetypal approach with a hyperrealist effect. Like the entire artistic movement surrounding hyperrealist sculpture, the works of this artist are firmly anchored in the history of art and reflect developments from the waxen funerary masks of antiquity, via the sacred art of the medieval period and the tortured bodies of the Gothic, to the exiling of polychrome sculptures into the limited sphere

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15 See Elisabeth Schlebrügge. "Arbeit am Verlorenen" in Katrin Bucher Trantow ; PeterPakesch (eds.). *Berlinde de Bruyckere - Leibhaftig/In the flesh*. [Exh. cat., Graz (Austria), Kunsthaus Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum]. Cologne : König, 2013, 113.

Fig. 10
Allen Jones (1937)
Refrigerator, 2002
Mixed media
188 x 84 x 37 cm
Private collection

of scientific collections. All of the universal themes of human existence are reflected in the timeless aesthetic of her works.

Hyperrealist sculpture thus extends its roots deep into the history of western art and yet remains astonishingly current. Its overall development has taken place within the context of postmodern society and depends to a high degree on the prevailing spirit of the times—or, more precisely, on the cultural, economic, and social factors that have predominated in the years during which it emerged. The question thus arises as to why realistic representation has persisted for so long a stretch of time. What exactly has moved artists, especially since the beginning of the modern period, to fall back on this classical form of representation for their highly charged and decidedly current subjects, despite the fact that since the nineteenth century, and even more clearly in the twentieth, the conception of art has diverged so radically from the ideals of preceding centuries?

The Romantic and Realist movements of the nineteenth century are foremost among the precursors to have influenced, stylistically as well as thematically, the development of hyperrealist sculpture. The profound upheaval occasioned by the process of industrialization and the attendant agglomeration of masses of people within large cities led to a general sense of insecurity, heightened by the diminished importance of religion. Since the Enlightenment, artists have incessantly sought ways out of humanity's "self-inflicted immaturity" (as Kant put it), arriving at new, individualistic attitudes to which the Romantics and, even more manifestly, the Realists gave expression. The great importance that to this day we assign to the individual

self likewise stems from that period, as do the modern belief in progress and the metaphor of the machine. The Realists defended the possibility of representing daily life objectively, and in their works they presented images of the middle and labouring classes. This radical divergence from the ideals of the official art of the Academies was a scandal. As with Duane Hanson almost a century later, the realistic representation of simple people without idealizing them caused astonishment and outrage. In the period between the World Wars, a similar evolution took place when artists returning from the war like Otto Dix and George Grosz created realistic, politically charged paintings of cripples, prostitutes and other marginalized groups. The realist current of *die Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity, presents direct parallels with the early exponents of hyperrealism in two senses: on the one hand in their un-prettified and objectively realistic approach to representation, and on the other in their focus on human beings' mental states (psychologically and generally) as a mirror onto the state of society as a whole.

Romanticism, Realism, and New Objectivity are movements that emerged in times of great upheaval and general insecurity, when wars and also the forces of rapid progress destabilized the self-image of the individual and social relations among human beings. If we take this idea to its logical conclusion, we arrive at the hypothesis that realist—or, more precisely, hyperrealist—representation became an effective means of artistic expression for posing complex questions about human existence.

The arrival of postmodernity opened a new chapter in the history of Western culture. The restructuring carried out during and after the Second World War, as well as the thriving economic growth of the 1950s and 60s contributed to the rapid spread of globalization, which encouraged growing delocalization. Ties to the family sphere likewise disintegrated, as did the importance of tradition and heritage, and the individual was deprived of a sense of cultural identity. Social alienation had already played an important role in the nineteenth century, and it became intensified many times over in the context of burgeoning megacities. Similarly, Duane Hanson's sculptures, vacant and isolated from their surroundings, simply inhabit their spaces; no eye contact with them can be established, for these figures remain lost in their own thoughts. The relaxation of traditional paradigms of social relations paved the way for the sexual revolution as well as for a major shift in the definition of gender roles. Sexualized images of women made their appearance in magazines and advertising and were soon also restaged in brilliant colours by the exponents of pop art. We find the joyful and dark sides of this new awareness of the body satirized with great humour but also great realism in the work of Mel Ramos. John DeAndrea, in contrast, counters the world of advertising with sculptures of female figures that do not idealize their subjects, thereby encouraging a natural relationship with the body.

The issue of social alienation as well as that of a "correct" relationship with one's own body took on a new dimension with the onset of the digital age. Beginning in the 1990s, the Internet and soon thereafter smartphones and tablets have allowed for endless communication and have in many cases made the need for physical encounters obsolete. A new form of virtual coexistence has altered the patterns according to which we relate to each other. Words typed out on a keyboard and digital images sent via email or social media have replaced actual physical presence, and they allow us to gather friendships via computer code. Thanks to photo-editing programs, there hardly remains a body that for advertising purposes has not been defamiliarized, that is to say, "optimized." The deformed body parts and likenesses by Evan Penny reflect this artificial defamiliarization of real bodies and they present disturbingly emptied-out or monstrous images of his friends and acquaintances. It all recalls the dystopian world that Michel Houellebecq brings to life in his novel *La possibilité d'une île* (The Possibility of an Island): the de-emotionalized self of the future whose individual life has already been lived, in infinite repetition, by its genetic clone, and it will continue to be lived once the self's own life has run its course—an "optimization" of the quality of life that in the novel leads to a society far-removed from traditional patterns of human relations and that seems like a lethargic and paralyzing

Fig. 11
Berlinde de Bruyckere (1964)
Elie, 2009
Wax, epoxy, cushion
38 x 154 x 115 cm
Fundació Sorigué, Lleida

episode. Postmodernity poses numerous questions to the human spirit: Who are we and who will we be? Do virtual realities threaten traditional forms of human coexistence? What is the meaning of life in an age of constantly progressing development in the fields of genetic engineering and microbiology? Does Patricia Piccinini, with her hybrid beings that combine the human, the animal and the technological, forewarn us of a creation that will turn against its creator? Or does she face the possibilities of new challenges with confidence and joy?

The evolution of hyperrealist sculpture directly reveals a critical examination of the complex issues of our time. These objects that seem to be alive astonish and deeply affect us. They demand that we direct our attention towards artistic theories that are anchored in the reflection on the human condition.