

KLONES

In 1994, Dieter Huber created KLONES, a cycle encompassing depictions of human beings as well as plant and landscape motifs [*Landshapes*]. These computer-generated photographic works are among the earliest artistic treatments of the potential of genetic engineering, and are also among the few whose results not only comment on this subject but also reflect it by means of a technological process.

The following interview with Dieter Huber conducted by Heimo Ranzenbacher has been distilled from an e-mail exchange that can be accessed at [<http://kultur.aec.at/festival2000/texte/klones.html>].

Heimo Ranzenbacher: You got involved with the life sciences at a very early stage, at a time when there were hardly any public opinions or popular conceptions associated with this subject. Did “art” have anything to do with arousing your interest?

Dieter Huber: The impetus that leads me to select the contents of my work actually never comes from the field of art. Developments in science and technology as well as sociological aspects are the most significant factors today. It all begins with a subjective attraction. If, over the course of my subsequent research, a degree of social relevance that might previously have been concealed begins to emerge, the issue becomes the topic of an artistic confrontation for me. The formal selection of the medium depends upon the content as well as the structure of the cycle.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: What do you mean by “the structure of the cycle”?

Dieter Huber: Take, for example, gender-specific issues that I have dealt with in the *Landshapes*. Following various research efforts, I decided to break the work up into 12 chapters: aesthetics, manipulation, sex/gender, femininity, culture/codex, androgen, modesty, cybersex, omni-potency, genetic engineering, narcissism and masculinity. Each individual chapter, in turn, contains subheadings. As a “subjective” interpretation, an image was assigned to each respective chapter. The structure of the work of art, then, is another question, which falls into the area of interpretation.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: Can certain corresponding methodological causes be said to be responsible for your interest in genetic engineering?

Dieter Huber: I have taken the rough, basic structure of genetics, beginning with the availability of the material [genome, “world”], proceeding to the analysis [mapping, HUGO] and all the way to adaptation and new creation [mutations, “cleansings,” constructs etc.] and translated it to the artistic level. Analog images of human beings, plants and landscapes were recorded, digitized in fragments, adapted to the concrete graphic concept at the computer, and then returned to the analog state, to the “material” form of a simple, two-dimensional image. Through this equivalent in the formal method, the technological conversion becomes conclusive and makes “sense.”

Heimo Ranzenbacher: It is evident that interests with a totally different thematic focus could also be treated by means of the same process. What significance does this availability of “methodological meaning” have for you?

Dieter Huber: It's very simple. We perceive genetically modified plants as "beautiful," but no sooner do we come to genetically manipulated foodstuffs than we begin to see differences of opinion. Applying the very same principle to the external appearance of human beings comes across as "repugnant." The panoramas of the "world landscapes" impart irony to this mostly subjective ambiguity of the unanswered questions regarding the limits of manipulation. If the various different basic motifs are simply hung in contrasting fashion at an exhibition, observers recognize the problematic nature of these issues and have a potential way to approach the questions that need to be answered regarding the human image now and in the future. When it is successfully proven that not only primary hereditary diseases but also, for example, physical and social capabilities like adaptability, susceptibility to addiction, and mental health are genetically determined, we will be forced to redefine the meaning of "sick," "healthy," and "socially justifiable." The point here is nothing less than a redefinition of the human being. It's actually very exciting to be alive at a time like this. I consider the answer to this question to be one of the factors that will most profoundly define the immediate future. A decision made by society as a whole would be highly desirable. And if it isn't made very quickly, then pharmaceutical companies, research institutes, the NASDAQ and the new economy will step in and make it.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: The human image also continually reflects the images that the genders have of each other and of their roles in the sociocultural game. NEXT SEX deals with these images in light of changing biotechnological possibilities. I interpret several of your works as a subtle form of play with potential implications. For instance, there is *Klone #7*, nipples in various states of arousal on one breast, namely—to put it coarsely—as the absence of external stimulation; and probably also as an allusion to the saying about "two souls in a single breast"—updated in the present context ... Which images do you have in mind?

Dieter Huber: If we can give credence to Greek mythology, our origins are bisexual. The aesthetic ideals of Greek sculpture—as well as the supermodels of today—are based, after all, to a very great extent on the imagination of a creature that is a cross between the two genders. The statues were consciously endowed with attributes of the opposite sex; the boyish girls on the runways are idealizations, fictions that have assumed a material form. This hermaphroditic creature can be regarded as the ideal, so to speak, of the individual's increasing emancipation from others in the modern world. Actually, on such a basis and assuming technology that is sufficiently sophisticated, everything is imaginable: the end of motherhood via extogenesis, the elimination of sex through [technical] sublimations, "potent" human beings thanks to germ-line "therapy" [!], the online link-up of the body by means of computer implants, "perfecting" the ego to the point of rejection of the body ...

Considered in this context, the "dissolving of the individual" that has been an issue of great interest in European thought for decades comes across as highly plausible. Personally, I find it simply unpleasant. I place great store in decisions that I reach according to subjective criteria. This makes friends and enemies. After all, we have the option of designing our own "world" and our personal "everyday life"—even though women long ago lost control of their own bellies, and my own brain unfortunately no longer belongs to me.

