

THE SINGULARITY OF THE CHICKEN: ARTIST ANDREAS GREINER ON COLLABORATING WITH NATURE

It's closing time at the Berlinische Galerie and we're standing at the back of the main hall, transfixed. The lush, bioluminescent skin of a Japanese *Watasenia* squid pulses and glows, producing entrancing abstract compositions on a large flat screen while a self-playing grand piano emits an accompanying score. This is the alien, captivating world of Andreas Greiner, where encyclopedic knowledge of the laboratory meets the mystifying seduction of the aesthetic realm.



Photo by Robert Rieger

“Art was traditionally seen as the difference between what humans produce and what nature produces, but now the lines are being blurred,” says Andreas, as we walk through the main hall of the Berlinische Galerie where his current exhibition *Agency of the Exponent* is on display. We're talking about the overlap between art, science, and technology – the main topics the artist preoccupies himself with. His inventive cross-disciplinary approach to these themes is what won him the GASAG Kunstpreis this year. His fascination with themes as disparate as the skewed evolution of the industrial food complex and the uncanny idiosyncrasies of microscopic specimens, has led him to embark upon ambitious projects that implore the viewer to question their own relationship to biology, production, identity, and what constitutes a work of art.

On entering the exhibition, viewers are confronted with a seven-metre-high chicken skeleton, entitled 'Monument for 308'. The skeleton, a scale model of the breed Ross 308 (the result of 308 cross-breeding attempts), is taken from a type of hybrid chicken produced for extremely fast meat growth. In producing a monument to this scientific feat that has allowed humans to profit from the genetic manipulation of farm animals, Andreas points to the almost artistic yet deeply troubling evolution of consumer-driven production. “Now animals are co-produced by humans,” he explains. “We're co-creating nature and nature is adapting to us.” He sees this as a fascinating if upsetting evolution, one contrary to the history of mankind, where man adapted to nature. This juxtaposition is particularly present in this piece, whose impressive presence dwarfs the viewer, evoking the experience of confronting a dinosaur in a natural history museum. This is not by accident; Andreas sees the animals as contemporary dinosaurs, and suggests that future generations will take an archaeological interest in our current production practices. Additionally, upon enlisting scientist Mag. Dr. Erich Pucher at Vienna's Natural History Museum to draw an anatomical comparison between dinosaur and chicken, he learned that chickens – a sub-species of bird – are actually closer to dinosaurs than other species of birds, evolutionarily speaking.

Andreas Greiner has an impressive résumé, having first studied art, then anatomy, then medicine. After two and a half years of medical school in Dresden, he decided to make his way back to art. He recalls the moment when he realised he was on the wrong path: “When we had to take blood from one another, and I thought, ‘what am I doing here?’ At that moment I went straight into the sculpture department and said, ‘I'm a young med school student, but I want to study art.’” He landed a spot at Universität der Künste in Berlin where he worked with sculpture legend Rebecca Horn, and went on to study with Olafur Eliasson at the Institut für Raumexperimente. As we walk around the exhibition, however, it's impossible not to draw links to



Photo by Robert Rieger

Greiner's background in science. “Now I'm sort of closing this cycle and getting back to the interests I had in my early twenties,” he says.

Positioned opposite the impressive chicken-dinosaur monument is a photograph of another chicken, entitled 'Heinrich'. For this piece, Andreas sought out a producer of broiler chickens, where he purchased Heinrich and brought him to an animal farm in Berlin Tempelhof to live out the rest of his days as a living sculpture. The chicken looked normal at first glance until, upon closer examination, you could see that the proportions were all wrong: the feet and breasts abnormally huge, apparently so distorted through breeding that he was barely able to stand. Andreas produced photographic portraits of the chicken, wrote detailed notes on his biography, and stipulated how the chicken should be treated in 'A Contract Regulating How An Artwork Is To Be Handled', drawn up with the farm where Heinrich was placed. The artist stipulated that the chicken was to be treated like a living sculpture with all the freedom that this entails. Despite having lived longer than the majority of broiler chickens, Heinrich had a relatively short life. After his passing, Andreas arranged for an autopsy in order to determine the cause of death.

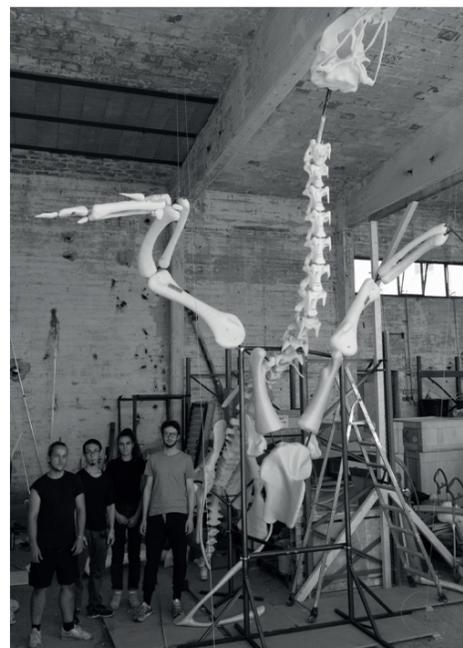
It is through this subversive act of elevating an ordinary or typically unseen specimen to the status of high art that Andreas questions the arbitrary nature in which we assign identity to certain creatures while dismissing that of others. Andreas sees this question of singularity versus anonymity as central to his work. “The broilers, for example,” he tells us, “they get abstracted into a piece of meat in the supermarket. But a dog has a very strong identity for many people; it has a name, it has a character and people get really attached to it, but not to an →

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'Monument for the 308' in the entrance hall of Berlinische Galerie. Photo by Theo Bitzer.



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Above: Andreas Greiner and team next to 'Monument for 308'. Photo by Theo Bitzer. **Left:** 'Studies of an Alien Skin'. Photo by Theo Bitzer.

abstract piece of meat. Somehow, with this notion of abstraction, it seems that we're losing this immediate relationship to living creatures."

Another example of this is his series 'Study (Portrait) on the Singularity of Animals', consisting of stunning black-and-white microscopic scans of different species of algae. The stark contrast and finite detail of the images gives a plant that most people consider multiplicitous in nature the impression of being entirely specific, a point which is driven home by the fact that Andreas has titled the algae with human names such as 'Lisa' and 'Peter'. "By irritating people with naming algae," he explains, "I'm basically playing with this notion of identity." His mission reads clearly across all of his work, and is profoundly humbling. "I'm trying to re-emotionalise this relationship to living creatures," he adds.

Andreas' experimental approach constantly leads him to new discoveries, allowing the works to build on each other with an almost narrative thematic structure: "There's a natural approach that I have wherein one thing leads to the next thing." For example, he explains, "When I was working on a piano work with algae [entitled 'From Strings to Dinosaurs'], that inspired me to research extinction, because the piece goes extinct itself towards the end. It grows exponentially, reaches a climax and then crashes down."

Not one to shy away from the unknown, Andreas welcomes the opportunity to go directly to the source to execute his projects. "I really like to get hands-on," he says, not only by learning all of the technical skills necessary to execute a project, but to go to the experts. "If I get interested into something like algae," he explains, "then I go to scientists who research algae, like the Culture Collection of Algae in Cologne. They keep a large library of different specimens. Or with the skeleton, I also contacted the Natural History Museums in Berlin and Vienna. So my approach is pretty much to work with specialists. If I have an idea and I want to realise something, then I'm looking for someone who knows more than I do and try to collaborate." The algae portraits shown at Berlinische Galerie as part of the open series 'Study (Portrait) of the Singularity of Animals', for example, were produced in collaboration with Dr Barbara Melkonian and Dr Karl-Heinz Linne von Berg from the Biology department at Cologne University, the home of one of the world's largest algae collection, and 'Studies of an Alien Skin' was produced in collaboration with composer Tyler Friedman.

"I like to collaborate and in doing so, to demystify things, acknowledging that I myself can only reach so far, and as soon as you join forces and get the perspective of somebody else then you can reach much further." Andreas not only collaborates with other



Photo by Robert Rieger

The Death of the Author Barthes' best-known work, this 1967 essay would prove to be a transitional piece in its investigation of the logical ends of structuralist thought in light of the growing influence of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction.

artists, scientists, and institutions, but sees himself as collaborating with the material itself. This very fact makes him uncomfortable accepting exclusive authorship of his work, and he therefore likes to share the credit both with collaborators as well as with nature itself, which he sees as "co-creating" the art. Take, for example, "The Free Plan" from 2014, wherein the artist installed a pupated fly maggot into a temporary David Chipperfield exhibition at the Neue Nationalgalerie. The fly eventually hatched and flew around the gallery. As Berlinische Galerie curator Guido Fassbender describes it: "Living organisms not only co-determine the creative process but ultimately they themselves become the artwork." Andreas contractually bound the director of the Neue Nationalgalerie to respect the fly as a living artwork and ensure its wellbeing. The last point of the contract humorously renounced his authorship of 'the flying artwork'. The same went for Heinrich, whose freedom as a living artwork is stipulated in clause 9 of another contract: "The living artwork remains in the possession of no-one. It is free." Though perhaps a tongue-in-cheek play on Roland Barthes' postmodern masterpiece *'The Death of the Author'*, Andreas' approach reads more as an earnest if covert attempt to subvert the essentially unchallenged notion that animals exist merely to serve human beings. By giving agency to the chickens, flies, and even algae through shared authorship, he is elevating their importance to that of not only co-author, but co-creator.

This surrender of control, of acting rather as facilitator or choreographer, organising situations in which things occur on their own, is entirely deliberate, he says. "This is part of my sculptural approach: to create settings and then let go of complete control. So part of the artwork that's living is unfolding itself in this situation, and I can't really predict that everything works out as I hope." Sometimes things don't go according to plan: for example, when the algae for a particular exhibi-

tion were just too tired or at the end of their cycle and therefore didn't produce light for exhibition viewers on certain days. While it's sometimes hard to accept this degree of uncertainty, Andreas feels that in some way, the core of his practice is pulling out or drawing attention to the wonder of these miraculous processes and accepting that they exist on a continuum. "I'm becoming a gardener," he says, "and part of gardening something is also to live with life, offspring and dying."

While these aren't themes that are new to the discipline of art, Andreas' take on them is undeniably fresh. Certainly, bringing a bred-to-eat chicken into an art gallery is a kind of institutional critique, questioning hierarchies in terms of what or (in the chicken or algae's case) who is considered to have value. Heinrich serves as an interesting example: "When I first exhibited Heinrich's portrait along with the contract when he was still living people would ask me, 'So where is this children's zoo? Can I please go and visit Heinrich? I want to see this chicken!' But, it's just one chicken out of 600 million. No more or less special. It's just because I name it and put it in a gallery and call it art."

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This brings our discussion full circle, back to how art and production has evolved over the centuries, what qualifies as meaningful and what exactly is the link between art and nature. Andreas is undoubtedly problematising the role of artist, producer and scientist, and perhaps conflating all three and simultaneously questioning their traditional output. "I'm bringing nature into the white cube. The white cube is probably one of the most high-end cultural spaces you can imagine," he suggests. "By bringing this 'natural' product into the white cube, I'm saying 'nature equals art and art equals nature.'" In a world in which it is undeniable that humans are indeed "co-creating nature", Andreas Greiner is the agent setting up the aesthetic and conceptual conditions for his audience to look at the link between the natural, the man-made, and even ourselves: "I don't think we're different than nature. We are art and art is nature." Despite the traditional white cube that we find ourselves in and all the cultural associations that come with it, it's hard not to feel the spirit of some kind of revolution.

Agency of the Exponent is on display in the Berlinische Galerie until February 6th, 2017. To see more of Andreas' work, visit andreasgreiner.com