

*On vibrant matter, jizz and dark desires*

Last week I was asked to write a text based on the figure of a bunny as a sexualised symbol. A work by Virginia Overton, which I saw in 2018, popped up in my mind: a black-and-white playboy poster, laying on the exhibition floor, obscured by a lamp placed on top, so as to hide the full image. I couldn't tell exactly why such a sight immediately made me laugh. For its irreverence, most likely. I guess one of the images that comes up first in our collective, luscious minds with the word "bunny", is indeed the playboy symbol, known for its seductive and sexy-cute-innocent connotations. According to the conventions of the time, the simplified bunny with a bow tie embodies the unrestrained promiscuity of "playful" boys—the supposed readers—and became an icon of "sex culture" with its introduction by the artist Art Paul in 1953.



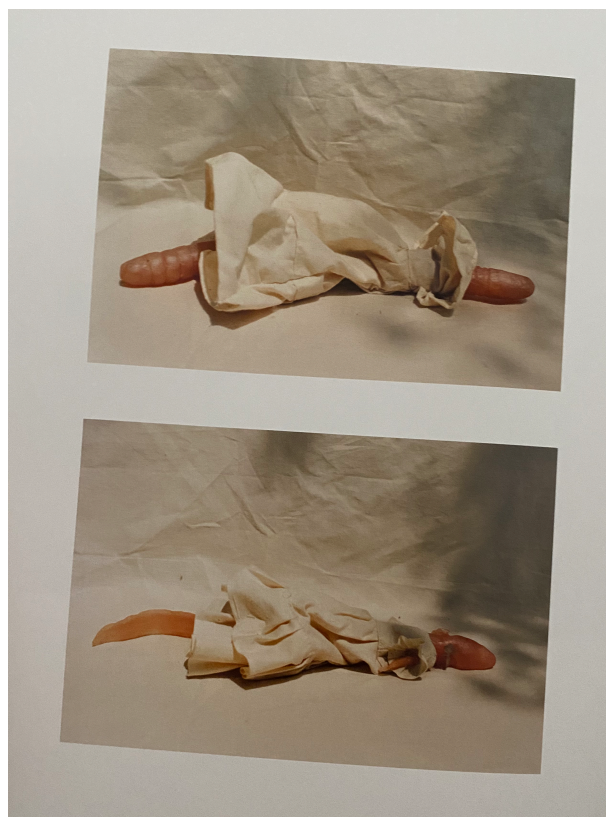
Jochen Klein, *Untitled*, 1996

Sexual associations of rabbits, or hares, hence seem to have close ties with modern American culture, perhaps precisely because of the impact created by the not-so-well-aged magazine for men. There are however several readings throughout art history, especially in painting, in which these animals are considered as symbols of fertility, or, according to more moralising views, of lust. In writings by Herodotus, Aristotle, Pliny and Claudius Aelianus the rabbit is described as one of the most fertile of all the animals, therefore becoming a symbol of vitality, fertility and ultimately sexual desire throughout history:

*I SUPPOSE DIVINE PROVIDENCE, WHICH IS WISE AS FAR AS I CAN TELL, HAS MADE ALL THE TIMID AND EDIBLE ANIMALS PRODUCE MANY OFFSPRING SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT GO EXTINCT BY BEING EATEN UP, WHILE IT HAS MADE ALL THE SAVAGE AND VIOLENT ANIMALS PRODUCE FEW OFFSPRING. <sup>1</sup>*

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett describes how, in his observations of the natural world, Darwin anthropomorphised worms: he saw in them “an intelligence and a wilfulness that he recognised as related to his own”. Paying close attention to their mundane activities on a daily basis “He was able to detect what natural historians call the “jizz” of a worm: “the unique combination of properties that allows its ready identification and differentiation from others”.<sup>2</sup>

Maybe this is too much of a mental leap, but this passage from the book, a key reference to Herresthal’s work, made me think of Jochen Klein’s small sculptures (*Untitled*, 1990), that feature worm-like creatures and reenact such methods of “experiments or an investigation of a scientific principle using models”.<sup>3</sup> In a way Klein’s small anthropomorphised models, wrapped like dolls in ecru nettle handmade clothes -almost as if bandaged-, break similarities across categorical divides and light up “structural parallels between material forms in “nature” and those in “culture” ”,<sup>4</sup> that are somehow analogous to our renowned playboy bunny.



Jochen Klein, *Untitled*, 1990

*A TOUCH OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM CAN CATALYSE A SENSIBILITY THAT FINDS A WORLD FILLED NOT WITH ONTOLOGICALLY DISTINCT CATEGORIES OF BEINGS (SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS) BUT WITH VARIOUSLY COMPOSED MATERIALITIES THAT FORM CONFEDERATIONS.*<sup>5</sup>

Anthropomorphising, the interpretation of what is not human or personal in terms of human or personal characteristics<sup>6</sup>, appears too as a motif in the paintings of Livia Avianus, in which pristine depictions of rabbits are uncannily put in dialogue with comical and hideous figures that remind us of human-goat hybrids, perhaps obscene fauns or satyrs, portrayed in the act of kidnapping. These creatures are paired with ornamental patterns that at times contain animals themselves and occasionally emerge on the canvas.

Susanne Herresthal's paintings play out with similar ambiguity, combining, in her words, the ugliness of particular colours in such a way as to metaphorically unveil "contradictions that really exist in the world", breaking our ways of seeing. Almost playing hide and seek, rabbits' body details are concealed and alternate within flower-like abstractions, absorbed by blurred surfaces of mixed colours.



Piece by Virginia Overton | photographed in 2018

During our conversation, Susanne emphasised the central role that the notion of materialism—as opposed to minimalism—plays in her and Livia's practice, and mentioned the work of Jane Bennett as a prominent point of reference. Bennett traces the history of Western thought on vibrant matter through different philosophers who attempted to name the "vital force" inherent in material forms. She focused on the resulting political and theoretical implications of vital materialism, in which vital matter is often found in the most commonplace things.

*IN A VITAL MATERIALISM, AN ANTHROPOMORPHIC ELEMENT IN PERCEPTION CAN UNCOVER A WHOLE WORLD OF RESONANCES AND RESEMBLANCES—SOUNDS AND SIGHTS THAT ECHO AND BOUNCE FAR MORE THAN WOULD BE POSSIBLE WERE THE UNIVERSE TO HAVE A HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE. WE AT FIRST MAY SEE ONLY A WORLD IN OUR OWN IMAGE, BUT WHAT APPEARS NEXT IS A SWARM OF "TALENTED" AND VIBRANT MATERIALITIES (INCLUDING THE SEEING SELF).<sup>7</sup>*

Virginia Ariu, 2022





Antonio Pisano, gen. Pisanello, *Allegory of Luxuria (recto)*, c. 1426

1 Herodotus, *Histories*, 3.108.2-4

2 Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press. "Lorimer, Nonhuman Charisma. Lorimer notes that "jizz" has affinities with what Deleuze and Guattari term "a 'singularity' – the congealing of a particular mode of individuation" ". In scientific terms, "jizz" is the immediately recognisable characteristics of a bird or other organism.

3 Jochen Klein (2011) *Pinakothek Der Moderne*, Hatje Cantz, as written by Bernhart Schwenk p.7-13

4 Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press.

5 Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press.

6 Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press.

7 Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press.

Thanks to Yannic Joray for our dialogues and enriching comments