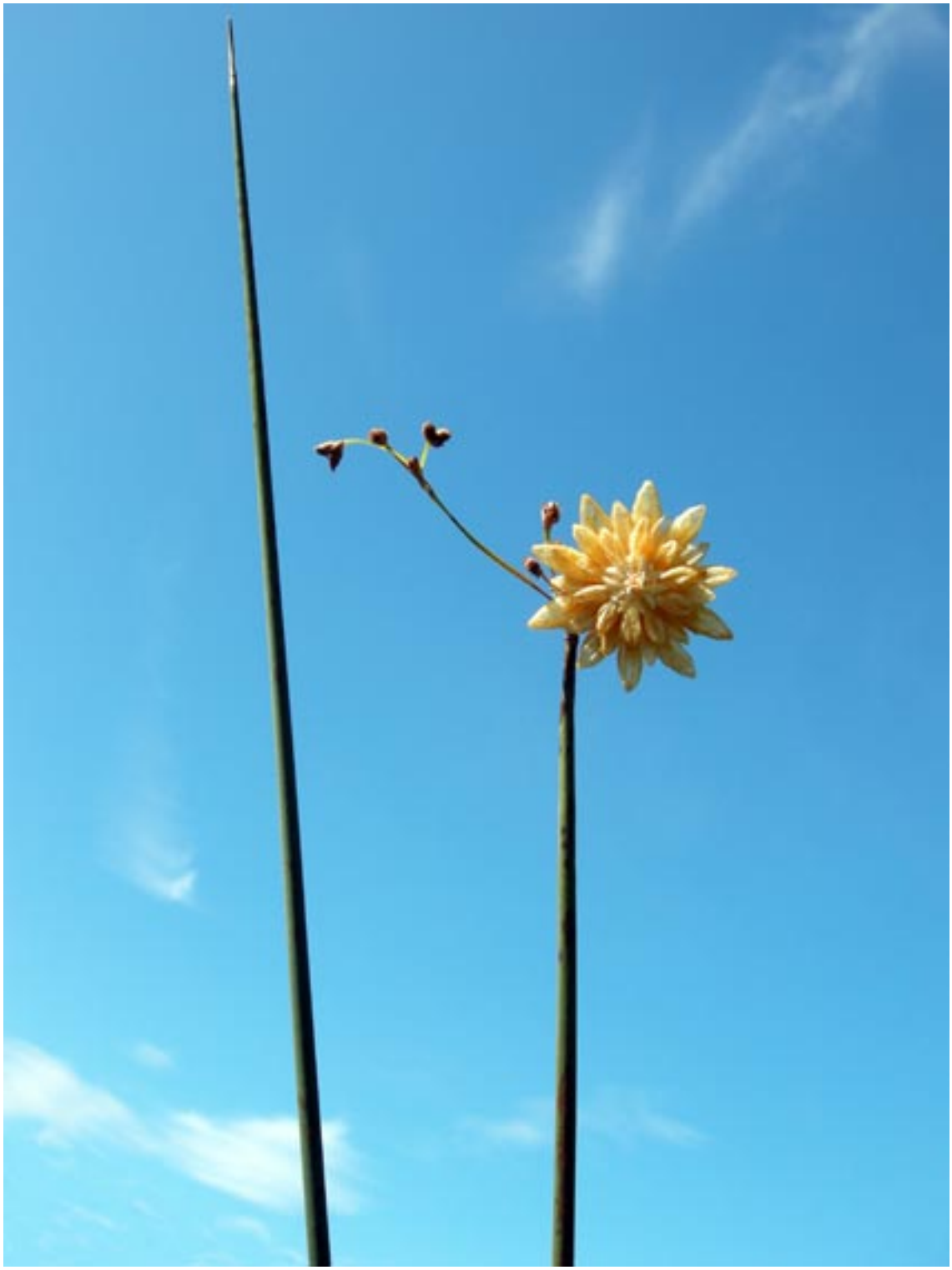

MUSÉE TALKS TO HEIDE HATRY

In her latest work, *Not A Rose*, Heide Hatry, a New-York based visual and performance artist, puts the most grotesque and more importantly overlooked components of our natural world in the most beautiful arrangements feasible. Her work is quietly shocking, yet humble and subdued, very similar to her attitudes toward her work and the ideas it entails. She has much to say about the themes presented in her work, those being flesh, flesh as a commodity, the female body, and nature. It's clear in her work and the words that follow that she not only wants to say something, but she is, in fact, saying it. In Heide Hatry's words, "It's the wanting to say it, not the impossible hope of its being true, that is at the heart of beauty." The German-born, self-proclaimed feminist and provocateur took the time to sit down with Musee to talk about ethics, animals, art, flesh, Carolee Schneeman, prostitution and the ever-shifting medium of photography and the role it plays in her work and performances.

You have been working with interactive technology. How does that shape the connection your work has with the viewer? What benefits and drawbacks have you found working with new media in that regard?

The primary interactive technology I have worked with is the book, though I have certainly done that in a different way and to a greater extent from the pre-printing-process production side than has been typical of its history. My principal bodies of work have all been collaborative conceptual projects that took the form of books, and the way I have worked with my collaborators has evolved from one project to the next.

I have, here and there, used something more like what I expect you actually mean, which is some way of bringing the viewer into the work as a collaborator. Much though I accept that the work of art really does not belong to the artist but to its audience, I fear that I do not hold out much hope that meaningful collaboration of this sort is possible: when you open a work up to the intervention of the ordinary man on the street (or in the

gallery), what you tend to get is ordinary responses, and that tends to make for uninspired art.

How do you feel your exploitation of animal flesh relates to that of the New York consumer culture you inhabit?

Although in most of its connotations, I'd tend to take issue with your use of the word "exploitation," I do appreciate that it conveys a sense of thoroughness, of exhausting the potential of a resource; at the same time, the "resource" in question is exactly what I, and it, are intent upon questioning. The animal flesh I use in my work consists pretty much entirely of the rejectamenta of an industrial process, the commercially scorned oddments that have not found a place in the normal process of exploitation. They arise from within it, but endure only as refuse, and now I have found a place for them precisely from which to criticize the universal exploitation, which they do somehow by their very existence.

Do you feel photography in the 21st century needs to be provocative in order to grasp the increasingly desensitized viewer?

I have mixed feelings on that issue. On the one hand, the world is certainly so full of images that the general tendency has been to make them ever more provocative in one way or another in order that they will stand out among so much visual pollution. We get the idea that it is necessary to make one's own images different and provocative just to compete, and that's happened frantically for quite a long time. On the other, I do not really see this as a necessary process at all, and I think it reflects a false value system that we have bought into pretty much unreflexively, but whose momentum is formidable once it's gotten going. In my own work, I do tend to want to arrest my viewer, sometimes with a disturbing image, so as to bring her mind into the sphere of its ideas, where they will have to fend for themselves, but there's a difficult balance to strike, as a viewer will just turn away from an image that is too painful to contemplate.

How does your process differ when using yourself as a subject as working with others?

Using myself is more intimate, emotional, and intense. When I'm working alone I can, and want to, go to the very edge of the unbearable. I can connect

myself, for example, with odor, to the point where I have to vomit. In one project I worked with a dead baby, and the feelings I endured were so intense that I had to cry during the whole process. I have done things that were so disgusting that I couldn't stop shaking for quite a long time after I finished, or which are so deeply disturbing that I will never even tell anybody about them. When I'm working with others the process is more intellectual, even if difficult subjects are still in play.

How important is the temporary nature of the media with which you work? In what ways does that change when you photograph these subjects?

On the one hand, the ephemeral quality of my objects is not really essential to them as works of art. If I could determine a process of preserving them in a way that satisfied me, I would very happily have them still around me – and here and there I have done that. On the other, maybe that is a way of being essential: like Goethe I want to say, Verweile doch! Du bist so schön! And of course, nothing can stay, so the fact that they have disintegrated makes them stand on an equal footing with all of creation, making them poignant in a way that a more enduring work of art is not. It's the wanting to say it, not the impossible hope of its being true, that is at the heart of beauty.

Capita piscium dessicata, media pars ophiuridae, Beijing, China 2011

How do you feel the concept of "flesh as commodity" has evolved through technological advances, particularly the Internet?

The internet is the greatest thing that ever happened to the flesh trade, from the trade standpoint, if not the flesh, making it simultaneously possible to reach every possible customer in the world, and blurring lots of legal boundaries that would have impeded traffic once upon a time. It has also emboldened every creep in the world to come forward in some way or another with its simultaneous aura of privacy, as well as helping develop the creep in many for whom it would otherwise have lain dormant. At the same time, the lusts it has aroused or fanned tend to be exhausted within the technological medium itself, so the flesh it is actually peddling is predominantly virtual.

As a feminist, I have mixed feelings about it all. Although I am discomfited by the thought of such vast numbers of young women working as virtual prostitutes, as if sex were the only, or at least the predominant, commodity we women have to offer the market. I do see prostitution and pornography as a potentially efficacious wedge in the entrenched edifice of marriage, and the individual contractor model the internet permits as a way of circumventing the white-slavery/pimp model of prostitution that has taken the "means of production" from the hands of prostitutes in the past. If I could abolish marriage or prostitution, there's no question which I'd choose.

You recently held a discussion at MoMA PS1 on your work and the ethics of animals and art. What specific questions of ethics are you trying to evoke with your recent work, "Not A Rose?"

The principal ethical issue I address in *Not a Rose* is the human exploitation of animals, and of nature in general. Not so much *that* we exploit nature, since that's our nature, but how we do it and the extent to which we are even aware of what we, as a vast network of beings, structures, and processes, are doing in any individual act of consumption. The effort of my work is to make people think about what they are doing, what is supporting the way they live, and to what extent the hidden violence, degradation, and slaughter should concern them. We see animal products as no less innocent or appealing than the flower, and the fact is that even the flower is not so innocent: we plunder the environment to produce millions and millions of them as frivolous commodities every day.

The titles of your work appear to be very developed, especially in "Not A Rose." What was your process in creating these new taxonomical names?

I wanted these flowers to look convincing, and I thought if they have Latin botanical names, nobody will doubt that they were real, at least not at first glance, where, tactically, this would be important. They'd be more likely to think they are exotic and for that reason they must never have come across them before.

I studied the old techniques of biological taxonomy and realized that before Linneus simplified everything with his binomial nomenclature, things were quite complicated: a so-called polynomial nomenclature was used in naming flowers, so that everything you needed to know about a particular flower was right there in its name. I embraced the older technique, because I could translate every single part I used to make the flower into Latin, creating polynomial names, so that the viewer could discover every single part I used and from what animal it came. If you're going to name a work, the name should enrich it and open new dimensions for thinking about it.

How does the inherent notoriety in working in the BioArt landscape frame your body of work? Do you ever feel limited by stylistic constraints, either in media or subject discourse?

Although I have been working with biological materials for almost ten years now, it's far from the only medium that interests me or in which I work. I do have a close sense of the body as the fundamental unit of human meaning, so I suppose that my work in various media is still intimately related to what I'm doing with animal materials, but I've never felt limited either in myself or in how my work is viewed because of that choice. Even for viewers who think: oh, she's that artist who uses pigskin, I've never gotten the feeling that their relationship to the work stops there. They understand that there's a lot more under the surface than on it.

As to stylistic constraints: the reason I came to biological materials was precisely to overcome constraints I felt in more traditional media, and if I should ever begin to feel that my material has become a limiting factor in my work, I'll move on to something else.

In what way would you like your art to be remembered, in relation to shaping the history of feminist photography?

As a general matter, I don't think I'm working within that lineage, but more along the lines of early performance artists who used photography as a means of making their work last longer than the moment of its passage. It's never simple documentation, I don't think, but it's not really governed by the concerns of photographic art either. We're stepping into that realm and appropriating what it offers in the way of capturing time to suggest the trajectory of the time that the individual image has not captured. I like it that some of my individual images are self-sufficient, but their primary meaning is as part of larger conceptual projects. Of course, these larger structures are much harder to keep in mind as a whole, like books in general, and start to dissolve into scenes and passages and characters, just by virtue of the nature of memory. I suppose that means that I want my viewers to remember that, in my work, photography is a means and not an end: I fear that a lot of my images would be too conservative to have much effect on the history of photography.

Carolee Schneemann has been a significant influence upon your conceptual route. What draws you to her process and role in feminist art?

For me, Carolee Schneemann is the first woman artist in history to specifically address the full range of feminine experience in her art and to inhabit the space of art as a female human being. It's as if she alone awakened from the collective drug-induced sleep of women (perhaps like Sleeping Beauty) and saw the world unencumbered by the patriarchal lens. And then, unlike many strong women who might have understood the same things throughout history, she spoke about it. And she didn't back down when she was hated, reviled, or ignored, nor did she capitulate to the blandishments of fame or wealth.

Spisulae solidissimae sculptiles, pars conchae luteae, New York, NY 2011

What new photographers interest you and why?

My focus, again, is not on photography per se, but on art more generally. When photography becomes powerful art, then I'm completely engaged. Of course, photography has other merits as well, and even work that just brings strange images before us, or makes what we see, or think we see, everyday strange again, then I love it. I'm very partial to Sally Man's dead people, Jeffy Bleyer's organs, Manabu Yamanaka's old women, Matthias Kessler's fat women in rice milk, Jill Greenberg apes, Bettina Rheims's animals. I find it fascinating when artists make a new reality.

You have a strong connection to literature, from your love of rare books, to work with authors like Jonathan Safran Foer. How does your connection to literary art shape your visual art?

Literature keeps working on the mind long after one has read a book, in deep and subtle ways. I don't know that I would say that I feel my visual work has been demonstrably affected by my reading, but the processes by which literature keeps returning to one's thought represent a model for me in my work. I've always tried to give it narrative components, making it stretch back into a past and to resolve or fail to resolve itself over a course of development (I mean within the work itself, not in the process of making it). I also recognize that one of the great merits of literature is that it does not normally specify a reading or a fundamental position on its materials, or when it tries to, the natural processes of dissemination undermine what it thinks it's conveying, so it is always complex and unresolved; there is always a new interpretation or inherently conflicting interpretations, much as in interpersonal relations. There is a proverb that says that when another person enters the room, the truth slips out. And a corollary that says that only when everyone is in the room can it come back. I want whatever truth my work can be said to embody to be as all-encompassing, and as complex as that of literature. For me it is the essence of the Gesamtkunstwerk that I'm always trying to achieve.

Could you describe the optimal environment for viewing your work? How can different situations shape the way your work is interpreted, from traditional galleries to your artist's books?

The *Heads and Tales* project would have been perfect in a morgue, or a

refrigerated room, where every woman would have lain on a metal table ready to be viewed. The *Not a Rose* project would be great in a greenhouse. It may actually be shown in a natural history museum, and that would also be good. *Skin* worked well in a museum context, especially when I hired models to impersonate some of my heteronyms during the opening or at performances that were part of the run of the show. In some fundamental way, though, exhibition is not the way that my work needs to be understood: the books I've made are not just documentations of a process that has concluded before they've appeared in print, but rather they *are* the work of art, and not as an object but as a conceptual and emotional space they open up for the attentive viewer. Of course, there are aspects of the work that cannot enter the book except through the imagination, and often these performative or time-based sculptural dimensions no longer exist. So, I fear that there's not a perfect way to bring in all of the aspects that the work includes.

Does the reception of your work differ when exhibiting in Europe than the United States?

The reception is of course always a very individual thing, but, overall, people react in a quite similar way everywhere. If there is a difference that I can see, it might be that in US people are a bit more squeamish and less interested in entering deeper into the work, but I'm not really sure I can generalize that. However, I might take my experience with PETA as an example:

In the US they wanted to shut down my exhibitions, while in Germany PETA became my media sponsor. I have the impression that in South America or Asia, people are more open regarding the material I use: it's not so hidden from ordinary experience as in the US. In fact, in Asia the normal viewer seems to especially love my flowers and couldn't care less that they are made of animal parts, but rather think that makes them more interesting.

With the ever-increasing availability of photography, how do you feel the landscape will change, and how are you evolving as a result?

To me the fact that everyone is a photographer nowadays merely speaks to the decreasing power and relevance of the photographic image. That means that photographers must enter their work much more powerfully and

thoughtfully than ever before if they want it to have an effect on viewers, or to be seen at all. The essential difference is always between a mindless activity and one in which thought and feeling have been expended. Photography as a medium has always had a hard time producing works of art, but the way in which it has done that historically has not been through extraordinary measures, but through extraordinary vision: actually seeing the world, and what is behind its mere surfaces. My own strategy is unaffected by this trend, but then my relationship to photography isn't quite the same as that of most photographers.

Spisulae solidissimae, cilia cervorum, oesophagus capreae, Cervi, Dallas, TX 2011

Do you feel your work is inherently violent? Has that shifted as you have grown as an artist?

No, I don't feel that my work is violent; if anything, probably rather the opposite. I put things together, things which certainly came into my hands because violence, especially violence that is hidden, is part of the world, but then I turn that violent history into some sort of disturbing beauty. The violence remains a part of the work, as is appropriate, but its motivation is not violence.

What challenges did you face in merging plant and animal flesh in creating "Not A Rose?" How did your experience differ compared to working creating human faces from flesh in "Heads and Tales?"

The two projects are intimately related. It was in observing the reaction of viewers to the images I made for *Heads and Tales* that I got the idea for *Not a Rose*. If people can look at images and think they are intriguing and then find them abhorrent when they've learned what they're made of, it seemed to me that it might be possible to draw some conclusions about how our knowledge of what we're seeing affects our aesthetic response to the world – and I even wanted to go farther and apply the same to our moral views, especially regarding the mass slaughter of animals for human consumption. So, I decided to make objects that looked like something that is universally regarded as beautiful and pleasant out of material that is almost universally regarded as loathsome and which we do everything possible to keep out of sight.

The technical and practical challenges in *Not a Rose* were mainly in procuring the material: a cow vagina or a sheep's penis are not so easy to obtain, especially since the meat production industry really tries to hide the "humanizing" elements of its victims. For *Heads and Tales* I was much more concerned with creating images that bespeak real human qualities, and that's always extremely difficult, regardless of medium.

How do you envision feminist photography and performance art evolving in years to come? What, in your mind, shapes these changes?

What shapes the way feminist art is made is always what is wrong with the world, and the things that are right with the world that are neglected by the

structures that control it. I think women will dare to go closer and closer to the edge, challenging their fears and experience, and gradually they will be heard by men as well. Art is, historically, the vanguard of thinking, and the ideas it brings into being eventually filter into society at large, much in the way that Carolee Schneemann anticipated pretty much all of the important ideas of Second Wave Feminism in her art. I expect female artists to change the world.

How powerful is the depiction of the flower in the history of art? How does that relate to the depiction of the female body?

Flower Power is a bit of a contradiction in terms, but the power there is is a subtle one, much as in nature, where the flower exerts an attraction on insects who, as a consequence, do the sexual bidding of the plant. In art history, the flower has often served a subtle emblematic purpose, and even in the hands of its greatest exponents, like Nolde or Gaugin, it remains rather peripheral to the concerns of power, but it does often underline the fact that the ephemeral is all there is, and this is certainly a potent thought. That said, the depiction of flowers do not particularly interest me as an artist, even though I'm a passionate lover of flowers in my ordinary life. I loved the colors of Ernst Nay, but even him and other artists like van Gogh or Andy Warhol, I find rather boring. On the other hand, I find Marc Quinn's work, or Mat Coleslaw's wilting flowers amazingly touching. For me the connection of flowers to the female genitalia is not especially evocative as an art idea, even though I think the morphological similarities are intriguing. I never found Georgia O'Keefe's work all that interesting even before she agreed with the critics that there might be a connection. I would not, however, be shocked to learn that the similarity has somehow sustained a moribund genre much longer than I would have expected, if it were possible to ascertain such things, that is.

Photos Courtesy of Heide Hatry,

May 7, 2013

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