

Surrealism and Hybrid (Psycho-) Morphologies

Donna Roberts

The current exhibition, *Against Nature: the Hybrid Forms of Modern Sculpture*, draws our attention to the fact that hybridity is a central theme for the modern condition, and that the theme of hybridity in art has for over a hundred years been in some way a reflection of the changing nature of human subjectivity in the modern age. Hybridity has been the theme of a number of exhibitions of recent years which have explored the notion, its attractions and anxieties, from the perspective of contemporary sculpture, installation, and digital media. The unsettling and uncanny character of, for example, Thomas Grünfeld's hybrid creatures or Stelarc and Nina Sellar's 'Blender'¹, a mixture of the artist's bodily fluids, fats, and nervous tissue, are examples of recent explorations of hybridity which suggest concerns with cloning and the kind of uber-Cartesian mind-body duality that current technology seems to promise. Such themes are now at the forefront of broad contemporary interests in the implications of technological advancement for the shifting boundaries of species identification and human self-consciousness, and yet, as the historical weight of this exhibition shows, such concerns with hybridity are in no way exclusive to the internet age.

In this paper I would like primarily to discuss the *idea* of hybridity as it was explored in surrealist thought, not only however through art but also through a kind of hybrid psychological identification that developed within surrealism via archaic natural or modern technological phenomena. I want to look at how we might see the surrealists' concerns with hybridity as a force that could transgress strict boundaries of identity with potentially subversive and yet also deeply anxious consequences. The particular modern conditions of surrealism have a strong background of hybridity, and I would like to touch

¹ *Blender*, 2005, by Stelarc and Nina Sellars contains the bodily fluids and fat of the artists, extracted through liposuction. It stands as a 1.6 metres high, somewhat anthropomorphic structure, which every few minutes automatically circulates and blends its contents via a system of compressed air pumps. The mixture includes 4.6 litres of subcutaneous fat taken from Stelarc's torso and Nina Sellar's limbs, local anaesthetic, adrenalin, oxygen and blood, sodium bicarbonate, peripheral nerves, saline solutions and connective tissue. The work was first exhibited at the Meat Market Gallery B, Melbourne, August 2005.

upon certain elements of this background, which include the Darwinian and Freudian model of the human-animal, the accelerating reality of the modern technologised human, and the peculiar surrealist adaptation of Henri Bergson's distinction between instinct and intelligence within a fantasy of the insect-human hybrid.

Secondly, I would like to discuss certain examples from the history of surrealism and indeed its legacies that reflect a broad interest in hybridity as arguably a further manifestation of the notion of the marvellous. This is a category that is inherently characterised by its blurred boundaries. It has its origins in natural philosophy and pre-scientific discourse, and yet has been translated quite prominently in recent academic debates around surrealism through a specifically psychoanalytic discourse relating to the uncanny.

Whilst I find this compelling, I also feel that something of that playful and Baroque character of surrealist hybridity becomes lost in the wake of this strident discourse, and I would like, therefore, to finish by looking at the objects of two Czech artists, Jan Švankmajer and František Skála, who I think work very strongly with the theme of hybridity as variously subversive, playful and poetic. I may be stretching the argument a bit, but what I would like to try do is bridge a highly anxious conception of hybridity, that concerns an often violent conflict of the natural and the cultural, with a far more playful interest in hybridity, which draws on the blurring of the categories of the natural and the cultural that is inherent to an old notion of the marvellous which surrealism inherits.

The fears and seductions of hybridity did not, of course, originate in the period covered by this exhibition, and are indeed as old as civilisation itself, attested to by the totemic imagination that informs mythological thought. In fact, an explicit concern with hybridity seems to reflect a certain crisis of consciousness in any given age; that crisis representing a kind of dawning consciousness of the turn of events wrought by progress; whether that be the discovery of flint or the creation of the internet. The first cave paintings, for example, reveal how the advent of the social human is figured through an uncomfortable distinction between man and animal: as Georges Bataille has shown, a distinction wherein the strictly human is derided as comic and impotent in relation to the superior

grace and force of its prey. The possibility that some of this bestial power might be harnessed has obviously long held an immensely alluring appeal for the human imagination. Although not entirely superseded, this fantasy of hybridity has developed within relatively modern civilisation into one in which the organic weaknesses inherent to the human might be overcome through technological advancement.

As Donna Haraway famously argued in her 'Cyborg Manifesto' in the late 1980s, our recent culture's avatar of hybridity, the cyborg, is, despite its technological character, in fact an extension of human animality: 'The cyborg,' she writes, 'appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed.'² For Haraway, the cyborg is a powerful modern monster which contains within it all manner of transgressive possibilities for the expansive *political* realm of subjectivity. Like all previous mythical hybrids, the cyborg poses certain social and ontological problems for entrenched and insidiously 'naturalising' ideologies, relating for example to race, nation, gender, sexuality and class: 'A cyborg exists,' she writes, 'when two kinds of boundaries are simultaneously problematic: firstly, that between animals (or other organisms) and humans, and secondly, that between self-controlled, self-governing machines (automatons) and organisms, especially humans (which are models of autonomy). The cyborg is the figure born of the interface of automaton and autonomy.'³

This cyborg figure, then, is born out of the biological and technological advancements of the late nineteenth century, and emerges in its early form in the age immediately preceding surrealism. It can be identified in the mechanomorphic figures of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, such as the various manifestations of Duchamp's 'Bride' and Picabia's 'Girl Born without a Mother'. These works conflate the human organic with the mechanical through the kind of black humour that was so typical of their work, and yet which belies exactly how well-attuned they were to the implications of technological progress and its ensuing anxiety. Two works included in this exhibition, Jacob Epstein's 'Rock Drill' and Umberto Boccioni's 'Unique Forms of Continuity in

² Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the late Twentieth-Century,' in *Simians Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, 1991), p. 152.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 138-9.

Space’, can be seen as two of the first sculptural manifestations of the cyborg phenomena; in turn revealing the attractions and anxieties represented by the growing reality of the technologised human. The power of these works arises in part from that crisis of consciousness that is signified by hybridity and the stretching of the boundaries of the human that is an ongoing process within civilisation. They represent a cold hard punctum within a civilisation enamoured with its growing mastery over the organic realm, suffused with the dream of speed and grace and yet also encumbered with the uncertainty of where *exactly* it is going so swiftly.

Art historians like Hal Foster have convincingly argued that surrealism itself was born as a kind of hybrid movement triggered by the traumatic events of the First World War.⁴ Foster writes of how surrealist thought is characterised in fact by hybridity; and he pares the central concern of surrealism down to an obsession with ambivalence, reading the seemingly inscrutable surrealist notion of the marvellous in terms of the Freudian uncanny. Thus Foster reads the rather hazy definition of the marvellous presented by Breton in the ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’ – as pertaining to that character found in mannequins and ruins – in terms of the ambiguous nature of the uncanny: those things that blur the boundaries of the organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate, and the rupture of the present by an outmoded past. The phenomenon of the simultaneity of opposites, or at least of disparate elements, is of primacy to surrealism, and the kind of blurring of boundaries that is represented by hybridity is central not only to surrealism’s poetic transformation of the world, but also to its broadly political ambitions. In a world of increasing ideological stricture around national, racial, and gender identities, it seemed surrealism’s moral duty to go against the grain of potentially every fixed notion promoted by contemporary regimes.

Donna Haraway’s argument concerning the political potential of the subject that is inherent to the hybridity of the cyborg, what she calls ‘the promise of monsters’, is something that the surrealists recognised a long time ago in relation to hybridity, and is something which they have practised in all manner of ways in their assault on received ideas; whether that be in the hybridity of a collective identity practised in surrealist games

⁴ See Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

– such as the Exquisite Corpse – or more simply in the very international ambitions of the movement.

While hybridity does present a transgressive allure for surrealism, it evidently also strikes a chord of deep-rooted anxiety. One of the achievements that surrealism can lay claim to is an acute sensitivity to the unconscious currents of its epoch. The surrealists grasped the immediate impact and potential significance of new creative technologies, such as photography and film, and they delighted in highlighting the latent content of popular cultural manifestations. The various spreads in the surrealist periodicals of the 1930s reflect numerous popular fascinations with hybridity. For example, the double images of postcards published in ‘Minotaure’ in 1933 reflect the surrealists’ concerns with paranoia and the projections of desire that make of the world a constant mix of subject and object; and the article by Benjamin Peret in the same issue of ‘Minotaure’,⁵ as well as the photographic spreads in the Belgian review ‘Variétés’, March 1929, reflect the major anxiety presented by the hybrid of human and machine. The anxious face of this hybrid no doubt arises from its powerful appearance as a spectre of war, and yet it also represents the fear of a potential enslavement to utility that is variously expressed in contemporary culture, from Fritz Lang’s film ‘Metropolis’, 1927, to Charlie Chaplin’s ‘Modern Times’, 1936. The former film, however, reflects an anxiety that would be central to surrealism, with the demonic and duplicitous robot Maria representing the bogeywoman of modernity as a creation of male scientific mastery turned into a seductive and threatening automaton, not unlike the doll in Hoffman’s tale ‘The Sandman’, which becomes so central to Freud’s essay on the Uncanny.

As Hal Foster has observed, this paradigm of the uncanny pops up in various guises in the early twentieth century as part of the modern myth of the machine and modernity’s ambivalent relation to it, thus expressed in terms of mastery and loss of control, desire and dread. As I will discuss, it takes on a peculiar evolutionary turn with surrealism’s obsession with the hybrid psychological and morphological identification with the terrifying behaviour and appearance of the praying mantis.

⁵ See Paul Eluard, ‘Les Plus belles cartes postales,’ and Peret ‘Au Paradis des fantômes,’ *Minotaure*, 3-4, 1933.

It is surrealism's timely perspicacity that enabled it to highlight the fears evoked by mechanical hybridity that stem from an Enlightenment metaphor of man as machine to a twentieth-century fear of man as becoming merely a prosthetic of an endless production line of uniformity. Although surrealist art certainly did explore hybridity in the plastic realm, surrealist creative practice cannot be restricted to plastic production, but rather takes much of its force from the critical spotlight that it shines on all aspects of culture. Although I am talking in the context of an exhibition of sculpture, I cannot, however, underestimate the importance of Surrealist interpretative strategies in identifying hybridity as a constant psychological fixation relating to deep social and ontological concerns about what exactly it is to be human: a notion that had, only relatively recently to the development of surrealism, shifted dramatically with the establishment of evolutionary fact and its consequent development through Freudian theory. Surrealism, then, developed in a culture in which the boundaries between human and animal and human and machine were undergoing major changes owing to the advancements in biology and technology.

With the influence of Freud's Darwinian psychoanalysis, the surrealists' interest in the mythical and poetic force of metamorphosis and hybridity takes on a vital psychological force, whereby the beast within is broken down into the relationship between drives, their fantastical or real satisfaction, and the social obstacles or prohibitions to their fulfilment. This is, perhaps, what best distinguishes the surrealists' interest in hybridity from their Symbolist precursors. In Symbolism, the transformation of forms has a poetic logic that is renewed in surrealism, as seen in the works of Hans Arp and André Masson for example, and yet this is developed in surrealism *alongside* the recognition of the natural world as determined by merciless drives and instincts that pose the sort of anti-social threat that is insufficiently represented by what had long become the humanist gloss upon classical mythology. One of the most recurrent tropes of hybridity within surrealism is perhaps the Minotaure, as depicted in the numerous images, for example by Masson, Picasso and Man Ray, reproduced inside or on the cover of the periodical 'Minotaure'. The mytho-poetic character of this hybrid beast in his labyrinth is certainly not lost with surrealism,

but it does nonetheless take on a more explicitly biological and psychological resonance against the backdrop of Freudian and Darwinist thought.

Despite its resonance as a hybrid of bestial appetite and psychological profundity, the Minotaure figure is arguably picturesque in relation to the terrifying phantasmagorical sense of hybridity that the surrealists saw represented by the praying mantis. The mythical force of this creature became an obsession for numerous surrealists, including André Breton, Paul Eluard, Max Ernst, Michel Leiris, and perhaps most importantly, Roger Caillois, and Salvador Dalí, and we can perhaps distinguish its force from that of the Minotaur by observing that its hybridity is all the more powerful for its being seen as part of the *real* rather than the imaginary world. As Roger Caillois observed, such creatures allow us to ‘presume the existence of an underlying imaginary that is part of the real.’⁶ The praying mantis enters frequently into surrealist art and writing; it was the subject of Caillois’ 1934 article ‘The Praying Mantis: From Biology to Psychoanalysis;’⁷ it played a huge part in Dalí’s reverie upon Millet’s ‘L’Angélu’⁸ as well as appearing to him as a paranoiac sculpture within the organic designs of Hector Guimard’s entrances to the Paris Metro. In addition it appeared to Michel Leiris to present a terrifying equivalence between human and insect species through its castrating and murderous behaviour. The mantis was seen by Leiris, for example, as a natural analogy for the biblical figure of Judith as depicted by Lucas Cranach.⁹

For Caillois, Dalí and Leiris in particular, the lyrical and psychological force of this creature comes exactly from the dual nature of its anthropomorphism: that it is associated with both love and violence owing to the fact that the female mantis devours the male during copulation. Thus, the violent character of the insect is implicitly inverted in Alberto Giacometti’s 1932 bronze sculpture, ‘Woman with her Throat Cut’. In general, the mantis is a creature which strongly provokes that aspect of the surrealist imagination

⁶ Roger Caillois, ‘The Natural Fantastic,’ in Claudine Frank (ed.), *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader* (Durham and London, 2003), p. 357. Originally published in Caillois, *Cases d’un échiquier* (Paris, 1970).

⁷ ‘La Mante religieuse,’ *Minotaure* 5 (1934), pp. 23-6.

⁸ See *Le Mythe tragique de l’Angélu de Millet, Interpretation “paranoïaïque-critique”*, c. 1932 (Paris, 1963).

⁹ See Leiris, *L’âge d’homme* (Paris, 1939).

which finds an immense lyrical force in hybridity; and not only because the insect bears a physical resemblance to the human, but also because it provokes a distant sense of recognition and kinship within the instinctual recesses of the surrealist mind. While it resembles an apparently serene human figure posing, as if kneeling at prayer, the insatiable mechanical drives within the female towards reproduction and nourishment represent the violence of instinctual behaviour that, within the Darwinian-Freudian model, are seen to lurk within some elemental corner of human evolutionary history that is recapitulated in each individual life. ‘The essential thing’ about the mantis, argues Caillois, is not in fact that it resembles a person at prayer, but rather that it resembles a sexual posture: ‘of all the insects,’ he writes, it is the mantis ‘whose form most reminds one of a human form, mainly because of the resemblance of its rapacious legs to human arms. As for its ordinary purpose, it is not that of someone praying, as common consensus would have us believe (one does not pray lying on one’s stomach), but that of a man making love. This alone is enough to justify an obscure and constant identification.’¹⁰

Caillois saw the mantis as one creature amongst a small number that he distinguished as part of the ‘natural fantastic’, and which included creatures that, although entirely natural, have a peculiar hybrid appearance. These included the death’s head moth, with its skull insignia, the lantern fly, with its proboscis shaped like an alligator’s head, a particular trapdoor spider with uncanny Aztec-like markings, and the sea horse, not because it resembles so much a horse, but rather, the horse in a chess set. For Caillois such creatures all seem to contradict reality and present a startlingly blurred boundary between nature and representation, thereby suggesting to Caillois that the human capacity to represent and play with formal resemblances are in fact not things that *distinguish* the human from the rest of creation, but, rather, are part of a general principle common to all species. This is part of Caillois’ argument for the existence of a playful and aesthetic drive within nature, which, like his argument for the existence of an instinct of self-abandonment in nature, is part of his broad polemic against the kinds of utilitarian constructions of

¹⁰ Caillois, *The Necessity of the Mind: An Analytic Study of the Mechanisms of Overdetermination in Automatic and Lyrical Thinking and of the Development of Affective Themes in Individual Consciousness* (Venice, California, 1990), p. 63. Originally published as *La Nécessité de l’esprit* (Paris, 1981).

‘naturalising’ ideologies that were being promoted by conservative, colonial and ultimately totalitarian regimes of the 1930s that used a shoddy Darwinism to justify notions of identity, preservation, selection, and destruction.

The specific case of the praying mantis, however, was something that appealed to the surrealists precisely because it seemed a living manifestation of castration anxieties; and yet with the male mantis’ mechanical impulse to copulate over-riding mortal danger, it thereby provided ancient or, as Dalí would call it, ‘atavistic’¹¹ evidence for the strength of the sexual instinct over the instinct for self-preservation. This identification of the human with an insect reveals the peculiarly hybrid character of surrealist subjectivity that, rather than primarily identify the instinctual drives with the bestial – as represented by classical hybrids like the satyr or centaur – it constructs a very modern hybrid from the identification with the insect and its specifically *mechanical* sexual instinct. Thus, the hybrids of human and animal and human and machine are condensed into the powerful image of the praying mantis through what must be seen as the Bergsonian division of instinct and intelligence. In his highly popular publication, ‘Creative Evolution’, of 1907, Bergson argued that while both categories – instinct and intelligence – were originally found in equal measure in the first life forms, their development split into two distinct evolutionary trajectories: the human representing the evolutionary heights of intelligence and insect life representing the heights of instinct. A return to the inescapable demands of instinct does, therefore, represent for the surrealists a vertiginous and terrifying involution back to a primitive stage of life, whereby a hard-won evolutionary and civilisational autonomy is replaced by senseless and deathly automation.

Again, this outlines the reason why the image of the human-insect hybrid coincides with the more widespread modern fear of the human-machine hybrid. Rosalind Krauss has described the seemingly unnatural combination of the female-machine in Hans Bellmer’s ‘Machine-Gunneress in a State of Grace’, 1937, as another manifestation of the praying mantis phenomena within surrealism. With her long limbs in a state of

¹¹ Dictionary definition of atavistic: ‘Relating to or displaying the recurrence of a genetic feature that has been absent for several generations’ or ‘relating to or displaying the kind of behaviour that seems to be a product of impulses long since repressed by society’s rules.’

repose, this heavily armoured female-machine hybrid resembles the mantis at prayer; instinctively ready at any moment, however, to continue her murderous mechanical spree.

Such hybrids – whether as a plastic manifestation or an uncanny phenomenon of the natural world – reflect how, by the 1930s, the surrealists were rooted in a vision of nature determined by violent and self-abandoning drives. Hybridity in the form of the Minotaure and the praying mantis attest to this, and yet we can see this vision of nature at the extreme pole of an axis that also connects surrealism to much earlier pre-scientific discourse, that of the early modern period, wherein the phenomena of an unsettling hybridity within nature certainly fascinated, but was more generally categorised in terms of the marvellous or the monstrous. To a greater or lesser degree, from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, such classifications were part of a discourse within natural philosophy that registered phenomena that breached boundaries and which were part of what historian of the natural sciences Paula Findlen, has called ‘paradoxes of classification.’¹² Although Hal Foster’s revision of the surrealist marvellous as the uncanny is very convincing, it does not preclude the exploration of the genealogy of the marvellous, that, like the uncanny and its inherent ambiguity, is historically rooted in an early modern sensitivity to wondrous phenomena. This is quite clear when we look at Breton’s choice of objects for his interpretation of the marvellous in his 1937 text, ‘L’Amour fou’, which he classifies in terms of ‘veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, and magic-circumstantial’: these terms expressing the very ambiguous nature of the marvellous that historically situated it as a paradox of classification. Breton discusses objects that have a peculiar ambiguity, such as coral and crystal, that blur the boundary between plant and mineral, animate and inanimate, or the mandrake root – a staple of the early modern collections of marvels – in which Breton perceives the shape of a classical sculpture of Aeneas carrying his father. In Breton’s marvellous as in Caillois’ natural fantastic, nature and representation become confused.

¹² Paula Findlen, ‘Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge: The Playfulness of Scientific Discourse in Early modern Europe,’ *Renaissance Quarterly*, No. 2 (Summer, 1990), pp. 292-331.

The blurring of a distinction between the natural and the artificial is part of the marvellous tradition that the surrealists inherited. It is obvious that the 1936 *Surrealist Exhibition of Objects* took some of its inspiration from the display strategies of the old *wunderkammer* and the Cabinets of Curiosity – with its intermingling of categories of natural, scientific, artistic, primitive, and found objects, etc. Much has been written in recent years on the highly attractive historical phenomena of the *wunderkammer* – something that seems to delight because its pre-scientific approach to taxonomy worked according to principles such as analogy and visual resemblance that might now strike us as more poetic than strictly scientific. It is, however, the *wunderkammer* that first really privileged the phenomena of hybridity – whether a hybrid of nature or a hybrid of art and nature. In their brilliant investigation of early modern natural philosophy, ‘Wonders and the Order of Nature’, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park describe the *wunderkammer* as something that ‘exploited the old opposition between art and nature to feign pleasant paradoxes and also hazard new combinations of the two that subverted the distinction altogether. It was,’ they write, ‘in such collections of rarities and marvels that art and nature first mingled and ultimately merged.’¹³ The blurring of the boundary between the natural and the artificial prompted natural philosophers to develop the concept of ‘the games of nature’ – or *lusus naturae*. According to Daston and Park again, ‘All of these [games] exploited analogies of form between natural and artificial objects. Some were hybrids of art and nature that played with analogies of form and matter,’ and they cite examples stones and minerals with image-forming patterns in them. Close to surrealist circles, Jurgis Baltrušaitis¹⁴ and Roger Caillois¹⁵ have both discussed the phenomena of pictorial stones, for example; stones that seem to present implicit analogies between the forms of nature and the forms of art, as well as examples of art following the morphological structures of nature, such as the nautilus shell goblet – the kind of hybrid artefact that plays with form and function in a not entirely dissimilar way to Dalí’s ‘Lobster Telephone’.

¹³ Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York, 2001), p. 260.

¹⁴ See Baltrušaitis, *Aberrations: Essay on the Legend of Forms* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

¹⁵ See Caillois, *The Mask of Medusa* (London, 1964). Originally published as *Méduse et cie* (Paris, 1960).

Of all the surrealists to have understood the conflict between the categories of the natural and the social, and to have worked very particularly with the relation between the marvellous, play and hybridity, it is perhaps the Czech surrealist Jan Švankmajer who has most consistently explored these themes in the plastic realm. Švankmajer has a keenly black humoured view of the monstrosity that occurs when nature and civilisation come into conflict, or the comic hybridity that ensues from their confusion, which he explores in his three-dimensional work, collages, and films. His work, however, takes into account those two poles of surrealism that reach from the anxious acknowledgment of instinct as both irrational and deadly to a ludic and playful sense of the relationship between culture and nature. Much of Švankmajer's work can, in fact, be defined as deliberately playing between culture and nature, and can be seen to take some of its force from either a blurring of the apparent boundary that exists between them or an exploitation of the ridiculous attempt to entirely separate one from the other.

Švankmajer works very consciously with the legacy of historical Prague; with the history of the *Wunderkammer* of the Emperor Rudolf II, the courtly history of magic and alchemy, and the Prague fable of the Golem - a kind of monstrous Galatea; an animated human form made from mud. This legacy has led to his constant creation of hybrids, through puppets, collages, and objects. Following his interest in the metaphorical implications of alchemy, which he refers to as 'imaginative science', Švankmajer produced a series of alchemical vessels for example, which represent the fusion of disparate elements within an ideal process of a union that produces a mythical material or psychological hybrid. His natural science cabinets and collages present a resistance of the imagination to the rules of classification, and, in a parody of Victorian empiricism, they pursue the kind of dream logic of the concrete irrational that is so productive of hybridity within surrealism. Again, with a very self-conscious sense of the Rudolfine legacy, Švankmajer works recurrently with the Mannerist antics of the court painter, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, who, as keeper of the Emperor's *wunderkammer*, produced artistic equivalents to the 'paradoxes of classification' that were so precious within contemporary natural philosophy. Fascinated with metamorphosis as a poetic principle that fuses forms, blurs the boundaries of distinct objects, and pursues an imaginative stream of

morphological resemblances, Švankmajer thus works according to what he calls the 'Arcimboldo effect'. In films, such as 'Dimensions of Dialogue' (1982), in his Arcimboldesque objects and collages, Švankmajer draws on the surrealist concern with the double or multiple image that arises from fluid, analogical, and paranoiac morphology.

Although not a member of the Czech surrealist group and in fact somewhat resistant to the surrealist label, the contemporary Czech artist František Skála nonetheless works within a similar legacy to Švankmajer, and like him works in a variety of media. Where I think Skála has a kinship with Švankmajer is not only through his use of found objects and his concerns with tactility, but also through his production of objects which again play with classificatory boundaries to produce hybrid objects. His work expresses a poetic sense for morphological resemblances and transforms found objects into whatever analogical forms are suggested by the given material; these plastic bottles becoming promenading women, for example, or an animal's jawbone becoming the arm of a record player. Skála also has an acute sense for the art historical resemblances of particular morphological patterns, and it is hard not to see his works 'In Full Sun' and 'Memento' as alluding to the fairly idiosyncratic obsessions of Dalí with crutches, organic holes and melting forms.

What I think more precisely connects Skála's work to that same legacy as Švankmajer, though, relates to the blurring of the natural and the artificial. Hybrids of these classifications abound in Skála's work and strongly suggest an over-arching interest in the production of a kind of marvellous ambiguity between the natural and the cultural. The 'Walker', for example, is an assemblage consisting of a car head lamp, sticks and organic materials, and is one of the objects that Skála made as part of his project for the Venice Biennale in 1993, when he walked from Prague to Venice over the Alps. His exhibits were objects and sketchbooks made along the way, and also included 'New Values' (a leather wallet sprouting moss shoots) and 'Brunkopf' (a felt hat filled with moss and lichen) which both reflect the substitution of the cultural values of currency and clothing by organic life. There is a tremendous sense of play in Skála's work, in which

objects of great multivalency participate in a game that works on various levels, most notably playing with questions of taxonomy and classification, with forms and materials and their cultural or historical connotations. ‘Weight of Authority’ combines a velveteen-coated prosthetic hand with a giraffe’s tooth on a bed of sea grass placed in a snakeskin box, and ‘Ship of Ancestors’ is made from a wooden ship (apparently carved by the artist’s grandfather and found in an attic), a carved wooden figure and dried fruit.

If we consider the cultural history of the art and the natural sciences in Prague, we can see Skála’s paradoxical objects – with their sense of occulted meaning, their baroque character, and their obscuring of natural and artificial delineations – as objects with an ancestral lineage to the Rudolfiner *Wunderkammer* of the Mannerist period that is so close to Švankmajer’s work and which historically underpins this fascination with the marvellous, the unclassifiable, and the hybrid. A work like ‘Dragon Hide’ (1994), for example – an animal skin affixed with carved wooden spines – provokes comparisons with Švankmajer’s hybrid natural history creatures, and both perhaps in turn recall the elaborate fakes made by the cunning virtuosi of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which were ardently collected by owners of cabinets of curiosity.

Perhaps Skála’s most accomplished hybrids are the series of heads carved from seakelp that he first made in 1992 when resident at the Headlands Centre for the Arts in California. Skála has said how he became immediately drawn to the kelp for its seemingly animate character and perceived in its suggestive form the potential for morphological manipulation. He has described the long black tubes as objects that appear to blur the classifications of plant and animal, defining them as ‘magical, something between a plant and an animal, they look like snakes from the depths.’ He took the classificatory blurring even further by reforming the anthropomorphic tips of the kelp into the shape of human heads, which he modelled on different features of ancient ethnic physiognomy in order to express the ancient remoteness in time that he felt corresponded to the evolutionary archaicism of the kelp. Skála created the kelp heads through a process of dehydration and rehydration, sculpting them with small wooden tools he had crafted specifically for the task. This process he describes in quasi-shamanistic terms, underplaying his role as an artist working on the objects from without and emphasising

the morphogenetic process of the objects' formation: 'Through drying and my intervention, their faces began to appear, and I felt like I was calling forth from past existences faces of the dead or beings from other civilisations.'

Skála's creation of these seaweed golems epitomises the drive in his work to animate the inanimate, and he further exploited the anthropomorphism of the material in an installation at the Rudolfinum Gallery, Prague, by placing the individual heads behind two opposing rows of portholes of magnified glass. The resulting affect was that on close observation of the glass, the objects resembled shrunken or mummified heads as seen behind the vitrines of an anthropological museum. However, at a greater distance, the effects of the glass caused the magnification of the heads to increase, and they thus loomed up to life-size, as if swaying underwater. These 'Seehead' objects hold for the artist such intimate traces of a singular experience of the natural environment that he in fact refuses to consider them in terms of art. Instead, they are precious souvenirs of the process of detemporalisation that the artist experienced during his residency on the ancient coastline of California. 'I do not like to call them sculptures or objects,' he has written, 'because this classifies them in terms of particular art categories by which they are then judged. I would like them to be understood as evidence of time spent in another world.' These heads, therefore, are part of Skála's personally invested collection of objects that are a kind of hybrid of souvenir, organic and sculptural form.

What I've tried to convey here then is how hybridity is a shifting signifier within surrealism and its environs, which denotes both liberation – from the boundaries of strict form and identity – and anxiety, and that the surrealists were sagely aware of how human identity has always concerned itself, whether through fear or fantasy, with hybridity, and how their particular hybrid obsessions draw together ancient and modern concerns about the loss of the human within an uncannily instinctive body. However, I also believe that hybridity is used far more broadly in surrealism as one aspect of the marvellous – that strange old category that blurs boundaries of identity, confounds classification, and makes a virtue of ambiguity.