

Taxidermic Hybrid Animals in Contemporary Art

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This paper discusses sculptures that integrate body parts of animals in a way that creates a hybrid unity. I would like to focus only on artworks that exhibit their hybrid state, artworks that declare at first sight that they are not grown but made.

Whereas a taxidermist struggles to achieve the most authentic results and any exaggeration or abnormality is frowned upon, artists today no longer aim at imitation or reproduction of a given natural form. Traditional taxidermy makes an individual specimen a mere exemplar of its species while the artworks I want to discuss create unique items. They do so by presenting the scandal of bodily hybridity.

Iris Schieferstein

For more than ten years now Berlin based sculptor Iris Schieferstein has been creating chimaera-like artefacts out of the bodies of animals, precisely in order to demonstrate that what is not, nonetheless may be. After early work consisting predominantly of individual animal hybrids which she assembled out of the bodily fragments of representatives of various species into a new and fantastical totality, there followed lettered images in which the physical bearing of her fabulous beings indicated letters which, when read in succession, formed words or entire sentences. These animal-chimaeras thereby raise the insistent question as to the degree to which something that is fundamentally natural must be manipulated in order for it to generate something artificial. Iris Schieferstein subordinates the individual animal bodies to bizarre composition, imposing her will upon the natural material. Her sculptures and installations make reference in this way to the creative potential of art and not to the natural state in which they previously existed and which itself is basically a construction.



Iris Schieferstein, 'Untitled (Letter R)', 1999. Photograph by Stephan Rabold.
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Iris Schieferstein combines traditional artisanal illusionism, extravagant stylisation and humorous subversiveness with the voyeuristic aesthetic of a Frankenstein narration in which dismemberment is the source of synthetic monstrosity. The omnipotent fantasies of a godlike creator and a lively interest in anatomy are paired with delight in the grotesque and a rich knowledge of cultural-historical resonances. Thus she revives with her corporeal narrations and situations the primal chimaeras from the intermediate realm of earth, heaven and hell. Approximately five thousand years ago, mixed beings had already emerged in ancient Eastern cultures in Mesopotamia, Egypt and India. All major world religions are familiar with hybrids, which are laden with allegorical meanings and function as part of mythological and cosmological explanation of the world. In the ancient classical world as well, and later in the Germanic cultures, chimaeras are present as representatives of ancient concepts of nature. An attempt was made by means of the myths of mixed beings to provide an explanation for the origin and purpose of the world or to make manifest repressed fantasies and fears. Chimaeras appear in the ancient 'Physiologus' and in medieval travel reports, but also in pseudo-scientific books concerning – in a double sense – the end of the world. Their appearance is often interpreted as a marvellous sign, mostly in relation to a menacing danger such as the plague, for example. The violation of norms represented at the same time an existential threat. For this reason hybrids frequently arise in cultural history during periods of turmoil and transition, and they impart visual form to fears of the demise of

the existant social order. It is no wonder, at the millenial shift between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, that Iris Schieferstein turns to the motif of the chimaera, transforms it and legitimises it in new and current matter.

The free combinatory activity that creates a new syntax is evident precisely in the objects in which animal bodies and letters become one. What is mirrored here is a set of poststructural theories concerning the body as a transformable category of history and culture. The body, understood as a text, no longer actively speaks its own language but instead becomes the passive location upon which a script is written.

Admittedly, she cuts up the bodies and divorces them from their customary context, but in spite of her creative process which is a violent procedure, the bodies do not appear deformed but remain strangely intact. Nonetheless Schieferstein sees a beauty and value in the animal cadaver that is rarely, if ever, seen elsewhere.

Paradoxically, Iris Schieferstein imbues the bodies with enhanced vitality by means of stark gestural and facial expressions. Furthermore, through careful preparation, she subjects the organic material to the technical processes that assure its preservation. The corpses behind the glass, suspended in liquid formaldehyde, cannot decay. This double resuscitation of dead bodies comes close to recalling the practice of Egyptian embalmers, in the perpetuation of humans and animals beyond death. In this context, Schieferstein's assemblages may also be read as portrayals of vanitas. On the one hand, the combinatory grotesques convey an experience of death in its ponderous finality, and on the other hand they reveal a defiant will to live. This is especially evident in her new sculptures in which she constructs human portraits out of animal fragments.



Iris Schieferstein, 'Head no. 2', 2004, detail. Photograph by Stephan Rabold.
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The series of busts gives a human likeness to animal matter. The material fits together like a three-dimensional puzzle, one that is impossible for the viewer to trace completely. Without doubt the reference for these heads is Giuseppe Arcimboldo, whose strategy was transferred into the sculptural form as early as cabinets of curiosity in the eighteenth century. Just like Arcimboldo's paintings, Schieferstein's sculptures point to the fact that amid all the grimaces of animal nature the viewer is only gazing upon what is utterly human.

I would call Schieferstein's work sculptural grotesques. In the Romantic tradition the literal form of the grotesque is a strange and often nonsensical text that combines elements of reality that do not fit together in a way that deforms and distorts without undermining the inherent coherence. The grotesque induces both empathy and disgust.

Whereas the morphological mixings in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch or in the gargoyles of Gothic cathedrals still represented visualisations of the happenings in hell, Iris Schieferstein's works exist as artistic fantasies beyond all moral implication. They resist being read either as nightmares or as beautiful utopias, but instead they reflect and relativise myths of death, the body and hybridisations.

Thomas Grünfeld

German artist Thomas Grünfeld's representations of taxidermic hybridity also play with the ancient concept of the chimaera. His series clearly refers to the popular Wolpertinger, a mythological monster that was common in cabinets of curiosity in Southern Germany and that is still found in Bavarian museums of folk history or restaurants. So one cannot help reading his hybrids as successors of the royal Wunderkammer in which these and other diverse, monstrous objects were collected and often presented with a moralistic or didactic purpose. The Wunderkammer of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe that is also called cabinet of curiosities collected all kind of obscure objects whose categorial boundaries were yet to be defined. Fake hybrid animals were often among these.

The bending of the natural order seen in these fake hybrids was conceived to be a counter-image of the divine order and was associated with the dangerous and depraved aspects of life. By means of the exhibition of such mirabilia, it was sought to ban and to control the foreign and fantastical by means of appellation and arrangement. The wunderkammer was a precursor to museums; the subjective order

of disparate objects was continuously displaced by the specialised, chronological and more rational order of modern museums. As far as taxidermy is concerned one can say that the cabinet of curiosities preferred hybrid anomalies whereas the natural history museums favoured the display of ‘the normal’.

Grünfeld does not believe in either system. He takes nature as a cultural construct that is ruled by certain ideology and he uses it as a kind of fashion. Yesterday’s Wolpertingers are today’s genetic hybrids and Grünfeld playfully adapts characteristics from both.

It is no wonder that artists subvert the natural order of the world with taxidermic hybrids and mirror not only the perversion and infraction of natural laws, but also the historicity and relativity of nature. Nowadays the chimaera as a hybrid symbiosis of morphologies that are actually separate exists in ways that are no longer myths or hallucinations. Parkinson patients with implanted brain tissue from pigs, insulin from pigs for diabetics, bulls with human genes or mice with human ears on their backs are no longer apocalyptic visions but already reality. The social revolution of reproductive medicine and genetic technology and their design options are especially challenging to those artists who have intimate knowledge of or a strong interest in biology.



Thomas Grünfeld, ‘Cow’, 1997. © Thomas Grünfeld (www.thomasgruenfeld.com)

Grünfeld’s sculptures cleverly play on the widespread fear that nature must strike back all the more violently the more merciless the human intervention is (on the part of genetic technology, for example). The fantastic animals from his famous series ‘Misfits’ are produced with the help of a taxidermist and are presented without a base or a case – asserting their authority by their lifesize dimensions.

He has for example exhibited in the Mendel Museum of Genetics in the Czech Republic and made reference to the Austrian scientist Gregor Mendel's discoveries in inheritances and plant hybridisation that prompted the foundation of the discipline of genetics. In this work he constructed a pattern with a taxidermic specimen that carries on to excess and thereby satirising Mendel's Second Law. From a genetic point of view the transitions between species of animals are seen to be fluid. Thus the search for a super-species or for the proverbial 'egg-laying, wool-bearing, milk-producing sow' sees its ironic and absolutely useless counterpart in the artificial beings of Grünfeld.

The artist states, however, that he is not very interested in animals at all. He instead wants to question the status of sculptural objects in general. Hard cuts, an additive effect and aesthetic ruptures are what he is looking for, so his work won't be considered simply as taxidermic craft but rather as an artful assemblage.

His hybrids should be read as three-dimensional collages. They strikingly illustrate Max Ernst's definition of collage. Ernst sees collage as 'systematic exploitation of an accidental or artificially provoked encounter of two or more alien realities on an obviously inapt plane and the spark of poetry that jumps across in the approach.'¹



Thomas Grünfeld, 'Ass/Rooster', 2002. © Thomas Grünfeld (www.thomasgruenfeld.com)

Grünfeld himself calls his sculptures 'naïve' and 'romantic'. And indeed they do appear more artificial and more aestheticised than taxidermies by other artists. He

¹ Max Ernst: Biographische Notizen (Wahrheitsgewebe und Lügengewebe). In: Kat. Max Ernst und Bonn. Student. Kritiker. Rheinischer Expressionist. Nr. 14, Schriftenreihe August Macke Haus Bonn. Bonn 1994, p. 20-28.

just tampers with but doesn't really alter the anatomy of the animals, each of which is divided into two but kept mostly intact in each half. There is for example a squirrel with duck's feet, a rabbit with wings, a sheep with an ostrich head, a platypus with the neck of a goose and a skunk with a fan of tail feathers. Grünfeld is looking for species that have very little in common and avoids less spectacular, existing hybrids like, say, ligers or zorses.

He emphasises that his animal hybrids represent a possible and thinkable alternative to God's creation and that they are not horrible fantasies. He dislikes any reading of his art as commentary on the dangers of genetic technology – even though as I said they are quite regularly exhibited in this context. Genetic technology in his view does not produce 'visual design' like an artist. And indeed one is not usually able to tell by the exterior appearance of a genetically manipulated animal that it has been altered at all. Also such animals are almost never 'originals' in the sense of a unique item but are instead manufactured to obtain a potentially unlimited amount of identical clones.

Jean Baudrillard has stated that such hybrids produce a 'biological monotony' – a description that hardly fits Grünfeld's series of taxidermy specimens .

Nevertheless I would like to argue that the visible ruptures in the sculptures bear implications of the wound and therefore manifest a metaphorical disruption through the alleged distinct identity of the objects. I think that artists who use animal bodies for their artworks always address questions that go far beyond the classical concerns of sculpture such as the organisation of volume, measurement and dimension. Even though you can read Grünfeld's objects as autonomous sculptures and judge his mastery of sculptural means, the material in combination with the topic and the form of hybridity brings into play bodily and spiritual suffering.

So Grünfelds objects point not only to sheer sculptural problems but also to the fragileness of our perception of the world.

Deborah Sengl

Deborah Sengl's hybrids are in a comical way unsettling. She stages the phenomenon of disguise, delusion, concealing and cheating. She began with costumes for her own pet cats that she did not fit on the living animals but on handmade dummies like wireframe or rubberfoam cats until she discovered taxidermic animals as support material for her costumes.

The series of sculptures I want to talk about today was inspired by a biological example. Camouflage or mimicry as strategy to survive by means of deceit is a common thing in nature. In ecology, camouflage refers to the ability of a species to appear similar to its surroundings in order to avoid detection by a predator. Mimicry on the other hand comes in different modes. There is only one example in which a predator really disguises itself as prey: the ant-mimicing jumping spider that crawls into anthills to hunt. This is the lesson-teaching model Deborah Sengl turns to with her works.

Most of her sculptures involve the topic of eating or being eaten, feeding or being fed upon. The hen disguises itself as worm, the snake as mouse, the wolf as a sheep and so on.



Deborah Sengl, 'Die Löwin – als Räuber – ertarnt sich ihre begehrte Beute' (The lioness – as predator – disengues her desired prey) , 2004. Courtesy Galerie Deschler, Berlin.
© Deborah Sengl (www.deborahsengl.com)

In her early works the dominant motif was dressing up, masquerading and travesty. Masks that were clearly identifiable as such covered the true faces of the animals and thereby paradoxically revealed more than they disguised. In her more recent work it has become almost impossible to distinguish enemy from friend. The symbiosis and metamorphosis is so perfect that the hybrid animals look very natural. In a confusing role play the positions of aggressor and victim are inverted and woven

together. The engagement with inside and outside, form and context, volume and density reflect genuinely sculptural questions.

The irritation of Sengl's objects lies in the transparent camouflage that somehow feels dangerous and it also lies in the fact that the boundaries of two ontologies are blurred in a hybrid way. Sengl makes the beholder accessory to both offender and offended, predator and prey. The roles of perpetrator and victim remain unclear, both are mingled together in a constant becoming.²

In order to bring out the discrepancy between the seeming and the real or between appearance and reality, taxidermy that may be seen as a rather old fashioned and outdated technique is appropriated in an ideal way. Taxidermy produces an absolutely clear and obvious surface with an absolutely obscure interior.

Taxidermic hybrids turn on the classical understanding of art as an imitation of nature. Immanuel Kant's claim that artworks should not look constructed but should rather be perceived as having grown like nature combines with the concept of the artist as *alter deus*, as a second creator God. Even though Sengl's works contain natural material they are not nature at all but rather simulcra.

Roland Barthes defines all structuralist activity as reconstruction of an 'object' involving two operations: dissection and articulation in order to fabricate meaning. He calls this reconstruction 'simulacrum'. 'The simulacrum is intellect added to object.'³ In his explanation of the simulacrum, Baudrillard on the other hand distinguishes four steps of reproduction '1) basic reflection of reality, (2) perversion of reality, (3) pretence of reality, and (4) simulacrum, which is not a copy of the real, but becomes truth in its own right. One sign of the modern simulacrum is that it has become impossible to tell original from copy, reality from imagination.'⁴ I would argue that Sengl performs all four steps in creating her artwork and in doing so also takes Barthes' concepts of dissection and articulation literally. First she analyses reality, forms an opinion about what she sees and distorts reality accordingly by dissection and articulation of the mobile fragments and by thus faking a rather real-looking surface that becomes a simulacrum in the end which does not have any connection to the real appearance from which she started.

² See for the concept of 'becoming' and especially 'becoming animal': Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie 2 – Tausend Plateaus*, Berlin: Merve 1992; Orig.: *Mille Plateaux*, Paris 1980.

³ Roland Barthes: *Die strukturalistische Tätigkeit*. In: Kursbuch 5, Mai 1966, pp. 190-196.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard: *Simulacra and Simulation*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press 1995.

Sengl addresses questions of reality and illusion of identity and masquerade and stages the unfixed, undefinable identity of the animals she uses as material for her sculptures. These questions ought to be transferred to the state of humankind. In her newest work she even focusses on the transgression of the borders between humans and animals. When she for example presents a priest with the face of a wolf and thus turns the shepherd into a beast of prey she also makes a critical comment on the claims and the reality of the Christian church in a metaphorical way.

I would argue that Sengl's works are sculptural fables (just as I have said that Iris Schieferstein's works are sculptural grotesques). A fable is a brief story that features anthropomorphised animals and that illustrates a worldly wisdom or moral lesson by metaphoric transference of human behavioural patterns, social conditions or political events onto animals. The structural elements of the fable are applied by Sengl by combining narrative and dramatic elements, by installing animals as agents and by standardising the protagonists (innocent sheep and bad wolf for example). Also the order of the fable is maintained by confronting two polar opposites without taking sides. A fable needs to be narrated in the most succinct way possible. Sengl manages to even shorten the necessary gap between two opposites by glueing them together in order to make just one personification with opposing features.

Just as in a fable, her sculptures bear a hidden connection to reality and social criticism. The insupportable gap between surface and essence, between promising something or pretending to be something and reality in human cooperation is a subject of discussion as well as the factitiousness of society. Her main theme is the declaration of the phrase: homo homini lupus.



Deborah Sengl, 'Der Wolf – als Räuber – ertarnt sich seine begehrte Beute' (The wolf – as predator – disengues its desired prey), 2003. Courtesy Galerie Deschler, Berlin.

© Deborah Sengl (www.deborahsengl.com)

Several of her sculptures deal with the story of the wolf in sheep's clothing that is told in a well-known fable. In German as well as in English, 'a wolf in sheep's clothing' has become a metaphor for an enemy pretending to be a friend or more general for any hidden danger. Sengl uses animals in a similarly metaphorical way – a strategy that has a long tradition. Not only in literature but also in the visual arts there is a long tradition of taking animals as metaphors, symbols or as screens on which to project all kinds of things. Animals have always been used to comment on humans, as sacrifices, totems, alter egos etc. They represented the human species and were used as personifications of human fears, dreams, desires, aggressions, instincts or drives. But Sengl's works adds something to this by presenting the construction plans of the sculptures along with them. She understands these sketches to be an integral part of her artwork that cannot be separated from the sculptural objects. The drawings are modelled on scientific plans. In these construction plans Sengl explains explicitly each and every component of the sculptures, even details that do not need any explanation at all. In doing so she satirises the proverbial obsession with control and the hybrid phantasies of the do-able and of the domination of nature as advocated by a science that does not take responsibility other than for itself.

So the sculptures do more than simply illustrating proverbial human-to-human-relations in a disturbing way. They could also serve as a stimulus for reconsidering what has, up to now, been science's way of using and misusing nature.

Katharina Moessinger

Berlin artist Katharina Moessinger works in a completely different manner with stuffed animals and with chimaeras – both in a literal sense. In Greek 'chimaera' means goat, and this sculptor deals only with domestic animals, with animals that are more or less man-made creatures, whether by breeding, use or handling. Consequently she transforms this subject matter by creating borders between nature and culture that consist of artificial insides and organic outsides just like all other taxidermic animals. Her series entitled 'Kuscheltiere' ('cuddly toys'), includes four stuffed animals: pig, goat, cow and sheep.



Katharina Moessinger, 'Kuscheltiere: Schwein' (Cuddly Pets: Pig), 2004.
© Katharina Moessinger (www.katharina-moessinger.de)

Moessinger transfers all the proportional deformations of anatomy that are to be found in cuddly toys, the cute faces with exaggerated schema of childlike characteristics and the unnatural body positions of her models onto the life size sculptures.

Since childhood Moessinger has had a close relationship to animals, especially to those associated with idyllic country life. Being the daughter of a circus owner she grew up in the world of animal dressage and urban farming where animals were basically treated as family members. Therefore it might irritate some beholders that in her new work she also uses the fur of bunnies and horses, animals that she was involved with and loved most when she was a little girl. She describes how she had to overcome her inhibitions especially in the making of taxidermic sculptures of those species. She admits that in the creative process she thinks a lot about the formerly living individuals her material is taken from and she feels some morbid kind of tenderness for her objects – a notion she hopes shows visibly in the finished artworks. And indeed: individual characteristics like little crowns in the hair or scars in the skin provide information about the legitimate owner of these skins. Inavoidably some reflection on the specific creature she is working with flows into the creation and reception of the work.

‘The formal and technical discipline that the process requires’, she states, ‘is visible in the works and raises these terrifying hybrid creatures above the level of pure shock or spooky surprise. The care and cost that is involved in making these artworks illustrates the meditation on the subject and in confrontation with the viewers informs their own meditation.’⁵

The sculptural transformation nevertheless involves the total destruction of the original body to create a new hybrid reality that has nothing to do with the living beings the material was taken from. Moessinger brings to light this fact and makes it the primary theme of her artwork. Because of the proportional distortions of the cuddly toys, it is necessary to use several skins for the configuration of just one object. She needs the bodies of up to five individuals of the same colour and fur texture to make one convincing artefact. This multiplication is significant: one single animal is not enough to represent all the things we project into it.

Moessinger’s work addresses the brutal handling of animals in the commercial context. She chooses a witty and dressed-up approach to do so because she feels that the unadorned take on the same subject would be unbearable.



Katharina Moessinger, ‘Kuscheltiere: Kuh’ (Cuddly Pets: Cow), 2005/06.
© Katharina Moessinger (www.katharina-moessinger.de)

It is clear from first sight that there is something wrong with Moessinger’s cuddly toys. For artworks that do not quite seem right, Steve Baker has coined the phrase ‘botched taxidermy’ which he applies to works with a cobbled-together

⁵ Katharina Moessinger, www.katharina-moessinger.de.

identity: 'The look of the postmodern animal', he writes, 'seems more likely to be that of a fractured awkward, "wrong" or wronged thing, which it is hard not to be read as a means of addressing what it is to be human now...'⁶ Baker explains that those artists who produce embodiments of 'botched taxidermy' with their animal images question the notion of identity. He reads them primarily as sculptural realisations of a deconstructivist world view. Moessinger's sculptures also bring up questions concerning the difference between nature and culture, presentation and representation and the authenticity of such concepts. What irritates the beholder most are probably the dimensions of her work, the showing of the stitches that hold everything together as well as the deformed proportions of the cuddly toys that introduce creepiness into a childhood world that seems to be whole and familiar. According to Sigmund Freud's famous study of 1919 the uncanny is precisely the mode of the spooky that goes back to the well-known and the ever-intimate.⁷ Freud identifies the uncanny effect as resulting from instances of 'repetition of the same thing', and from doubts about whether a lifeless object might be, in fact, animate. I would argue that the paradoxical being of Moessinger's adaptations of cuddly toys bear the notion of the uncanny and unheimlich where something familiar feels uncomfortably strange. Her point of departure is as I said the highly complex phenomenon of the cuddly pet that in itself bears some subversive energy. They are commodity goods used for childish satisfaction of needs, fetishised bedfellows or obedient and replaceable playmates. All in all they are deeply ambivalent. The very same species that become cuddly pets are used for clothing and food as well. They are said to be miniature versions of real animals but bear hardly any resemblance to their models except for a grotesque formal likeness. Even though many cuddly toys are wild animals, bears or lions for example, they are stripped of everything that might be wild or menacing. They lack their sexual organs, claws and teeth and they can be dominated even by the smallest children. So they not only mirror the values of their manufacturers but also the common treatment of our pets that are mostly also castrated, neutered, groomed, or manipulated in other ways. Moessinger's sculptures reveal that not only are cuddly toys used as objects but also living animals can be designed anatomically and culturally at the discretion of humans. Furthermore she shows the parallels of living model and virtual copy: both

⁶ Steve Baker. *The Postmodern Animal (Essays in Art and Culture)*, Reaktion Books, London 2000, pp. 54-65.

⁷ Sigmund Freud: "*Das Unheimliche*" (1919), in: *Gesammelte Werke* Bd. XII, Frankfurt am Main 1999, pp. 227-278.

are potentially mass products, docile objects of composition, economic goods and rechargeable with almost any given meaning.

Moessinger calls her sculptures 'hybrids of the natural manifestation of a living being and the human construction of this living being in a commercial context.'⁸ She takes the commercial character of animals into account as well as the reduction of a living entity to the point that it becomes a mere usable, dead or living material as stock of fat, leather provider, object of research, implement or piece of sports equipment.

In a double sense, physically and formally, her sculptures serve as visual signs for animality that above all demonstrate human beliefs and ideas of the animal and express a critique of human use and misuse of animals.

Conclusion

All the artists I have discussed not only challenge the relations of humans and animals but also the function of sculpture and the classical conceptions of the overcoming of material or destruction of material that are sometimes used to measure the quality of an artwork. They all make use of different modes of preparation and sculptural strategies.

There are many possibilities to point out similarities or differences regarding the four artists: Sengl and Grünfeld combine exactly two different species in order to form one hybrid creature.⁹ The relationship is the predator-prey-contact in the case of Sengl's work, Grünfeld rather searches for the most surreal-looking combination.¹⁰ Schieferstein and Moessinger both graft more than two species together, while Schieferstein underlines this plurality and Moessinger hides it. Grünfeld and Schieferstein seem to be interested more in sculptural procedures, art historical traditions, aesthetics and formal questions whereas Moessinger and Sengl emphasise more the social meaning of their artworks; Moessinger with a focus on animals and Sengl on humans. Schieferstein and Moessinger work themselves with the organic matter, sew skins together etc. (Schieferstein even does all the dissecting and taxidermic preparation herself), whereas Sengl and Grünfeld commission the objects according to their concepts and blueprints.

⁸ Katharina Moessinger, www.katharina-moessinger.de.

⁹ Grünfeld sometimes does combine three species but these works are very rare.

¹⁰ Even though there is one example where he combines a sheep and a shepherd's dog.

What is remarkable is that animals' dead bodies find an entrance into high art and thereby – even if it is in afterlife – maintain their ground in a way that is no longer simply virtual but very tangible. What is even more important is that all the presented artworks quite forcefully bring to light the scale of human projection onto animals.

Although one scarcely perceives the objects as lifeless flesh, they still of course embody the materiality of death through the fact of their being corpse material, a fact that carries a taboo. Therefore the reaction to their eccentric formal experiments oscillates as a matter of course between attraction and repugnance, between stirred empathy and shuddering rejection. In particular, the splitting up and preservation of cadavers in the context of an artwork is often felt to be shocking, in disregard of the fact that day after day living and sensitive animals are treated purely as commodities, for example in the meat industry. Today's sculptors make sure not to depict the beauty of animals or to present animal imagery in a naturalistic manner probably because they do not want to be considered sentimental, decorative, naive, kitschy or anthropomorphising. Judgements like these would exclude them from serious art. A use of tabooed cadaver material that is too literal or too destructive on the other hand could lead to the critique of being sensational, gimmicky, disrespectful or irresponsible. At this point aesthetic and ethical values are mixed up in the reception of artworks.

Art usually fills a different moral position than the real world. Whenever actual animals are involved, though, it is no longer purely artificial but also 'real'. Here sculpture has always been ahead in the competition with painting. No matter if animals' bodies are equipped with eyes or not, the fact by itself that the animal is present physically, the presence of the original matter that once belonged to a living creature has the effect that the beheld also beholds.

Just because of the well-calculated shock that the material initiates, hybrid taxidermic animals are able to unfold a power that can cause an alteration in a set of values that is solely made to a human measure.

The sculptures can be read as contemporary reflections of recent developments in biotechnology and of changing attitudes towards animals. With their postmodern sampling of scientific and historio-cultural traditions they also mirror the constructedness of our world.

Whereas Horace made a plea that the serious artist renounce every type of hybrid, for contemporary art there no longer exists the question as to whether an artist

is under an obligation solely with regard to that which actually exists. All the artists I have presented are concerned with embodiment, with the hybrid animal body as an image. Their work is neither an appropriation of something already existant nor a mimetic imitation of nature, but rather a creation post naturam. They all present not normative situations, but instead fantastical abnormalities and barrier-breaking stagings of a new corporality. The goal of their oeuvre is the creation of compositional bodies that contradict unitary aesthetic systems of all sorts. Their bold artistic statements represent investigations of the concept of normality, heterogeneity, purity, hybrid nature and difference, and they aim at a reevaluation of norms and values that today continue to be assigned validity. With the expansion of the existing borders of what is considered to be doable and imaginable, their works make a plea for the unlimited freedom of autonomous world-creation and of the *ars poetica*.

Sengl uses animals' bodies as metaphors for humans. She borrows from the literary form of the fable and works with humourous irritations. Schieferstein makes death and resurrection the subject of discussion by recruiting powerful images from art history. Her grotesque chimaeras usually make a strong impact on the beholder and provoke very emotional responses. Moessinger points to the constructedness of an omnipresent animal imagery by manipulating patterns from the toy industry that are turned from cute to monstrous. Grünfeld creates three-dimensional collages by drawing from folk art, medicine and biology. His hybrids captivate the viewer in their ornamental compositions.

In the artworks I have talked about, the animals whose organic material becomes part of sculpture are either substitutes for the human, the glamorous memento mori, symbols for nature destroyed beyond repair or manifestations of hybrid fantasies of power and control.

Taxidermic animals located beyond any 'normality' may perhaps even be understood better as the expression of a complete idea of subjectivity than as a representation of the rational modern subject. The principle of dismemberment and synthetisation by means of fragments coheres into an unmitigated expression of the loss of a unified picture of the world without interruptions and contradictions. This violent fragmentation and recombination into a utopian hybridity reflects the recognition that today it is no longer possible to represent any generally valid idea of an 'authentic' body or to generate definite concepts of reality.

Taxidermic hybrids show at the same time the trauma and the allure of bodily deformations. They transform violence, fear and insecurity into something new. The animals that are prepared to be chimaeras not only exhibit the irreparable battery of nature by human intervention but they are also an attempt to think out a new, and fantasy-filled way of approaching the natural world.