

## **Masquerade**

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### **A great demon**

They have all the typical attributes of angels. Androgynous and winged. So how can we not think of other angelic creatures? Dürer's melancholy angel, or the one by Klee facing backwards, or Wenders's fallen angel, or the desperate angels by Giotto in Padua. But, these parallels are not enough. We can look for other winged figures among our papers. There is a very important image, that is little known among the general public - *Amore Vincitore* by Orazio Riminaldi (Pisa 1586-1631). We see an ephemic adolescent, with a strong, yet soft, sensual and intriguing body. This beautiful creature is surrounded by swords, helmets and lances, by musical instruments (the angelic art that uplifts us to consider a higher harmony, much like the love of Beauty), "tools of the trade" (palette and paintbrushes for the painter, bow and arrows for Love), open books and armillary spheres (for knowledge and wisdom). They are symbolic objects to help identify the struggle between Vices and Virtues, between Platonic love and sensual – or vulgar - love (and this explains why the model holds both a lance and a viola d'amore in his right hand). It is something of an amorous joust in which the winner loses all (his soul, happiness, and cheerfulness, or he loses himself to be reborn as another as we also read in Michelangelo). It is all a matter of understanding whom the winged youth is addressing with that mysterious gesture. Perhaps us, here and now? And then, what about the strange nail on his left thumb? Perhaps because, according to Plato that Angel is Eros, a "great demon". Something that strikes down and upraises.

### **Eros the child of Penia and Poros**

I can recognize the features of that "great demon", Love or Eros (something between mortals and immortal gods)<sup>(1)</sup> here, in these angels by Julia Johanna Dorothee Krahn

(that is her full name). But, as opposed to the artists I just mentioned, Julia Krahn has not used a live model, she has not used her imagination to correct nature, nor has she copied an antique cast and readapted it to her needs. As on other occasions, she worked on herself (in a broad, both artistic and analytical sense), using herself ‘as the model’ and as ‘the subject to analyze’. That angel is herself in flesh and blood (even though she then tries to redefine her physicality in all ways). However, I am convinced that the angel is not the being she has harnessed. Instead, I think of Eros (the child of Penia and Poros according to Plato) with whose image or mask the artist has identified to the point of becoming its personification: to embody him (through the performance) and to create distance from him (through photography).

### **On and off stage**

I speak of performance because Julia Krahn posed for her photographs. But her pose is always the acme of an action, the ‘turning point’ in a choreography. First of all, she dressed up in wings and feathers, intending to harness a latent force (eros) and a delocalized passion (the androgyne) through recourse to a myth and an iconography. Then, she used the cable release shot to capture the instant – the state of mind of a moment, a sensation. As a photographer, she works at a distance. As a performer she works from the inside moving outwards. She does acrobatics, she tries to jump away, she looks behind herself, she huddles, she tries to flap her wings, simulating the swoop of a falcon. There are two details which help us understand the organization of her work: the cable that hangs and remains attached to the camera, and her gaze that is sometimes focused on the lens (the same way that Pontormo looks in the mirror to do a quick self-portrait). In other shots, the artist shifts her gaze from the lens, not looking at us or herself, but focusing her attention in a direction other than the photographer-spectator’s point of observation.

In two images we see Julia Krahn from behind: in one she seems about to take flight for

the first time, leaping into the air. In the other she is going up – or maybe down – a ladder. Perhaps the ladder is a reference to Jacob's ladder and by extension to the Tree of Life. She seems to be telling us that even today the erotic experience is the link between high and low, between lowly materialism and the spiritual life.

### **Moving without gravity**

This entire 'ballet' (like an insect closed in a luminous box) takes place in a strictly white space, a space that does not seem to exist. There is no perspective. Having eliminated all points of reference – physical and geometric – the winged figure lives in an ethereal, *outopic* dimension. Only in this sense is the figure more Angel than Eros: "it is in an other-worldly dimension, in the fourth dimension beyond the sphere that defines the axes of the visible cosmos, *mundus imaginalis*"(2). And so, like the angel-Eros, Julia moves in this space, she tries to escape, she jumps, she gets up and she almost completely disappears from view. The meaning could also be, and reduce itself to this attempt: to oscillate between the erotic dimension and the angel's mystic dimension. Hence the restlessness, the agitated and frenzied state.

In one photograph we see only the artist's legs, as if the rest of her had darted beyond the frame of the print. Looking at this picture we cannot help but dwell on the cloven red nail, on the cord that hangs next to the limbs, on the tint of the skin. The wings, the waxy look, and the space without gravity all serve to remove the weight and the physicality of the artist's body, transforming it even more into a masquerade, into a surreal creature. This creature's sex, slightly disturbed by its new state of angel-*daimon*, remains deliberately uncertain. Otherwise, what would be the purpose of the wings if its body weighed as much as a mere mortal?

The figure is restless. In front of the photographic speculum- it is subjected to forces of desire, to the perturbing and it perceives that something – mortal and immortal at the same time according to Plato – which from the beginning subjugates and agitates human

nature, making the body too tight, and language too limited; the enormity of the difference between desire and fulfilment is unbearable, the gap between vision and sensation is terrible and death becomes unthinkable.

### **Change of register, change of skin**

By doing self-portraits, the artist puts herself on both sides with respect to the camera – on the side of the author-creator and on the side of the subject. Therefore, she can control the manner or manners in which she is seen and makes herself seen. In this sense Julia Krahn has placed the reins of language and the experience of meaning into female hands. In particular, we note the change of register (from masculine to feminine), when the artist appropriates the issues related to body language: pulsions, desires, libido (whose lethal violence and destructive power is perhaps only a deceitful construct of Western thought in order that female sexuality be controlled by men).

Here, however, it is the woman who lays the trap and falls into it, who plays in her own way and according to her critical view with the rhetoric of the images, with the significance of the myths, with the meaning of the words and gestures. The interpretation of the world remains in step with the critique of society and culture, with a process of liberation and deconstruction of general concepts and inherited forms of expression. And this reversal – from the ideological to the sensitive – can only take place from the moment in which the other – in this case the female – takes control of her own body and how it is presented, occupying both positions: behind and in front of the lens, inside and outside the technological-expressive field.

Now, if the masquerade produces a state of trance and depersonalization, without which it would be ineffective, the self-portrait is capable of certifying the transformation of the pulsion into a recognizable figure, without, however, demolishing the awareness of her femaleness, without degrading and debasing the power of androgynous desire, avoiding the snares hidden in the myths and symbols of Eros inflected in the masculine.(3)

## **Other souvenirs**

As in other series, *The Creation of Memory*, *Souvenir* and *Rooms* for example, here too the artist wants to go beyond the limits of the medium using photography to transcend the objective datum and convey other information or emotions with respect to a specific subject, a specific experience. In other words, Julia Krahn makes photography complex from the start, seeking a meaning beyond mere appearance. She is searching for more expressive photography without, however, abandoning the principle of reality that is always a prerogative of photography. Indeed, Julia relies on this principle even when she shoots places that are not part of her life but exist in the lives of others. She does this to give the impression of reviving her own memories or vague yet memorable sensations: sensations experienced in incidental and fleeting moments that now return to make themselves felt together with those refound places. In this case, I refer to earlier works such as *Souvenir* and *Rooms*. The disguise is necessary to remove pulsions and latent desires for transcendence, sublimation and identification from her darkroom. The myths return to reawaken sensations that would otherwise be buried along with the object of desire. So, it would be a matter of keeping *Eros* alive here before he dissolves amorous passion with his luminous energy, with his vital heat. As in *Souvenir* or *Rooms*, it is a matter of photographing and portraying herself to go back, to the exact moment of that first unforgettable sensation.

## **A superhuman presence**

Each disguise is also a form of incarnation: masquerading involves a personification and a kind of theophany, so that the individuality of the one wearing the disguise “does not limit itself to annulling itself before the symbol he wears, but blends with it to become the instrument of a superhuman *presence*... it is as if ... the exterior self ... revealed a latent possibility within itself. Man actually becomes the symbol of what he dons”(4).

Therefore, it is not a matter of mere portrayal or reproduction. Before the photo, in this case before the self-portraits, the artist worked on herself: disguising and transfiguring herself. According to Titus Burckhardt the mask, along with the clothing, ornaments, symbolic gestures, dance steps (as in this case), “immediately offers awareness of self a much vaster form, an opportunity to realize the fluidity of this awareness, its ability of taking on all forms without identifying itself with any of them”(5). Perhaps these self-portraits work in this way: they are *masquerades* to escape from the image we have created of the female eros either as an angel or a demon. It is a type of dialectic, either too ideal or too lowly to force pulsions and desires into iconographies that are produced and controlled mainly by the male. Therefore, the escape would be androgyny. But this time, it is taken from the female side: from the pure sensation of existing, desiring love with love. In a single personification of male and female, of the subject and the object of the portrayal.

### **A few brief notes about Eros**

The most beautiful and exhaustive explanation of what *Eros* is can be found in Plato's *Symposium*. Several theses concerning the nature of *Eros*, his appearance, his powers, and his ability to influence human experience either for good or bad are advanced during that philosophical banquet. The various positions are presented by Eryximachus, physician-naturalist philosopher who, in order to make himself understood, uses the theses of Phaedrus and then of Pusanias, a great rhetorician but with antiquated beliefs. These two are followed by Aristophanes, the most famous playwright of ancient Greece, and author of plays such as *The Clouds* and *The Frogs*, and Agathon the tragic poet of whom little is known. But the dialectic scene is dominated by Diotima who, though not present at the banquet is brought into the picture by Socrates when his turn comes. The last character is Alcibiades who is in love with Socrates and concludes by putting together the apologia of Plato's teacher.

For Eryximachus-Phaedrus: “ love is a mighty god, and wonderful among gods and men, but especially wonderful in his birth. For he is the eldest of the gods, which is an honour to him; and a proof of his claim to this honour is, that of his parents there is no memorial; neither poet nor prose-writer has ever affirmed that he had any. As Hesiod says: *First Chaos came, and then broad-bosomed Earth, The everlasting seat of all that is, and Love.*” (6)

Socrates-Diotima, however, explains that the god of love is a demon and is the child of Penia and Poros: “he is neither mortal nor immortal, but in a mean between the two” that he has the power “[to] interpret, conveying and taking across to the gods the prayers and sacrifices of men, and to men the commands and replies of the gods; through him the arts of the prophet and the priest, their sacrifices and mysteries and charms, and all, prophecy and incantation, find their way.” (7) Further on, there is a description of Eros that fits our case: “ [in that] Eros is the child of Penia and Poros, as his parentage is so are his fortunes. In the first place he is always poor, and anything but tender and fair, as the many imagine him; and he is rough and squalid, and has no shoes, nor a house to dwell in; on the bare earth exposed he lies under the open heaven, in-the streets, or at the doors of houses, taking his rest; and like his mother he is always in distress. Like his father too, whom he also partly resembles, he is always plotting against the fair and good; he is bold, enterprising, strong, a mighty hunter, always weaving some intrigue or other, keen in the pursuit of wisdom, fertile in resources; a philosopher at all times, terrible as an enchanter, sorcerer, sophist. He is by nature neither mortal nor immortal, but alive and flourishing at one moment when he is in plenty, and dead at another moment, and again alive by reason of his father's nature. But that which is always flowing in is always flowing out, and so he is never in want and never in wealth.”(8)

The platonic uncertainty, expressed in the Symposium, between a divine nature and another that is demonic remains in every later presentation of Eros, whose power is

well-known on earth and among the gods. Especially when all the ambiguity of man torn between sexual urges and ecstatic rages falls on him. In Eros we realize how disturbing the amorous experience can be, where pleasure borders on death, violence, on annihilation. And perhaps it is for this reason that he is clothed in transcendence. That is, to hide the frightening reality, the abyss in which the erotic trauma par excellence is reproduced: birth itself.

#### Notes

[1] See the brief note on Eros at the end.

[2] M.Cacciari, *L'angelo necessario*, Milan 1986 and 1992, p.13.

[3] Just to give a quick example: Julia Krahn's disguise collides with Matthew Barney's *masquerades* as he performs for the video camera as a faun. In the guise of the goat-man, the artist-director-actor presents Eros as a wild and threatening force within America's puritanical society. But, he does not succeed in fully removing himself from the seduction of Dionysiac mythology that is reactivated through the reference to those wild creatures with their masculinely exuberant and violent language.

[4] T. Burckhardt, *La maschera sacra e altri saggi*, Milan 1979, p. 13.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[6] Plato, *Symposium* (202 d – 202 e)

[7] *Ibid.*, (202 e – 203 a)

[8] *Ivi*