

DOING LUCY – PUCK VERKADE

FORDE –

When preparing the exhibition, you mentioned the terms “non-linearity” and “non-linear experience” several times, can you elaborate on it a little bit and tell us why it seems so important to you?

PUCK –

Neurologically and psychologically, the human brain creates linear patterns to process triggers and stimuli. This is also reflected in the way we tell stories. Historical or personal, it will probably be a linear story from A to B with a somewhat classic arc. However, human memory itself functions in a non-linear way, is extremely unreliable and generously fills the gaps between sensations and situations. Looking at the techniques behind dialectical montage and using my own experience of synesthesia, I became intrigued by the non-linearity that I consider to be a phenomenon of neurological time travel, if you will. It allows for space between signifiers of meaning and tries to amplify the gaps, to cut through the usual patterns we make and to exercise the brain so that it reconsiders archetypes and stereotypes. The roles of sound, image, movement, rhythm, text all become equally based on sensation and association - like zapping through TV channels. To this extent, the dialectical collision of images creates the meaning of the video piece, and is less concerned with a scenario than with the synthesis of associations between shots.

FORDE –

Why is everything red?

PUCK –

Some colour studies show that being surrounded by the colour red increases your blood pressure. I have no idea if this is a myth, but I am quite convinced that dominant primary colours intercept mental and physical behaviour. The dominant primary red that is consistent in the videos is mirrored in the gallery space; you can't escape it, as soon as you step in it, you are part of it. To my knowledge, red is the most stereotypical of the primary colours; it is the colour that we have been culturally conditioned to associate with blood, desire and rage, for instance. In many scenes, Lucy is confronted with this red substance and its “power” over her - I suppose this could be interpreted as a struggle against biological determinism.

– FORDE

This interview is filled with many very intelligent concepts and so are the videos. There is a strong presence of biological material/concern. How do you understand the relationship between body/intellect/subjectivity - secretion/concepts/sentiments and how much does it matter in your work?

– PUCK

I wonder what you mean with secretion?

PUCK –

In recent work, I have found myself taking on a range of topics that tap into issues of gender, sexuality and personhood

Do you travel in your own memory to create works, do you consider them as biographical or are you more interested in their general political aspect?

PUCK –

It is a healthy blend of both. I cannot deny that in my personal life, I struggle with some of the powerful structures that make up our society when it comes to gender experience, sexuality and personhood. At the same time, I know that I am one of many people who feel trapped by patriarchal definitions, and my work is not an intimate diary. That's why reappropriating existing sequences of pop culture or popular science helps me to bridge the gap between the private and the public. However, I do need to feel closely involved in the subject that I take on. Embodying a caricature of Lucy, with an apelike mask and such, helped me to push towards somewhat more absurd personal connections, for example.

– FORDE

It was only an image of the things produced by our body that we cannot control. Nothing to do with culture, intellect or concept, but something very animal. I used secretion because menstruation or sweat are an image of it for me...

– PUCK

Yes, I think that word is such a good reference. We keep forgetting the fluids that leave our bodies -to remind us that we are essentially animals- because of the impact of mysterious mind tricks. This awkward tension between the physical and mental often recurs in my works. In fact, last night I was thinking about that word secretion you mentioned, in relation to all the music in the videos, it's also so so so relevant. How all the music came about was almost a process of digital secretion; I selected outdated pop songs that I felt were topic related and then took their existing MIDI notes, regenerated the data through Ableton Live and changed all the initial instruments at random while keeping the composition, with the end result being a really warped and awkward digital discharge.

or subjectivity. In particular, how phenomena of the human condition are mediated, generated and represented by the power structures present in visual culture. Not to mention that I work with highly manipulative tools that require the viewer to navigate between sound, image, time and duration. That is why, in each work, I try to take into account the ethical dimensions of image production, obviously as an individual in contemporary society, but especially as a filmmaker.

**FORDE –
Who is Lucy?**

PUCK –

Lucy is a speculative character loosely based on an actual paleontological reconstruction of a preserved fossil dating back 3.2 million years. She is considered our last common ancestor, in some respects the earliest “mother” of both apes and humankind. In the videos, there are multiple interpretations of Lucy; a digital rendering, an interpreter and a claymation puppet. She is the conduit through which the spectator experiences a subjective story of evolution, which in this case is more **dystopian** than what we are usually taught. I hope it can playfully challenge how **stories** of the human condition, where fiction and facts are necessary to speculate, are influenced by centuries of bias and power dynamics. The most popular story of evolution - the Mighty Hunter theory - is quite sexist and biased. This raises the question of whether we are defined by biology or culture, and who gets to define that. Many of my works are threaded with questions such as: “who gets to voice their perspective, who is recorded and who is silenced?”, and I have found Lucy to be a fitting representative for introducing such questions.

A new story for each scar. In the multimedia series *Batman*, the Joker tells a new story every time he has to explain his scars: his violent father did it because he looked too serious, the Joker did it himself to show his wounded wife that scars don't matter, he did it to make his mother laugh, a fool did it to find his most hidden ideas, he was in a street gang that practiced torture, his parents did it to keep him with them at the Flying Grayson circus, etc.



FORDE –

Lucy, you're a star now, what do you want to use your fame for?

LUCY –

Don't be fooled, I have been a total paleontological celebrity since 1974. I was famous from the beginning when they found my remains scattered in the Hadar Desert in Ethiopia. That night, half a century ago, they carried my parts to the paleo-tent where the Beatles' hit song, *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds*, played loudly on the radio to celebrate their discovery. That's how they decided to nick-

name me Lucy. My scientific name is fossil 'AL-2881', but 'little Lucy' obviously quickly caught on in the media. In total, 47 of my bone fragments were found, making my body 40% complete, the rest was interpreted speculatively

FORDE –

There is some hope in these missing 60%. Since they have not been found, there is no evidence of what it can be. It could have been a new creature, 60% extraterrestrial/corn and 40% monkey/human. Do you like interstices and uncertainty?

– **PUCK**

Yes, uncertainty is essentially a space of imagination, of speculation, but it also often leaves too much room for bias and power dynamics. For example, science is still not sure if Lucy's remains were part of a female's or male's body, but in the media, it sounded better, of course: the ancestral mother of apes and humans. So the question is, what are the forces that influence this 60% imagination, and who gets to write this narrative? It's funny that paleo-artists all over the world have made very different reconstructions of Lucy - it doesn't look like the same individual at all, each reconstruction carries a series of interpretations and expectations of each culture in which it was made. But to get back to your question: yes, this uncertainty, that 60% is exactly why I chose Lucy's story as a trigger to develop the work and my questions about power narratives, evolution vs extinction, human vs animal, progress vs regression, biology vs culture, seduction of images and display, and the meaning of reconstruction/reassembling.

by paleo-artistic reconstructions. My remains have circulated all over the world, scientists have copied, reassembled and reconstructed my remains since then. With both ape and human traits, I was the perfect little mutant who inspired scientists to rethink everything they thought about evolution as a linear story of "progress" that popularized biological determinism. If anything, I'm here to show you that this basically is all speculative fiction!

FORDE –

There is no hope in biological determinism. No room for aliens and corn. A good part of your work concerns biological determinism, can you recommend a film, an article, a book, a work that you found interesting also addressing this subject?

PUCK –

The first thing that comes to mind is Isabella Rosselini's Green Porno and Seduce Me video series where she enacts and dresses up as animals. Green Porno deals with animal mating habits and Seduce Me with animal courtship rituals. It's part sexual education, part pop-science, part anthropomorphic comedy and it is genius. When it comes to dystopias, biological determinism and conflicting perspectives, it's probably not a surprise: my favorite classics are Orwell's Animal Farm and Huxley's Brave New World. A more recent gem is Maggie Nelson's semi-fiction the Argonauts, because it sensitively scrutinizes social biases and a set of expectations regarding parenthood reproduction, gender and the problematic definitions of this idea of "natural". It is also written in a very clever, non-linear and fragmented way that includes autobiographical elements as well as academic theory. Then surely there are many cartoons that have triggered me too, mainly because the laws of nature are completely skewed and they often provide opposing binary narratives that are super offensive but hilarious, like Rick & Morty, Beavis & Butthead, Ren & Stimpy. In hindsight, it's probably because I feel drawn to the dialectical tension of the characters; there's always a naive one, and a more cruel and aggressive one. I have adopted this dialectical approach for most of my montages, characters and narratives. Lastly, other filmmakers who completely captivate me and who also work with installation are Omer Fast, Mika Rottenberg, Arthur Jafa to name but a few - I think it is really brave that in most of their works, they do not seek to make perfect sense, it is really up to the spectator to speculate about what it all means.

FORDE –

I find your work in general very funny. But fun is not the question, it's actually the means by which you catch us, and awaken our interest in your work, right? More generally, can you tell us a little more about your relationship with subjects such as humour and seduction? And how/why do you use them?

PUCK –

I am interested in neurological patterns and perception, it shows how the brain is conditioned by biology as well as by culture. Humour and absurdity give space to disrupt these patterns, without it there is no way I can make the work 'work'. Many of the sensitive topics I address can be difficult to digest and I feel that humour and laughter entangle you, bind you to the subject and make you complicit in a way. In all my work, I am curious to untangle conflicting perspectives that are part of broader social structures and the relationship to what is considered to be "natural". The narrators of my video works are extremely unreliable, manipulative and often contradictory. Seduction and repulsion follow one another in waves throughout the work, I hope, in a push-and-pull movement that requires the spectator to form their own opinion.

PUCK –

Also, someone I forgot to mention as a total non-linear hero: REGGIE WATTS, do you know him? What a genius.

Doing Lucy, an interview with Puck Verkade led by Yoan Mudry and Roxane Bovet at the occasion of Puck Verkade's solo exhibition.
Forde, Geneva. December 6.18 – January 21.19

In the space:
Doing Lucy, 2018
Looped multiscreen video installation
10:29 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Daata Editions