*Tord Boontje and Emma Woffenden: a shadow play*

Monica Gaspar, Anima Animus catalogue, 2009

“World making begins with one version and ends with another” stated the philosopher Nelson Goodman[1]. All what one can grasp are world versions, temporary agreements, which can be described and expressed by scientific or artistic means. Art and design both operate as means to make sense of reality, offering possible versions of the world. Tord Boontje is a designer, who likes to tell stories and Emma Woffenden is an artist attracted by liminal states, beginnings and endings. Both initiate narrative processes, engaging in personal versions of world making.

Despite its different starting points, Emma and Tord trigger off poetical, emotional and primal undercurrents through their work. Sometimes Tord designs “objets d’art”, most of the times Emma produces art objects, both speaking the languages of photography, design, scenography or sculpture. Their work has an inclination for the aesthetics of the carnivalesque[2]; while Boontje stages his design products through the play of light and shadow, noise or water, stirring up multisensorial experiences, Woffenden creates installation work that places the viewer right on the verge of an imminent incident, a moment of transformation. Like in a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, they both are able to set up aesthetic environments, where a dream, an incident or a party can happen, blurring borders between the familiar and the unexpected.

These practices conjure contemporary forms of otherness[3]. In cultural theory, otherness is introduced as one of the poles in a dualistic discourse: Forms of patriarchy, consciousness, logocentrism, light and ocularcentrism are positioned against the “other” forms of matriarchy, unconsciousness, speechless, darkness and body centred sensuality. Emma and Tord are attracted by such concepts. When Martina Margetts writes that Boontje brings back to contemporary design aspects of “domesticity, femininity, ornament and craft”[4] she clearly refers to this “otherness”, which breaks the taboos of Modernism, normally heading towards clarity, rationality and universal functionality of form. By understanding design as a hybrid, precarious and emotional practice, Boontje creates objects that possess tactile qualities and generate complex messages. These are also some of the attributes in Emma’s artistic work. She displays her enigmatic objects, organic forms, vaguely functional, in apparently casual settings from everyday life[5]. The objects adopt an inconvenient presence, disturbing the regime of the white cube, and heightening the fragility of the materials she deals with: glass and human nature.

Transforming otherness, complexity and emotion into a creative impulse, Boontje and Woffenden position the *Anima/Animus* project at the core of the discussion retracing the territories for contemporary art and design in a paradigmatic manner. *Anima/Animus* presents a selection of their previous individual work and new collaborative installations. The show is an attempt to (re)create an environment that expresses the sometimes flowing, other times compulsive movement of convergences and divergences between two different “versions of the world”: his’ and her’s.

*Anima* and *Animus* are concepts developed by Jung in his analytical psychology. They refer to the unconscious or true inner self of an individual, being *anima* the female soul of every man and *animus* the male equivalent for the feminine unconscious. The idea of a gendered soul pointing to an inherent duality of human nature, acts as a guiding thread through the exhibition. (Un)compatible opposites, seductive paradoxes, and temporary mutations run along the dialogue between Boontje and Woffenden. As a couple or as single individuals, they constantly act and sense at the rims of established categories, negotiating temporary in-between spaces of encounter and disencounter.

The metaphor of the shadow can bring some light to the ambiguous and fertile terrain of *Anima/Animus*. Shadows inhabit the unpredictable space between light and darkness, they are genuine rims, spaces of transit, where mysterious and exciting things can happen. Shadows are often present in the work by Boontje and Woffenden, despite receiving different treatments and meanings. Boontje cuts out silhouettes, fusing a traditional domestic entertainment with cutting-edge digital production techniques, in order to create decorative patterns for his products or dreamy atmospheres through his lighting projects. Woffenden uses the shadow as expression for the immaterial, as trace of a movement or a state of mind, the potential of a half presence.

In his essay *The Art and its Shadow*[6] philosopher Mario Perniola tells about the unconvincing attempt to analyse contemporary art under “full light” conditions, either by falling into the thingness of it (identifying art and the object itself), or by paying exclusive attention to its communicative nature (art as relational event). Instead, he suggests observing art’s shadow, a neutral space beyond dualism and reductionist endeavours. Following Perniola’s analogy, independent positions between art and design operating “in the shadow”, far from being clandestine, offer a resistance against processes of cultural standardisation. Exploring neglected aspects of human nature and recovering the notion of difference, these practices shape an alternative “running room”[7], a challenge that Boontje and Woffenden have embraced since the beginning of their careers.

Shadows and transparencies, so present in *Anima/Animus*, are intangible phenomena that challenge the senses. Both are vehicles to fashion parallel worlds between illusion and reality. By choosing for the exhibition works predominantly made of glass, Boontje and Woffenden emphasise the qualities of this material as metaphor for casting virtual worlds. The *Transglass* collection was their first collaboration in glass, and with their attitude of giving a second life to discarded bottles, they created a solid design icon fusing aesthetics and sustainability. When Woffenden made the choice to work with glass as artistic medium, she was fascinated with the physical and metaphorical qualities of this material. The solid invisibility of transparent glass, present and absent at the same time, optimally expressed Woffenden’s aim to “capture a loaded simplicity”[8].

A common impulse in Tord and Emma’s work is *wanderlust*, a desire to explore and to move across territories, disciplines and states of mind. Having decided to settle their working and living spaces literally into the middle of nature, they experience the forest as a place for wandering, a microcosm to get lost and be found, a place for inspiration and fantasy. The forest is transformed into a scenario where dualities dissolve in a spectacle of splendour and loneliness, scarcity and excess... Everything mingles into light, shadow and penumbra.

The photographic project *Cross-Dressing* created especially for the exhibition documents an intervention in their local landscape. The cross is a symbol of Christianity, which has deeply shaped western culture, and the gesture of dressing is a very powerful one, which can create or destabilise identity. Staying ambiguous between showing a female or transvestite divinity, the Cross Dressing project emphasises a historical gender inequality in society by questioning the dominant masculine character of the symbol. Woffenden’s piece *Sister*, engages in a dialogue with *Cross Dressing*. An insect-like female being, stands on an inverted cross in an exhibitionistic yet vulnerable manner: her presence incarnates the other, even the evil, the stranger as she could also evoke a Hindu goddess with her six arms... With this piece Woffenden updates the myth of the *femme fatale*, following the most genuine Surrealist tradition, fusing, mysticism, erotism and death[9].

Metamorphosis and “animated” objects (endowed with a soul, a character or a gender) abound in Woffenden’s and Boontje’s work. One can find in Boontje’s repertoire a “princess”, a “pirate” or a “witch” chair, belonging to the “Happy Ever After” installation, or “dreaming”, “seductive” and “sinister” chairs for “The End” presentation. Woffenden is currently working in sculptural forms that are figurative. Hybrid characters between human and animal, like the *Elephant Boy*, appear as fragile, grotesque and poetic beings, while raising existential questions on human nature.

By having chosen the environment of the forest as actual place to live in, Boontje and Woffenden seem to be fascinated by the myth of the Wildman. The ‘savage within’ has been defined as the part of ourselves that we do not want to recognise anymore. “The civilised man is nobody without the shadow of the wild man at his heels” suggested anthropologist Roger Bartra[10]. In the Western imaginary, wild men and women were depicted as primitive, uncivilised beings, having some supernatural powers but at the same time were idealised as carrying a pure, paradisiacal living in nature. Anima, animus... animal. Boontje and Woffenden seem to be attracted by the genuine, moving aspects of primal life. On the one hand, they both have developed a language for the raw and the simple. Boontje’s *Rough and Ready* series share similar disarming and bold honesty of Woffenden’s installations, such as *Silent move me* or the *Goodbye Box Cross*. On the other hand, they address the most contradictory aspects of emotional response, like pleasure and pain, seduction and fear. Boontje’s flowering patterns conceal thorns, threatening and seducing the viewer, in the same way that their bright colours, come across as cheerful and violent at the same time. Woffenden’s work sharpens its emotional edges, when the viewer is confronted with metaphors of vulnerability threatened by a noise or a movement, mesmerising and disquieting at the same time, like in the *No Horizon* installation. Mastering the nuances between exuberance and control, the antagonistic positions taken by Boontje and Woffenden update in a sophisticated way the myth of the Wildman.

The imagined soul of objects and landscapes, the metaphors of passages between reality and fiction, the transformations of masculine into feminine sensitivities and vice versa and the surrounding and multisensorial environments endow the *Anima/Animus* exhibition with the dynamic attributes of a living entity. It is not a coincidence that the etymological root of *anima* refers to the primal breath. Woffenden is interested in “moving slow”, a way to be in the world very much inspired by the contemporary Japanese Butoh dance. In an extremely slow motion, the dancers express moments of ecstasy, absurdity, erotism or tragedy, capturing in a sigh the most precious aspects of existence. The turning movement of Woffenden’s *Ballerina* or the breeze across Boontje’s garlands seem to react to that life breath that subtly flows along the exhibition. With *Anima/Animus*, the designer and the artist join forces to invite the audience to be dreamy and aware, anxious and seduced, reflective or excited about the way they experience objects, environments and relationships in their everyday living. Almost as counter-reaction of today’s omnipresent issue of participation, that enthusiastic imperative of being present, constantly staging oneself, Woffenden and Boontje suggest through the languages of art and design the right to be half-present or in flow: *Anima/Animus* as a chance to listen to one’s own breath, to discover the shadow of things, to define other personal, fleeting versions of the world.

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[1] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978.

[2] GAU, Sønke and Katharina SCHLIEBEN, *Spectacle, Pleasure Principle or the Carnivalesque? A Reader on possibilities, experiences of Difference and Strategies of the Carnivalesque in Cultural/Political Practice.* Berlin: b-books, 2008.

[3] Definition of *otherness* (Alterität), taken from NÜNNING, Ansgar (ed.), *Metzler Lexikon. Literatur und Kulturtheorie.* Stuttgart: Metzlerverlag, 2004.

[4] MARGETTS, Martina, *Tord Boontje.* New York: Rizzoli, 2006. (p. 23)

[5] About the dialogue between applied and autonomous art see Ann Fletcher’s interview in *Emma Woffenden*, exhibition catalogue, National Glass Centre, Sunderland, 1999.

[6] PERNIOLA, Mario,  *The Art and its Shadow.* London – New York:  Continuum, 2004.

[7] Picking up the expression by Karl Krauss quotated in Hal Foster’s essay *Design and Crime and other Diatribes*. New York/London: Verso. 2002.

[8] Emma Woffenden’s statement for the exhibition *Breaking the Boundaries*, Gracefield Art Centre, Dumfries, Scotland, 1999.

[9] See the essay by sociologist Roger Caillois, *La Mante Religieuse. Recherche sur la nature et la signification du mythe.* (Minotaure, nº5, 1934), where he traces a paralelism between the deathly sexual union of the Praying Mantis and the image of a *femme fatale*.

[10] Roger Bartra curated the exhibition *The European Savage,* (Barcelona, CCCB, 2004) and is the author of *Wild men in the looking glass. The mythic origins of European Otherness.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.