

PURITY – ANITA MUCOLLI

1.10 - 22.12.2023 — CENTRE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN YVERDON-LES-BAINS

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

A curious sensation may overcome us as we explore the exhibition *PURITY*. The artist Anita Mucolli wanted to give her audience the illusion of entering a recently abandoned, secret laboratory. The sound that spreads throughout the exhibition space hints at its activity, or the memory of it. The impression of invading a forbidden space in which something unsettling is hatching out is accentuated by the piles of stones spread all around. Through this atmosphere, Anita Mucolli gives material form to the preoccupations that invest her thoughts, notably the consequences of what has been termed “human progress” for other species. The artist interrogates that system by linking it to fear of the unknown and to humanity’s mortal condition.

In her artistic practice, Anita Mucolli reproduces the spatial conditions of tightly controlled spaces such as laboratories, because they are directly connected to the development of science and medicine. These hotspots of human evolution are characterised by hygiene, precision and performance. That idea of perfection gives rise to the notion of purity, which the artist has chosen as the title for her exhibition.

In a Western society in which religion is on the decline, technology – in the broadest sense of the term – seems, in its search for perfection, to have supplanted the divine when it comes to promises of health and eternal life.

In laboratories, anthropocentrism finds expression through the subjection of other living creatures, especially through experiments and manipulations in which animals are classified and altered to serve human existence, be it by curing illnesses or improving performance.

Health and illness, life and death. Doubt insinuates itself between those opposing conditions. Does research push back the boundaries of ethics so that we may transcend our mortal condition? Animals are far from being the only creatures that are used for scientific purposes. Regarded as sacred for centuries, human beings are not untouchable: their very cells have now become objects for experimentation. For Anita Mucolli, the freedom asserted by science is troubling. Through the medium of her powerfully evocative works that operate beyond all religious or moralising considerations, the artist emphasises that the absence of ethical concern for other species may hint at an identical, pernicious lack of concern felt by human beings for their peers. History, sadly, has given us ample evidence of this. The fear of new technologies, of cell manipulation and indeed artificial intelligence thus mirrors a mistrust of humanity and its capacity to regulate and set limits for itself.

In her reflections, Anita Mucolli considers fear of death to be one of the drivers of scientific progress. From that perspective, death may be understood as the absolute unknown. Most of the time, we are afraid of what we do not know, of what we cannot understand or control. In that sense, our own animal nature may terrify us. That instinctive and largely unfathomable component which is as much part of us as our reason sometimes forces us to step down from our pedestal as thinking beings, for a healthy lesson in humility.

The suggestive forms and polished surfaces of Anita Mucolli’s metal and ceramic sculptures are laden with a narrative potential that invites us to reflect. In the face of uncertainty, fear is a poor guide, for it gives rise to violence, rejection and exclusion. Anita Mucolli counters it with the power of the imagination.

In the conversation that follows, the artist elaborates on the meaning of the exhibition design and the works that she has created for her solo show at CACY.

CONVERSATION WITH ANITA MUCOLLI

In all of your exhibitions, you plunge your audience into a specific atmosphere that can be unsettling. What effects are you trying to create?

In my practice, I try to reproduce the ambiance of specific spaces. I think an atmosphere is one of the most powerful ways to introduce a concept, because the sensation aids understanding.

So the design of my interventions is an invitation to immerse yourself in my thoughts. In the exhibition at CACY, the sound installation and the piles of crushed gravel help to accentuate the intimidating effect and cinematographic references of my works, while creating a unity between them and the place.

At CACY, the materials you've chosen for your sculptures – mainly steel and enamelled ceramic – transport the audience into a kind of futuristic laboratory. What's your intention?

I'm interested in specific spatial conditions and in spaces that are tightly supervised and controlled: hospitals, laboratories, prisons, bunkers, financial districts along with railway stations, airports and hotels. Ever since the beginnings of industrialisation, they have been directly linked to "human progress". That term is based on an anthropocentric conception of the world, and therefore the subjection of other species to human beings. Experiments to that end are carried out in laboratories. These considerations are central to my research. Consequently, I'm interested in the idea of excessive purity that characterises some of those spaces.

PURITY is the title you've given to your exhibition at CACY. What meanings do you associate with that term?

The idea of purity seems to me to be inextricably bound up with the idea of "human progress". Taken to excess, it suggests a quest for infinite perfection with the aim of prolonging life. Hygiene can be seen as one of the drivers of our civilisation. More precisely, the title *Purity* comes from my research into how racehorses are bred. During the time I've spent exploring the subject in depth, I've realised that the way animals are bred for a specific use is similar to many aspects of contemporary human life. A racehorse only belongs to a specific breed if it satisfies a whole series of conditions. Its purity isn't negotiable, and its breed is selected on the basis of certain DNA characteristics.

So purity leads to exclusion and defines beings as capable or incapable of achieving a result, worthy or unworthy of belonging to a certain category. It considers bodies as unequal and, dangerously, can suggest that one race is superior to another.

Purity is an unrealistic idea embedded in human beings' hidden desires to be more than they are: a blink in the face of eternity.

I've always been fascinated by the dystopian image of a purity that's lost its power. I'm drawn to abandoned sites and highly supervised spaces that, in order to endure, are totally inaccessible to the public – hence the exhibition design that I've come up with for CACY.

In your reflections, you link the idea of purity directly to “human progress” and the subjection of other species. Could you tell us more about that?

While I was researching the notion of purity, one subject came up again and again: the link between “human progress” and other species, and in particular the way they are made to submit. As I see it, the relationship between human beings and animals has always been troublesome because it is governed by power relations. While building a better world for themselves, human beings have created a structure that is unfair, one that categorises animals as worthy or unworthy, precious or valueless, as companions or resources to be exploited. Scientific progress often involves keeping animals in captivity and using them to obtain a result. In everything from pandemics, the climate crisis, world food supply, advances in medicine or technology to friendship or threat, human beings’ relationship with other species is directly linked to their own survival, progress and decline.

The sculpture *Open Field*, the first that visitors see when they enter CACY, is inspired by anxiety tests carried out on mice for medical purposes. *Vertigo* reproduces the form of a cage, in a reference to various systems of confinement and isolation for the purposes of control, observation, oppression and possession. In the context of this exhibition, it symbolises human beings’ sense of superiority over other species. The green light, which is typical of surveillance and security systems, accentuates the feeling of an abuse of power.

In your opinion, what are human beings trying to find through the experiments they carry out?

Purity implies that any impairment should be considered as an enemy to be combatted. Taken to its extreme, that reasoning could view death as an anomaly to be corrected. In my view, life and what it means to create it or extend it artificially is one of the most crucial questions of the 21st century.

The egg and the seed are so important to the exhibition because of the multifaceted ways in which 21st-century human beings make use of those constituent elements of life. The egg and the seed are symbols of the manipulation of life on Earth. They represent human control over biology, animals and plants. Life is conceived in such a way as to maximise utility.

The installation *Eggseeds* combines those constituent elements of life into a monstrous form which reflects the human fantasy of other possible life forms that we sometimes see depicted in literature or cinema.

In your view, does transcending biological limitations in an attempt to extend human life reflect a need to exorcise death?

Death has virtually disappeared from our everyday life; it’s been relegated to the sterile rooms of hospitals and to retirement homes. *Endings* is a sculpture in two parts that’s been set up against the wall of the columned room at CACY. It’s inspired by the tables normally used by pathologists. When you look at it, you can see your own reflection, and so you’re confronted by your own finiteness. The installation manifests the tendency to turn death into a question of pathology, like an illness for which humans need to find a cure. The work also invites us to ask why, with the beginnings of modern medicine around 200 years ago, the human body became something that can be dissected for scientific purposes.

And where does religion fit into all this?

As religion loses its importance in the workings of contemporary society, science is seeking to extend or even create life. Eternal life no longer looks like a religious matter. For example, Israeli researchers successfully created artificial mouse embryos from pure stem cells in 2022. Without adding an ovum or sperm, the stem cells were manipulated to act like a fused ovum-sperm pair and so start to divide in the way the researchers wanted in order, ultimately, to form an embryo with a detectable heartbeat.

So *The Substitute of the Divine* is a sculpture consisting of two identical parts inspired by bioreactors in which artificial life of that kind is produced.

Fear of death might be associated with fear of the unknown, the things that evade us, that we struggle to understand. In your view, is the breakneck acceleration of scientific and technological development contributing to that malaise?

The fear of death and the anxiety caused by that acceleration are important aspects of the exhibition. For example, fear of flying is one of the most common phobias among human beings, because it involves surrendering control over their lives.

The sculpture entitled *The Power of Imagination in the Face of Fear* replicates the shape of aircraft turbines. It suggests that humans' anxiety about new technologies is almost always linked to fear of death. Actually, the probability of dying in a plane crash is very low – around 3,000 times lower than dying in a car accident – suggesting that, even if unjustified, fear often prevails over reason when it comes to situations or technologies that are beyond our comprehension.

In general terms, the circle and the wheel are the thread running through this exhibition. The wheel isn't just one of the most important inventions in the history of humanity: it's also a form that has been considered to be the most perfect in the universe. And it's not surprising that the circle has always been linked to the idea of the divine and eternal.

In your view, can accepting our finiteness – our nature, basically – free us from existential angst?

Death is part of life, and vice versa. One amazing metaphor for that is the life cycle of the cuttlefish, which I've included in the exhibition at CACY in the form of ceramic sculptures that imitate the shape of their single bone. That speaks to the animal's short life, its decline being closely tied to its reproduction. The males die after mating, whereas the females start to decay shortly after laying their eggs. That means that, theoretically, cuttlefish can't live forever, in other words perpetuate their species without expiring. Biology tells us that life is in a constant relationship with death, in a fragile balance between what is about to arrive and what is about to depart.

The human body itself is a system that operates under those conditions. What would happen if that balance were upset?

In the same room, the sculpture *Who's Afraid of Eternal Tedium?* reproduces an activity wheel for animal research that's often used in experiments on laboratory rats and mice. The turning wheel describes a state of boredom, blockage or imprisonment in the eternal mills of modern life and its demands. It also symbolises eternity: what would humans do if, one day, they could live forever?

From conversations held at Basel and Yverdon-les-Bains between June 2022 and September 2023

BIOGRAPHY

Anita Mucolli was born in Burgdorf in 1993 and is an artist of Kosovar origin now living and working in Basel.
anitamucolli.com

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Purity*, Centre d'art contemporain Yverdon-les-Bains (CACY)
Limbo, KULTURFOLGER, Zurich
- 2022 *The Other*, Liste Art Fair, Hall 1.1, Basel
- 2021 *Scapes of Remembrance*, Sattelkammer, Bern

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *A Place without Walls*, The National Gallery of Kosovo, Pristina
Disappear Here, Museo Civico Villa dei Cedri, Bellinzona
- 2022 *Peace or Never*, exposition des diplômés MA & BA Fine Arts, Kunsthau Baselland, Basel
Bourses Kiefer Hablitzel | Göhner, Hall 1.1, Basel
Project 8, Space25, Basel
- 2021 *Interior*, Kunsthalle Palazzo, Liestal
Plattform 21, Palazzo Reali, Masi Lugano
Bourses Kiefer | Hablitzel Göhner Kunstpreis, Kunsthau Langenthal
- 2020 *Life, Love, Justice*, exposition des diplômés MA & BA Fine Arts, Kunsthau Baselland
We Said we Needed Space, Der Tank, Basel
- 2019 *Greetings From Paradise*, Dock, Basel
13. Jungkunst, Halle 53, Winterthur

EDUCATION

- 2020-22 MA of Fine Arts à l'Institute of Art, Gender and Nature, Academy of Art and Design (FHNW), Basel
- 2017-20 BA of Fine Arts à l'Institute of Art, Gender and Nature, Academy of Art and Design (FHNW), Basel

AWARDS AND NOMINATION

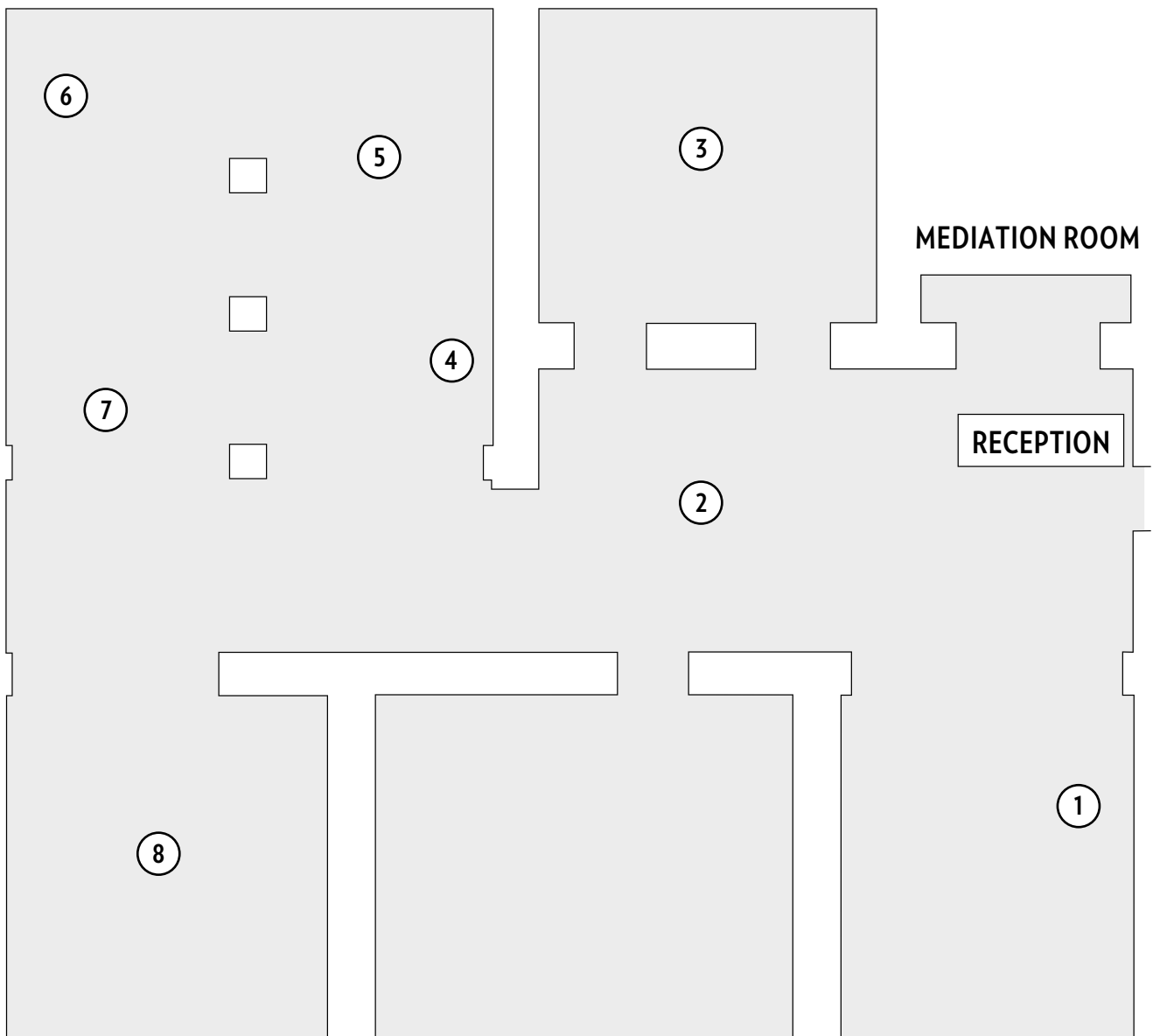
- 2022 Winner of the Kiefer Hablitzel | Göhner Art Prize
- 2021 Winner of the Helvetia Art Prize
- 2020 Nominated for the Kiefer Hablitzel | Göhner Art Prize

PUBLICATIONS

- 2020 *Kiefer Hablitzel | Göhner Kunstpreis 2020*, VfmK Verlag Für Moderne Kunst, Vienne
- 2019 *13. Jungkunst*, Verein Jungkunst, Winterthur

COLLECTIONS

- 2022 Helvetia Art Collection, Switzerland
- 2022 Roche Art Collections, Switzerland



PESTALOZZI SQUARE

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|---|--|
| <p>1. <i>Eggseeds</i>, 2023
Black enamelled ceramic
Variable dimensions</p> | <p>5. <i>The Power of Imagination in the Face of Fear</i>, 2023
Stainless steel, aluminium and plexiglass
ø : 150 cm, D : 41 cm</p> |
| <p>2. <i>Open Field</i>, 2023
Stainless steel
H : 112 cm, W : 160 cm, D : 160 cm</p> | <p>6. <i>Endings</i>, 2023
Polished stainless steel
H : 190 cm, W : 200 cm, D : 4 cm (two pieces)</p> |
| <p>3. <i>Vertigo</i>, 2023
Stainless steel
H : 220 cm, ø : 300cm</p> | <p>7. <i>Who's Afraid of Eternal Tedium?</i>, 2023
Aluminium
ø : 150 cm, D : 41 cm</p> |
| <p>4. <i>Beginnings</i>, 2023,
Black enamelled ceramic
Variable dimensions</p> | <p>8. <i>Substitute of the Divine</i>, 2023
Stainless steel, steel and plexiglass
ø : 50 cm, W : 200 cm (two pieces)</p> |

The audio work played throughout the exhibition has been realised by the artist Ana Jikia @water_nap

THANKS

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PARTNERS

