

Notes for an off-world phrenology

Is it really so sad and dangerous to be fed up with seeing with your eyes, breathing with your lungs, swallowing with your mouth, talking with your tongue, thinking with your brain, having an anus and larynx, head and legs? Why not walk on your head, sing with your sinuses, see through your skin, breathe with your belly [...]. Where psychoanalysis says, "Stop, find yourself again," we should say instead, "Let's go further still [...]"

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

'Let's go further still,' write the two wired prophets of French postmodernity, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, after inviting the reader to 'walk' with their head, 'sing' through sinuses, 'see' through the skin. The most linguistically playful, the most surreal of all recent theorists, the couple could well have been conceived in the head of Lewis Carroll. For like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* reads like an exercise in reversals, where nothing is what it seems, and where sense is approached if not through nonsense, then through a defiance of everything that is normal.

As an artist, Julia Morison has been drawn to renewing perception through inverting it; through transforming it; and through playing surreal games with her viewers and their objects. This latest offering: a collection of twenty-seven heads, many baring only rudimentary resemblance to the human head, look down on the gallery space from their shelf and urge us to see further still. Retaining appendages and apertures yet resisting a connection to human consciousness, they could have been designed for an off-world location there is something so foreign to them. And their errant playfulness is entirely in keeping with the designs of Deleuze and Guattari.

What Morison has given us here is a kit for re-imagining sentience. This kit is not the sum of its parts, or the assemblage of its sums; rather it is reminiscent of that peculiar statement in *Anti-Oedipus* that 'we always make love with worlds.' And if we lost the use of our senses in one of these worlds and were forced to rely on new ones, what might happen? What might be seen if the language of smells became mixed up irrefutably with the language of sight, or sound? What would objects be; how might they be spoken of? Psychology would domesticate these states of confusion with the term, *synaesthesia*. Deleuze and Guattari however, insist that mechanisms or counter-technologies defuse the language of analysis. Similarly, 'Headcase' derives its alien quality from a deliberate rupture of the dazzling expectations traditionally surrounding the head in western society.

In this sense Morison is riffing on earlier apprehensions. Think of her 'Accessories for a soft machine,' (1984-87) borrowing from William Burroughs; and 'Somniloquist,' (1986) an attempt to dissect the role of psychoanalyst by playing with its technologies. These works also referenced the Kabbalah – another form of analytical machine. 'Headcase' by contrast turns away from overt systematising and steps more fully into the language of surrealism.

Morison acknowledged the challenge of constructing a truly androgynous head form for this exhibition. Anatomically, male and female dimensions of the head and neck are different. Eventually settling on a wig block to provide the necessary generic mould and satisfied with its ambiguity, she chose to construct the models of glazed stoneware (occasionally, porcelain). But it is precisely this ambiguity of shape that gives 'Headcase' such weird suggestiveness: no matter where and how you look, it is impossible to make a family resemblance stick beyond the banal. You could insist, for instance, that Headcase 25 has some association with Headcase 26; you could pair Headcase 19 & 20; 1 & 13. Beyond correlating rudimentary functions, however (1 & 13 are both 'tear-catchers,' based on a performance by David Cross; in 3 & 4, the mouth is distorted - teeth dangle on threads in one; the lips are sewn shut in the other), their dimensions resist the urge to give these anthropomorphic identities.

Because face recognition remains a primal human experience, staring for too long at these body-less models can be telling. A child learns how the world works through the geography of its mother's face. Interestingly, this form of capture remains key to adult experience, for neuroscience has been able to show that facial recognition can to some extent be correlated with different locations in the brain. Nineteenth century phrenology might have been discredited as a science yet ironically, modern image resonancing has shown an indisputable connection between regions of the brain and face perception, among other human behaviours. The estranging qualities of Morison's heads however provoke discomfort, an uncanniness more at home in nightmares or science fiction. Headcase 8, 9 and 12 recall part objects from surrealism; Headcase 10, 6 and 4 summon that master of pulp horror, Howard Philips Lovecraft who invented a whole mythos to showcase saurian monsters like these. Headcase 2 conflates bitterness and prickly taste; Headcase 5 plugs the head as a sucking apparatus into a machine for sustenance. Headcase 18 contains within a miniature version of itself rather like the Russian doll effect but without its amiability. Headcase 26 happens to be based on the fibreglass bell jar sent down to Scott Base and currently held in the Canterbury Museum; whereas the impulse for Headcase 7 appears to be the foregrounding (with car bog and silver leaf) of the flawed making-process itself. Blockages and flows, crossing-points, entryways and exits: here Morison takes pleasure in the plasticity, the sheer sculpture of ends and beginnings. Everywhere you look, the unexpected collides with what Deleuze and Guattari named the 'molar' or a static system.

It is impossible to write one narrative into which each of these curious, resistant objects might feel at home. Each viewer will make a different connection within and between works and in so doing, even if for a moment, register the power of becoming. For this has surely been the key impulse of (post)modern art: to give chaos free reign in that split second before interpretation can get to work and make sense of everything. Which suggests that Julia Morison is one of our most accomplished representatives of Wonderland to date.

—Anna Smith

1 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minnesota Univ. Press, 1987: 150-51.

2 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen R. Lane. Univ. Minnesota Press, 1983: 294.

3 Simon O'Sullivan, 'From Aesthetics to the Abstract Machine: Deleuze and Guattari and Contemporary Art Practice, sourced at: <http://www.simonosullivan.net/articles/aesthetics-to-the-abstract-machine.pdf>