

**NIKITA KADAN**

**ANASTASIA POTEKINA**

*The body of Attis will not decay*

**LAURA BULIAN GALLERY**

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*The Animacy of Matter*

critical essay by **ANDREY SHENTAL**

As we know from the history of philosophy, Parmenides believed in the stability and immutability of being. Heraclytus, on the other hand, was convinced that everything is in a constant state of flux. Western philosophy has had to walk a tightrope between these two antithetical ontologies: either taming change, or animating stasis. In these times of rapid acceleration, what remains of Parmenides world view is, ironically, the sheer invariability of change itself. Stasis has become *becoming* like Charles Baudelaire's transience of *modernité* became permanence in Walter Benjamin's interpretation.

But beyond a general condition of melting into thin air — commonly known as “liquid modernity” — deeper transformative processes can be observed. Thanks to new (nano-bio-info-cogno) technologies, what had been taken as already established and constant has succumbed to change and mutation; what was complete and circumspect has lost its integrity and autonomy. More importantly, as a result of technological advancement and scientific discovery, solid entities have become mercurial and their borders porous. Even the prostheses through which they were made intelligible — identities, concepts, laws and orders — tend to be isomorphic and interpenetrable. If Antigone, Oedipus and Prometheus have been the main protagonists of modernity, two other ancient Greek figures, Agdistis and Attis, might arguably be celebrated today as our contemporaries. Even the manner in which the Phrygian myth has survived — in varying, and at times contradictory accounts and sources — presents them in the manner akin to “post-truth” media.

Nevertheless, the most widely circulated and consistent version comes from Pausanias who recounts this adventurous story: Zeus, filled with lust for Cybele, ejaculated on a stone and fathered a hermaphrodite named Agdistis. This lascivious offspring was later emasculated by Dionysus/Liber who added wine to the spring from which Agdistis drank; when he/she was intoxicated Dionysus tied his/her testicles in such a way that an erection caused his/her castration. Nana, a hypostasis of Cybele, ate the fruits of an almond tree that grew where Agdistis's blood had been spilt. As a result, she became pregnant and gave birth to Attis. Though Attis was abandoned as a child, he survived and grew to be a beautiful shepherd who, finally, was seduced by Cybele<sup>1</sup>. Such a displacement and condensation of stories into one person has created an elusive atmosphere around these names, while the vicissitudes and transfigurations of Attis/Agdistis present them as fluid and volatile beings. It is as if they were comprised of elemental particles that could be reassembled in different orders: mineral, biological, social.

<sup>1</sup> See Jaime Alvar. *Romanising Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008. Pp. 63-74.

The opening work in this exhibition refers directly to this myth. *Phrygian obelisk*, by Nikita Kadan, is a man-size obelisk alluding to Attis's body. It is surrounded by a vegetable "garden" on a tray which, in turn, refers to the ancient cult of Attis the god of vegetation. According to the rite, Attis's disciples grew lettuce and when it wilted they would throw it into a river as a celebration of the god's resurrection. Comparing this work with Giovanni Anselmo's visually similar and iconic sculpture *Untitled. Eating Structure* (1968) may clarify the artistic strategies employed in the rest of the exhibition.

Anselmo's abstract sculpture "behaves" as a human body standing upright and "consuming" leaves. As a representative of *arte povera*, the artist was concerned with the formal aspects of his sculpture. Basically, he pitted physical force (gravity) against biological process (decay) in such a way as to establish a causal relationship: degradation leads to the suspended stone falling from the obelisk. Through allegory and allusion to the myth above, Kadan creates a heavily symbolic substitute by including metal rods and an architecture catalogue from Donetsk. At the same time, however, he treats matter quite differently, highlighting its reversibility and cyclic nature. In this work, both vegetable and inanimate matter (leaves and metal) represent humanity. Hence, it suggests two possible transformations: mineral and vegetable into human and social.

Let us start from the first. In the myth, the division between animate and inanimate matter is *overcome* through the fecundation of an inanimate rock by human or divine semen. This division, which laid the foundations for modernity at least from Descartes onwards, is now undergoing revision in contemporary science and philosophy. Today, the assumption that organic substances can emerge from the interaction of chemical elements without any external intervention (the "Oparin-Haldane Hypothesis") is widely accepted and only awaits experimental validation. Recent discoveries in crystallography, geology, microbiology and other fields suggest that the earlier disconnect between the biological and mineral worlds were based exclusively on the application of human classification systems. Not only does the animate tend to become inanimate (akin to the Freudian death-drive), but the inanimate is always potentially capable of being recycled and vitalized. Furthermore, though their structures were considered quite distinct (i.e. sinuous and curved versus angular and hard), they are now revealing an ever increasing number of correspondences.

In a similar vein, the notion of animacy in linguistics and philosophy examines this dichotomous distinction from the point view of the performative power of language. We could say that in certain languages the ability to affect and be affected by an object such as a stone reveals a bio- and necro-political governance and a conceptual ordering of beings that can be defined as patriarchal, colonial and anthropocentric. "Animacy hierarchies" are privilege distribution systems where some objects are constructed as inanimate, subhuman or disabled and thus subservient, while others are seen as sentient and sapient and consequently dominant. However, since animacy remains a fluid notion in linguistics, it is, according to Mel Y. Chen, open to cognitive rescripting and can engender diverse communalism and more democratic policy<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke University Press Books, Durham, NC, 2012.

Animacy, or the ability of an object to affect and be affected, is the subject of a series of flags called *The Black Sun* and *Untitled*, a collaboration between Kadan and Potemkina. Potemkina had already dealt, in an earlier work entitled *Beautiful Maw*, with the idea of spontaneous generation — an unscientific, heuristic hypothesis, pre-dating the above-mentioned theory of abiogenesis. However, it is not the generation, but rather the eroticisation of animate matter that is the issue in the present series. Three *Instagram*-style images depict human body parts engaged in (quasi) sexual activities with stones that remind us explicitly of human sexual organs (penis, vagina and anus) sometimes pitting smooth and rounded elements against hard-edged ones.

Nevertheless, instead of projecting erotic fantasies onto a natural object, this gesture, which could be seen as a further objectification or fetishisation, endows the stones with their own animacy, affectivity and sentience. Thus, it inverts the traditional worldview in which stones are “dead” things because they seem motionless and immutable when placed on the scale of human life. Potemkina and Kadan equate the pulsating desiring human body with the allegedly static mineral world with which they are in dialogue. Following these flags, one might wonder, paraphrasing the linguist Mutsumi Yamamoto, why is *Homo sapiens* supposed to be so much more “animate” than, say, a stone?

Historically, man has invested in friendships with animals for the most part, mainly as companions or pets, while plant life has been treated as raw material (wood), nutrition (vegetables and grains) or a source of aesthetic experience (flowers). According to the classical scientific view, plants are autotrophs, they do not move in search of food, consequently they do not have a nervous system or a brain. New disciplines (for instance, plant neurobiology) examine the structure of information networks within plants and other species. The discovery of sociability, affection and even memory in the kingdom of *Plantae* has led certain scientists and philosophers to redefine the idea of consciousness as such. Following this train of thought, Michael Marder extends the definition of intelligence from synaptic interaction with the brain to a body’s interaction with its environment. If we agree with such a definition, we need to abandon the concept of “human exceptionalism” and accept that anthropocentrism is nothing but a “symptom of non-adaptation, the incongruity between us and our milieu, an incompatibility between the environment and ourselves.”<sup>3</sup>

One possible escape from this split between the human being and their surroundings could be an expansion of consciousness, where the classical distinction between subject and object would evaporate. In some of her works Potemkina achieves this by comparing the human realm with fauna where “the self” of a plant and its other are remarkably permeable. For instance, in *Untitled* she creates a kimono where the human body is indistinguishable from the fauna, both through the organic fabric used (silk) and the pattern printed on it (early plants, namely liverwort). In the series of engravings on elliptical glass *Untitled*, she approaches the issue from within.

Together, these images comprise a kind of a compendium of species that cause psychedelic effects (such as *Mandragóra*, *Éphedra*, *Ipomoea*, *Artemisia Absinthium*, *Fallopia Japonica*). By altering their state, a human could partake of a “vegetal friendship” which, as we know, would not be based on an “us and them” segregation. For this reason these works can be read as a political statement and a plea for non-exploitative coexistence.

In *Protection of Plants* (2014), a more politically overt work, Kadan radicalised Potemkina’s claim. It is a collage series where the artist applied elements of plants onto photographs showing destruction from the war with Russia in Eastern Ukraine. This simple but eloquent gesture evokes the popular idea of plants’ healing and anti-inflammatory properties (most notably the genus *plantago*). Superimposing leaves, root crops, fruits and even insects on the images of bombed and destroyed homes somehow “protects” us from the traumatic imagery while highlighting our unwillingness to see the violence done to our neighbours. But at the same time, it suggests an alternative tactic for existence: contemporary interpretations of evolutionary synthesis tell us that traditional biology has paid too much attention to competition, while ignoring communality, mutual support and beneficial cohabitation which are equally important aspects.

Finally, the miraculous transformation of the inanimate into the sentient, described in the myth of Attis, leads us to one of the last metamorphoses: the emergence of a fertile almond tree. What is interesting here is not the mere fact of castration in itself, it has a long tradition of cultural interpretation, but its unusual consequence: the transformation of the male body into a plant. In his series of watercolours *Attis* Nikita Kadan presents vivisected male organs in hues of brown and green that are reminiscent of anatomical manuals. Once exposed, these various internal parts (testes, epididymis, urethra, vas deferens, prostate gland, etc.) look like plants or fungi. These resulting chimeric forms cannot be classified under the Linnaean taxonomic system nor do they follow the patterns of any sexual dimorphism. Instead, they seem to be driven by elusive, non-quantifiable and anti-identitarian vital forces. One could say that the emasculation of Agdistis, instead of implying a loss of male sexual capacities, grants the ability to cross the boundaries between species or kingdoms. By rejecting the “monarchical structure on modes of living”, it reveals the vital and fluid force of *zoe* (life itself) that can disintegrate and reassemble endlessly.

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