

Sofia Goscinski, *Angsthase*

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"Without anxiety, there would be no creativity. And I might even say that there would be no people," said Romain Gary¹. As a key to existence, and to creativity, anxiety simultaneously and paradoxically puts a brake on them. The blank page that's not written on, the sculpture that doesn't acquire a shape, the thought that's fragmented, the communication that's not verbalised: these situations are generated by anxiety – and in particular that of failure.

Sofia Goscinski's work is marked by the triad of anxiety, creativity and existence, and by their characteristic interlocking. Existence is anxiogenic. Anxiety is existential and creative. Creativity is existential, between catharsis and necessary individuation; which is what the first two works "encountered" in the exhibition thematise. *Selfportrait for the Future* is a chrome-plated mask with a human face, long hare's ears and a man's hat, impaled on a metal rod and set on a plinth. This hybrid object combines a pop, or indeed commercial, aesthetic, in an evocation of a death mask, with that of a display unit in an anthropological museum. But on closer examination, it is seen to syncretise legacies that are generally contrasted. It is like a hybridisation of Jeff Koon's chrome-plated rabbit² and Joseph Beuys's gilded face wearing his typical hat and explaining paintings to a dead hare³. Goscinski's face, appearing here for the first time in her work, was moulded to obtain the mask. Between superstar artists, she and her entire generation are subject to an historical heritage often dominated by male positions that are "loud", or even macho. Her own "bunny" inverts the empty-headedness displayed by the sexy "bunnies" of popular imagery. Both grotesque and absurd, it reflects its environment on its surface. In other words, it grabs us. It absorbs us. But it also evades us. It induces a Lacanian "Unheimlichkeit", or "uncanniness", that occupies a specular register. The image that sustains us simultaneously gives a glimpse of something "beyond", something elusive, something elsewhere, outside of symbolic reach.

Behind *Selfportrait for the Future*, at the far end of the space, is a work that speaks to us in a very different way. It is a standard punchbag, hanging on a chain from the (high) ceiling, covered in rabbit skin. Awaiting a hug, or a punch, the rotund form calls for a physical response, whether affectionate or aggressive. This may be a hint on the artist's part: for her, as for us, the expression of subjectivity involves cathartic eruptions. The training function remains clearly identifiable. As a phallic symbol, it is smothered in the luxurious fur that covers and embellishes it. The eponymous *Angsthase*, from the German word for a coward who takes off (like a hare!) at the slightest danger, determines the exhibition in a twofold way, through its irony and its tragic dimension. Faced with anxiety and historical or ideological conditioning, what strategy can an artist bring to bear, other than flight, camouflage or patience?

Places, figures and action are crystallised in both graphic, photographic and sculptural works. An index of oddities and hybridisations, props, masks, or again mysterious sketches. Holes stand upright, men have rabbit ears, rabbits have none, and props are covered in fur. On the ground floor, imagery and technique vary from one work to another. With those on the mezzanine, there are subtle divergences from reality. Some bear traces of this, or constitute its obverse, as in the mouldings or the photographs, such as *Selfportrait for the Future*, or *Cast Of A Rabbit Hole*.

¹ In *Pseudo*, 2012 (1976), published under the pseudonym Emile Ajar.

² *Rabbit*, 1986.

³ Beuys's celebrated performance took place at the Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf, in 1965.

By contact, Goscinski shapes and fleshes out beings, but also essentially improbable, impossible or unthinkable places. A series of painted drawings on paper show the outlines of a black parallelepiped, hollow like a vase, but opaque. The *Sketches (for Rabbit Holes)* are in fact studies based on a rabbit-hole motif. A geometric volume, like a black box containing an entire space – a space for withdrawal, and at the same time a space without an exit. A metaphor of the brain? Goscinski's works map out (and ritualise) the places of her thinking. Seven large photographic panels show totemic forms, between stelae and boundary markers. As the title of the series, *Cast of a Rabbit Hole*, indicates, these are black-and-white images enlarged by mouldings, in negative, of hares' burrows verticalised and photographed. Goscinski transforms narrow spaces of refuge and survival, necessarily invisible, into monuments on a human scale that bring together, in weird ways, species and their creations.

Throughout the exhibition, the human figure (apart from the artist's face) is both nowhere and everywhere, by default, in the dimensions of the works, their incitement to interaction and their production. This is a presentation of what Goscinski has internalised, and which at the same time has incorporated her. Lying on the ground in the space marked out by the raised-up rabbit holes there is a terracotta sculpture, *Untitled (I killed my Angsthase)*. It is a small creature, half-man, half-rabbit, its fragility accentuated by the massive character of the photographs. Where the face with ears of the *Selfportrait*, on the ground floor, recalls Harmony Korine's *Gummo*⁴, this rabbit projects us, rather, into the sombre universe of Donnie Darko and his manipulation by a hallucinatory double with a death's head and hare's ears⁵. In *I killed my Angsthase*, the "I" has overcome its anxiety. Here, the animal is a transfer.

But the work cannot be reduced to a psychoanalytic interpretation. It evokes animist myths, and denotes a signposted history of the arts. Goscinski integrates its symbols into her own aesthetics. Constructed images float in tension towards a resolution which, though seemingly imminent, never occurs. But who's speaking? Who's the victim? The place of death you enter – is it a place of grieving, or of liberation? Goscinski disconcerts the viewer both aesthetically, by undermining any possible trendiness, and also conceptually, by concealing the interpretive trails. The tension emitted by the works is powerful. One doesn't feel totally at ease. The anxiety stems firstly from a sense of the imminence of what escapes representation. But it also suggests another, whose intentions are enigmatic, or an "elsewhere" that cannot be represented. Victims of anxiety are often unable to say anything about it, other than to describe the effects it produces on the body, i.e. its physiological symptoms: aggression, asphyxiation, dizziness. These show that anxiety is not without a body – and a body which is not, perhaps, limited to being the place of the ordeal of anxiety, but which also generates it.

The duplicity of language, its indexical (dys)function and the mixture of languages contribute to this anxiety, as do the intricacies in the titles and images of the animal, its habitat, and human life. Nor is humans' use of animals spared. Rather than separating out the different realms, with a view to identifying and pinning down that which is the human being – or perhaps the artist? – Goscinski proposes a hybridisation experiment in "becoming animal". Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari had already put forward this metaphorical fusion in *Mille Plateaux*, 1980, whose political aim was to break down the frontiers modernity had established between humanity and the animal kingdom, reason and intuition, life and survival; and immersion in the minority experience. Beuys said he wanted to speak for animals, which couldn't speak for themselves. But he also wanted to impose his logic of production and his

⁴ An independent film (1997) on "white trash" culture and adolescent boredom in small-town America, aggravated by the passage of a tornado.

⁵ The eponymous anti-hero of Richard Kelly's 2001 film *Donnie Darko* is a young schizophrenic tormented by fear, and by hallucinations that lead him to commit crimes.

scale of values. The white Western male remained the measure of all things. By contrast, the symbols constructed by Goscinski deconstruct the unified figure of the artist. Her work expresses not only the impossibility of communication, and isolation – in relation to normalisation and discipline – but also permeability to another way of thinking.

In Goscinski's work, the negative, the inexplicable, the animal, the unconscious and the intuitive are used to disrupt rational (and anxiogenic) logics of production.

"The truth is you already know what it's like. You already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. As though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes.

But it does have a knob, the door can open. But not in the way you think... The truth is you've already heard this. That this is what it's like. That it's what makes room for the universes inside you, all the endless inbent fractals of connection and symphonies of different voices, the infinities you can never show another soul. And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees? Of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock. But at the same time it's why it feels so good to break down and cry in front of others, or to laugh, or speak in tongues, or chant in Bengali – it's not English anymore, it's not getting squeezed through any hole. So cry all you want, I won't tell anybody."

In David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion*, 2004