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Hybrids: Human Monsters, Terrorist Dolls and Cyborgs

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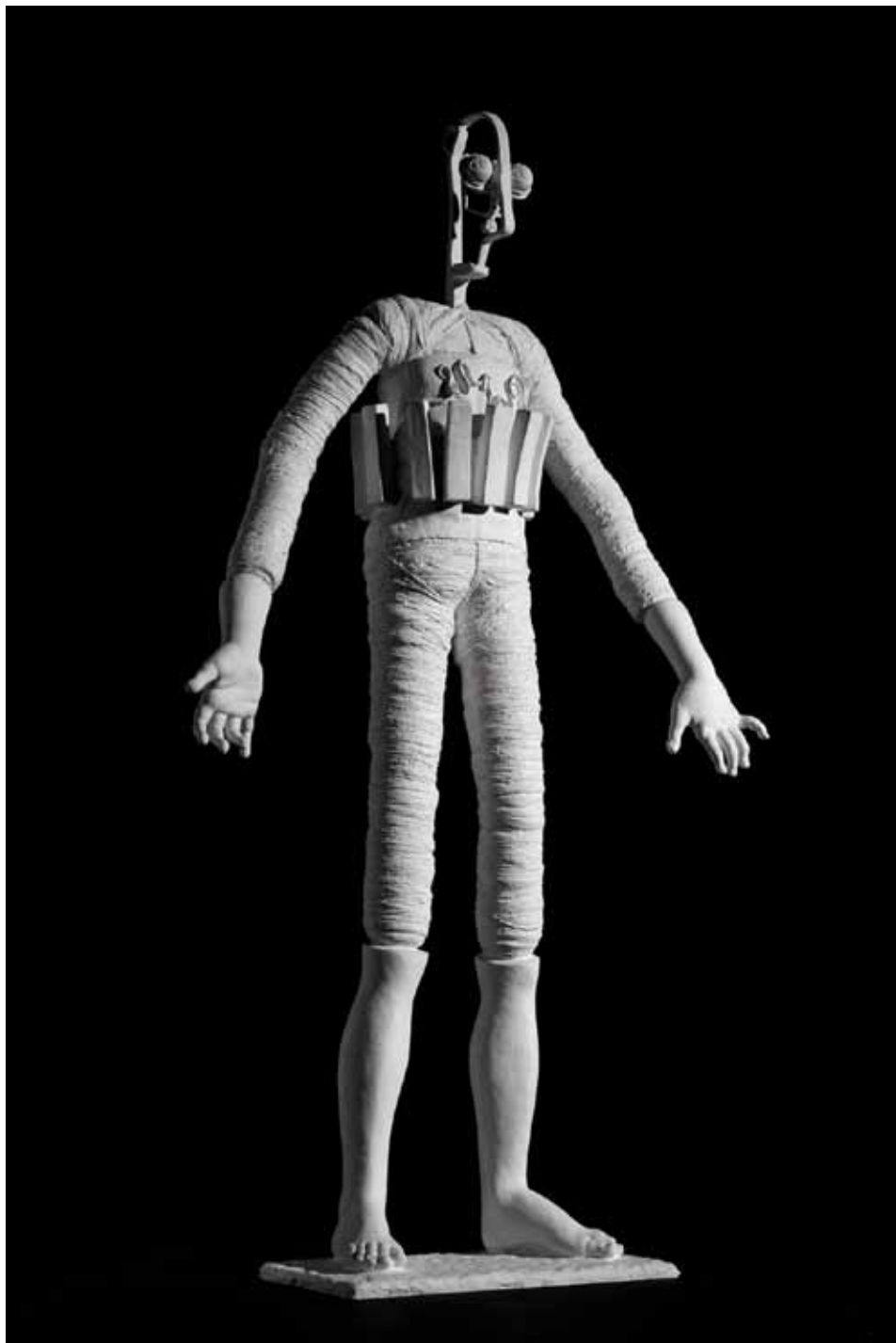
The present essay addresses a fundamental cultural mechanism – the relationship between the self and the other – that is also a recurring issue in Grisha Bruskin’s research. The dynamic relationship between identity and alterity produces a number of hybrids that inevitably reconfigure the limits and meaning of Bruskin’s images. In his work, the monster and the hybrid are truly “symbolic forms”: his piece *Scene Change* features a gallery of identities transformed by grafts and reconfigurations, and anatomies created by means of surprising connections. The recurring reference to alterity takes a variety of forms such as the invalid, the freak, and other non-standard modes of existence¹.

Bruskin’s hybrid figures, often at the crossroads between reality and virtuality, also appear to be located somewhere between the present, the past, and the future, all the while reasserting their marked plasticity. Although he relies on a stunning variety of media², Bruskin always seems compelled to give a three-dimensional expression to his signs: even in his pictorial works the figures must “come down” from the bi-dimensional surface of the painting and “come into” the third dimension³. *Scene Change* is yet another testimony to this recurring characteristic of Bruskin’s artistic language.

Despite merging different time frames, the installation remains focused on the contemporary age and on our perception thereof. It addresses the more or less concrete fears we may have about the world by incarnating them into hybrid images that take us beyond the limits of what is considered natural.

Through these images, we experience the transition from “enemy” to “monster”, as expressed by the variations on the key figure of the terrorist. These figures illustrate the gap that separates diversity and difference from established and acknowledged norms. This is also how we may interpret one of the most shocking figures in the series, namely that of the child terrorist, a distortion of the everyday, harmless representation of childhood. From the very beginning, the ambivalence of the monster is thus directly manifested in its ontological essence, as we shall also see below.

The monster may be considered as antithetical to the self, and as the quintessential “enemy”. However, while the enemy tends to be concrete, solid, and in most cases anthropomorphic, the figure of the monster is far more abstract, ambivalent and vaguely defined. From a theoretical viewpoint, monsters and hybrids are powerful expressions of the dichotomy between the “self” and the “other” (or between “us” and “you”). Such a dichotomy has been the object of extensive enquiries in the fields of philosophy and cultural studies, and has been defined by Giorgio Agamben as “the inhumanity of the human”⁴. From another theoretical viewpoint, the hybrid is a subclass of the wider category of the “monster”, as noted by Zakiya Hanafi:



“A monster is ‘not human’, then, and explicitly signals its foreign status with its body: too many limbs, or not enough, or not in the right place. Monsters are ugly because they are de-formed, literally ‘out of shape’, deviating from the beauty of standardized corporeal order. I know I am human because I am not *that*. The monster serves to erect the limits of the human at both its ‘lower’ and ‘upper’ thresholds: half-animal or half-god, what its other is monstrous. Another fundamental meaning of the monster – perhaps the most important aspect for an anthropological understanding of its mythological and social significant – is its hybrid character”⁵.

The Latin term *monstrum*⁶ belongs to the field of phantasmagoria. As for the Greek term *phantasia* (from the verb *phainomai*), this refers to images and imagination, but also to representation, i.e. to the act of bringing to light and presenting to the eye and mind what would otherwise be concealed. As suggested by its etymology, *monstrum* comes from the word *monere*, which means both “to warn” and “to preserve the trace and memory of something”. The word *monere* also gives us the word *monumentum*, and indeed the notions of “monster” and “monuments” are strongly intertwined. Images, including revolting ones, always reveal what was meant to remain hidden. A monster is both a warning and a return of what has been repressed.

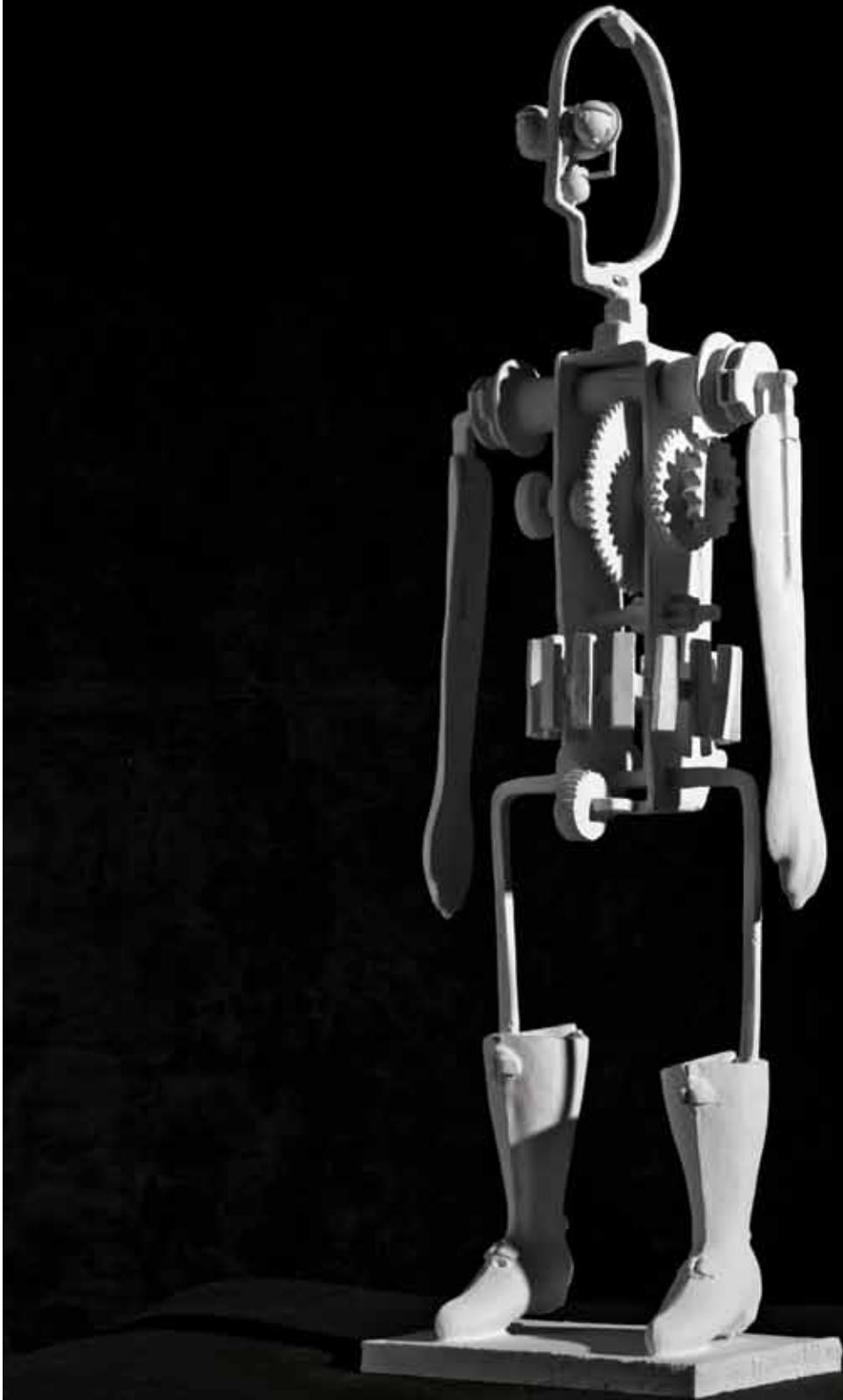
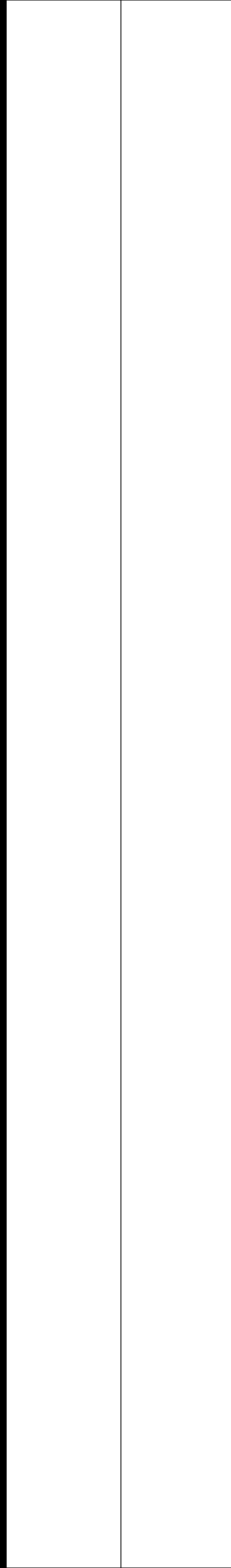
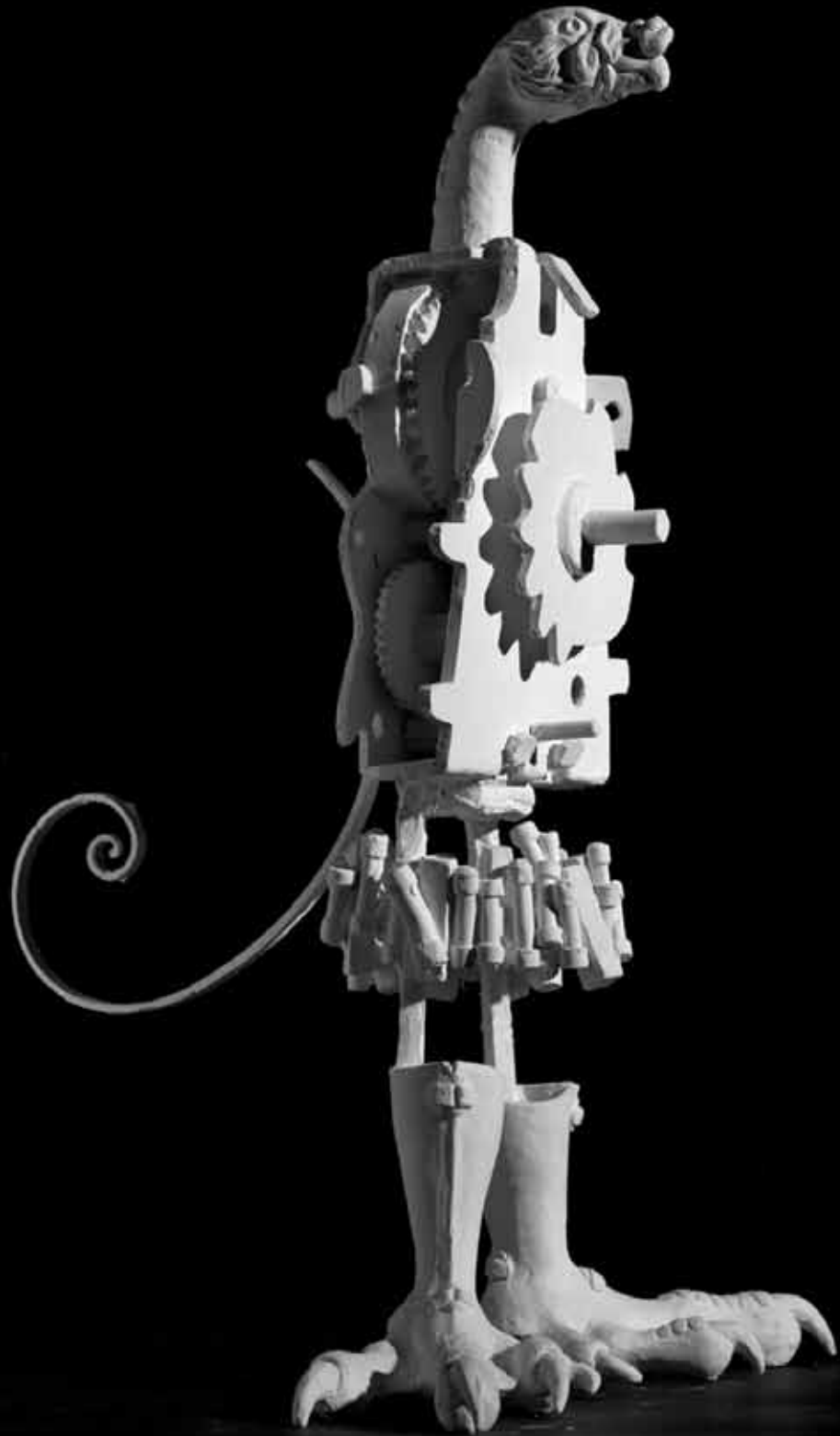
Ancient gods would often have monstrous features, quite different from the shapely and timeless bodies conventionally attributed to gods and heroes. These misshapen manifestations disrupt the repetition of regular morphologies. Although such figures can be found in any artistic period, today they seem to assert themselves with remarkable emphasis. In today’s proliferation of forms, and especially in contemporary art, hybrids and monsters appear as “vectors”. As avatars of monsters of the past and the symbols of a new crisis, these monster figures are neither accidental occurrences through the ages, nor the fruit of the peculiar imagination of an individual artist at a given time. They always betray some strong spiritual turmoil. If, in the Middle Ages, they were collected as a form of celebration of monstrosity, today they seem to mark the end of modernity and the beginning of what is sometimes called the “post-modern” or “post-human” age. In a way: “The humanist discovery of man is the discovery that he lacks himself, the discovery of his irremediable lack of *dignitas*”⁷.

For the Greek, the greatest sin was the sin of *hybris*, an unacceptable violation of the cosmic order: centaurs, chimera, satyrs – by the mere, arrogant configuration of their bodies – dared to challenge the ironclad necessity of a world organised into categories⁸. It is no coincidence that the term “hybrid” comes from the Medieval Latin *hibridus*, which in turn is

left page
Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist n°1*.
2015–2017. Mixed media

following pages
Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist n°3*.
2015–2017. Mixed media

Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist n°2*.
2015–2017. Mixed media





derived from *hybris*. The interest of contemporary art in biological forms as bizarre as those of the monsters of the past is the expression of a kind of modern hybrid, but is also symptomatic of the crisis of our society. The monster is not only a threatening, incomprehensible and unpredictable enemy, “the other”, “the stranger” who exists outside of commonly accepted measures and norms: its mere existence and appearance violate not only social laws, but also natural ones⁹. The phenomenon of hybridization covers a wide range of meanings and involves a variety of fields such as biology, technology, specific trends of thought, arts, literature and basically every form of expression¹⁰.

Far from being an isolated phenomenon, Bruskin’s hybrid monsters should be considered in the light of other images, such as Gelij Korzhev’s *tyurliki*; Dmitriy Prigov’s bestiary; the chimeras of AES+F; Boris Orlov’s semi-human columns (the Eastern counterpart to the fantastic creatures of Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster*); Orlan’s *Self-Hybridizations* (in which the artist’s own face is digitally merged with images from temporally and culturally remote civilizations such as pre-Colombian masks and votive statues, and late 19th-century ethnographic photographs of African and Native American indigenous people¹¹); and Aurel Schmidt and David Altmejd’s assemblage of heterogeneous fragments into human figures. All of these works may be considered as experiments, as attempts to rethink reality and humanity.

They all remind us of the importance of the “other” and invite us to rethink, or perhaps to overcome rigid and specific norms not only on an individual level, but also on the level of an entire society or culture. This illustrates to the highest degree how the intrusion of the extra-systemic into a system may prompt the transformation and global re-interpretation of a closed and static identity. The clash between different entities and the necessity of finding a common language for mutual communication and understanding lead to a re-configuration of the respective borders, or rather to a “structural reconfiguration of the sense of borders between self-enclosed semiotic worlds”¹². The above-mentioned considerations are particularly relevant to the contemporary debate about cultural hybridization and about the syncretism between languages, ethnicities, traditions and customs known as “cultural métissage”¹³.

For Bruskin, the hybrid is certainly related to the reflections on the body that marked artistic production in the 20th and 21st centuries. This so-called “trans-human” phase overcame what were previously regarded as essential limitations and led to the notion of a “hyper-body” that can absorb and encompass parts of other humans, animals, plants, minerals and new technologies. This brought about a change of identity in which the body became “a large hyper-body, a social and techno-biological hybrid”¹⁴.

previous pages
Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist n°4*.
2015–2017. Mixed media

Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist n°5*.
2015–2017. Mixed media

Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist n°6*.
2015–2017. Mixed media

Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist n°7*.
2015–2017. Mixed media

On the margins of mutant morphologies, we witness the passage from fixed images to their mental persistence. The body transforms in order to adapt to the current chaos.

Hybrids are traditionally represented as anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures, as the fruit of cross-contaminations between the two, or as the result of a fusion with grafted artificial limbs. Within this general perspective, I have tried to identify several typologies of representation in *Scene Change*¹⁵:

a. “Human monsters”: zoomorphic images which, in an ideal taxonomy, have undergone a process of “chimerization” (химеризация), leading to the creation of a fantastic figure. The combination of existing creatures produces a new meaning that is different from the sum



of each individual component. The “human monster” is a recurring figure in contemporary art, as testified in the 1990s by Korzhev’s *tjurliki* or Jake and Dinos Chapman’s *Tragic Anatomies*; Rona Pondick’s sculptures merged her own image with the body of animals and plants; and the creatures of Daniel Lee and Patricia Piccinini blurred the distinction between humans and animals. The grotesque figures of “human monsters” expose the precariousness, finitude and randomness of our own condition. Bakhtin wrote that the grotesque body is never defined nor given, but is constantly construed and created: it swallows and is swallowed by the world¹⁶. Accordingly, the artist creates a world inhabited by freely composed creatures such as those seen in the sculptures of Paul McCarthy or Annette Messager. Disharmonious, obscene, and inconsistent, the grotesque body is interested in everything that transcends borders. It is not clean, healthy, young and proper. The transgression into

Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist n°8*.
2015–2017. Mixed media

Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist n°9*.
2015–2017. Mixed media

Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist n°10*.
2015–2017. Mixed media

Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist n°11*.
2015–2017. Mixed media



monstrosity, thus, appears as a pivotal trend of contemporary art, to which it contributes somewhat apocalyptic undertones.

b. “Terrorist (and therefore monstrous) dolls” appear in the form of a packed group of sculptures. Their shapes have undergone a kind of “gorgonization”, i.e. the transformation or slippage of a positive image – previously a god or hero, or in this case a beloved toy – into a monstrous, revolting and evil figure. Bruskin’s doll-statues are indeed “gorgonized”: the anthropomorphic images of the terrorist child or of the women wearing suicide vests turn reassuring everyday signs into monstrous and threatening ones. Any object charged with some significance within a given cultural system usually serves two functions¹⁷: in addition to the direct function, which satisfies a number of social requirements, there is a “metaphorical” one. As the former function increases, the latter can manifest itself with extraordinary aggressiveness. We are inevitably reminded of the twisted and convulsive beauty of Hans Bellmer’s dolls or of Victor Brauner’s morphologies. The doll aptly incarnates this polarity, provided we distinguish it from its appearance as a statue or three-dimensional human representation: a statue is meant to be looked at and requires an audience that acts as the recipient of any information provided by the artistic text. The doll, for its part, is meant to be touched, manipulated, and requires an audience that does not only look but also takes part in the game. The statue is the medium of someone else’s creation; the doll invites us to become creators ourselves.

Bruskin’s doll-statues are a highly complex cultural text, at the crossroads between toys, theatre puppets and automatons. They have at least two personalities: one evokes the welcoming world of childhood, the other, a pseudo-life that is fake and “theatrical”. They serve as scene props to which Bruskin, as the creator, must also assign some kind of “mythology”. Some of his dolls remind us of Cindy Sherman’s mutilated dolls, but also of some important works by Paul McCarthy, such as his *Garden* (1991–1992). The doll always carries a second world that comes to life through play: the same happens on stage through role-play and masks.

Figures from the series *Terrorist* (n° 1, 4, 10 and 12) belong to this typology, but they are also anatomies that the artist has torn apart and sewn back together, like a modern Ovidian Prometheus or Dr Frankenstein¹⁸. Isolated human parts are a recurring topic of contemporary art, from Robert Gober to Raquel Paiewonski. *Disiecta membra* are used in all kinds of assemblages and precarious patchworks: in *Terrorist* n° 10 and 12, for instance, the individual parts seem to have an autonomous life: rather than inert dummies, they are stage figures. From a sin and a peril, *hybris* therefore becomes a stimulus to deconstruct and reconstruct the world: the artist is given free rein to create.

Grisha Bruskin. *Terrorist* n°12.
2015–2017. Mixed media

c. The third group of sculptures is associated with a process of “cyberization” (киберизация), i.e. the creation of imaginary creatures generated by scientific means with strong technological features. The most evident example is that of the two-headed eagle, movement created by a mechanical device located in its chest (*Eagle* and *Eagle and Crowd*). The history of film provides hundreds of instances of such hybrids between humans and machines, e.g., robots, cyborgs, or androids. Some of the best-known instances are *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang (1927), *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott, and also an absolute classic such as *2001. A Space Odyssey* (1968), directed by Stanley Kubrick. Contemporary art encourages hybridizations with what is truly different from oneself, with what is genuinely non-cultural: the inanimate, the inorganic, the animal, and the monstrous. Orlan and Stelarc graft all kinds of mechanical and bionic prostheses onto their own bodies, as if to expose the obsolescence of the body. As cultural beings, humans need to confront what was previously outside the cultural sphere. Now, however, the borders are blurred, and the distinction between cultural and non-cultural requires a high degree of relativism. Contemporary art needs not only the notion of the other in order to define alterity, but also a reconfiguration of the borders between what is outside and inside culture, and hence outside and inside humanity. This group also includes a series of herms with technological grafts. The ambivalence of the monster in *Scene Change* also emerges from its axiological and ethical features: the monster is both an aggressor and a victim, as shown in the representation of the crowd. In the mass culture of the last decades, the ambivalence of the monster adopts a slightly different perspective. Parallel to a more traditional perception associated with the Freudian notion of *unheimlich*, contemporary culture is trying to formulate an entirely different image of the monster.

To conclude, Bruskin’s hybrids are post-human creatures that are carriers of *hybris* in the sense of excess and outrage, and challenge of the accepted limits. Roland Barthes¹⁹ defined the monster as that which transgresses the separation between natural kingdoms, mingling plants and animals; it is the excess that changes the quality of that which has been named by God. Umberto Eco, for his part, reminds us that “the monstrous represents the breaking of natural laws, the danger and the irrational which is out of human control”²⁰. Thus, through his creative *hybris*, Bruskin questions the absolute value of the human shape and of the anthropomorphic ideal, and underlines its fragility, its “open” form and ambiguous and elusive meaning, thereby contributing a highly original perspective to one of the most important topics of the 21st century.

¹ See for instance the installation *Grisha Bruskin: H-Hour*, ed. P. Donegan, exh. cat. (Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow, 3 September–3 October 2012), Bielefeld/Berlin, Kerber, 2013.

² See *Grisha Bruskin. Alefbet: The Alphabet of Memory*, eds. G. Barbieri, S. Burini, exh. cat. (Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice, 12 February–13 September 2015), Crocetta del Montello (TV), Terra Ferma Edizioni, 2015; *Grisha Bruskin. An Archaeologist’s Collection*, eds. G. Barbieri, S. Burini, exh. cat. (Collateral Event of the 56. Biennale di Venezia, Former Church Santa Caterina, Venice, 7 May–22 November 2015), Crocetta del Montello (TV), Terra Ferma Edizioni, 2015.

³ This fascinating subject is reminiscent of a well-known Russian *topos*: the icon or image that comes to life. I intend to address this topic in the near future, especially in connection with Bruskin’s work *Fundamental’nyj leksikon* (1986).

⁴ G. Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal*, Engl. transl. K. Attell, Stanford, Stanford UP, 2004, p. 30.

⁵ Z. Hanafi, *The Monster in the Machine. Magic, Medicine, and the Marvellous in the Time of the Scientific Revolution*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2000, p. 2.

⁶ J. Clair, *Hubris: la fabrique du monstre dans l’art moderne; homuncules, géants et acéphales*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012 (It. transl. *Hybris. La fabbrica del mostro nell’arte moderna; omuncoli, giganti e acefali*, Monza, Johan & Levi, 2015).

⁷ Agamben, *The Open*, cit., p. 30.

⁸ See N.R.E. Fischer, *Hybris. A Study in the Values of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greece*, Warminster, Aris and Phillips, 1992.

⁹ See V.I. Stoichita, *L’image de l’Autre*, Paris, Louvre Éditions, 2014.

¹⁰ The origins of the phenomenon are extremely remote, as testified by one of the most ancient artefacts we have: the 30.000 year-old ivory statue of a human being with the head of some animal (bear or lion), discovered in 1939 in the Stadel cave near Ulm and now conserved at the Ulm Museum.

¹¹ See Orlan. *Le récit. The narrative*, exh. cat. (Musée d’art moderne, Saint Etienne, 26 May–26 August 2007), eds. L. Hegyi, E. Viola, Milan, Charta, 2007, pp. 44–46.

¹² S. Burini, *Jurij Lotman e la semiotica delle arti figurative*, in J. Lotman, *Il girotondo delle muse. Saggi sulla semiotica delle arti e della rappresentazione*, Bergamo, Moretti & Vitali, 1998, p. 144.

¹³ F. Laplantine, A. Nouss, *Il pensiero meticcio* (1997), It. transl. Milan, Elèuthera, 2006, p. 61.

¹⁴ See F. Alfano Miglietti, *Identità mutanti. Dalla piega alla piaga: esseri delle contaminazioni contemporanee*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2008, p. 18.

¹⁵ See E. Shapinskaya, *Monstruoznyj drugoj v verbal’nykh i vizual’nykh tekstakh kul’tury*, in “Polignosis”, 1–2 (38), 2010.

¹⁶ M. Bakhtin, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i Narodnaya kul’tura srednevekov’ya i Renessansa*, Moskva, Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1990.

¹⁷ See J. Lotman, *Le bambole nel sistema di cultura*, in *Testo e contesto. Semiotica dell’arte e della cultura*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1980, pp. 145–151.

¹⁸ This is not the Prometheus of Plato’s *Protagoras*, who stole the fire of knowledge from the gods, but a later occurrence of the myth mentioned in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, where Prometheus creates a human shape out of clay and makes it come to life, not unlike Dr Frankenstein.

¹⁹ See R. Barthes, *Arcimboldo ou Rhétoricien et Magicien*, in Id., *Arcimboldo*, Parma, Franco Maria Ricci Editore, 1978.

²⁰ U. Eco, *Il nostro mostro quotidiano*, in Id., *Apocalittici e integrati*, Milan, Bompiani, 1982, p. 384.

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