

## **Meeting with Michael Najjar**

**Barbara Oudiz**

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With his newest project, Bionic Angels, German-born Michael Najjar juggles a slew of weighty, intoxicating issues. He believes that mankind could be poised on the brink of a major transformation via the so-called GRIN technologies (Genetics, Robotics, Information and Nano-technologies). These, he is convinced, are not only producing radical changes in our society but will also generate, in a not-too-distant future, incalculable transformations in the human body, leading us to what he calls an era of "post human existence" and a new challenge for mankind: immortality.

Over tea on a rainy day in Paris, a few steps from the frenzy and bustle of the Paris Photo fair, Michael Najjar talked to Eyemazing about how his art strives to interpret the impact of new technologies on people and society. And to issue a wakeup call for mankind.

### **Barbara Oudiz: You've lived and worked in Berlin since 1988, when you first studied photography in a groundbreaking program dealing with new technologies...**

Michael Najjar: Yes, it was a key influence on my work. I studied for five years at the Bildo Academy, a private university, in a program that combined photography, computer, and video. It was the very first program of its kind in "new media art", with only ten students and four teachers. It was an incredible chance to build up this new field; a very intense but quite positive experience. I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing today without it.

### **B.O. How did the public react to this new media art in the 1990s?**

M.N. The reaction was amazing. I did a body of work called "Viva Fidel", about social and political aspects of life in Cuba, which got people very upset. It was actually the starting point of my career. The photo report, in black and white, was published in 1997 in the German newspaper "Taz" but without mentioning the fact that I had digitally altered some of the pictures. People were shocked. They sent dozens of letters to the editor saying: What's going on here? It was a very early time to show that photography was going to the next level, to digital photography. People still felt the need to believe that photography related to what exists in reality. For me, the reactions were a

revelation. I realized that I had hit a nerve. It gave me the idea to question the medium more and more, to bring it to a new level, which I call "hybrid photography". Soon after the publication, I got an invitation for my first museum show, in Hamburg.

**B.O. With time, you seem to have become increasingly interested in themes dealing with science and technology...**

M.N. My thoughts are constantly turning around the idea of technology and its impact on social structures today. My series Netropolis, made between 2003 and 2006, dealt with the future development of mega cities all over the world. It was about the increased density of urban structure combined with the increased density of information, about how the data flows circulate among all these mega cities. These mega cities have become a material embodiment of information.

**B.O. So the link between the Netropolis series and Bionic Angels is man and his technological environment...**

M.N. Yes, it is the fact that our environment has become so complex that the human body in its natural state can no longer survive. Our bodies haven't changed in the last 30,000 years, while our environment is changing constantly. We were not made to survive in this kind of complex environment, so the next step, in my opinion, is that the human body will be transformed to adapt to the speed of these data highways in order to survive. There will be a very natural evolution towards technology actually entering the human body. I personally would really like to have better and quicker access to technology. I lose too much time in planes, in turning on my computer etc. I could create much more if I could live in a virtual world, if I wasn't restricted and bound by limitations of the real world. This is what the Bionic Angels series illustrates. It takes as a starting point the impact of GRIN technologies on human evolution.

**B.O. Did the subject require a lot of research?**

M.N. I spent roughly six months meeting and talking to a lot of scientists and doctors, in close collaboration with the Charité hospital in Berlin, which strongly supported my project. They gave me access to labs and to research departments, I was given lots of information about what they were working on in the area of GRIN technologies. I also read and investigated a lot on my own, to get an overview of the subject. I put all these elements together and developed a projection into the future, of the probable results of these developments.

**B.O. What conclusion did you reach?**

M.N.I learned that the desire to take control of human evolution is linked to a very ancient notion in humanity. I realized that ever since the beginning of mankind, immortality has been the driving force. Man has always searched for ways to overcome death.

**B.O. There is a clearly futuristic dimension to your work, yet some pieces in Bionic Angels also evoke ancient times.**

M.N.The series is linked both visually and conceptually to two eras in human history. One is ancient Greece, the other is the Italian Renaissance.The Greeks had an idealized vision of the human body, especially as expressed in the arts and sculpture. This vision referred to the cultural, political and philosophical system that was developing in Greek society at the time. It was tied to the way they imagined a perfect individual should look, to the idea that there was a relation between the perfect functioning of the Greek state and the human body.

As for the Italian Renaissance, it was the first time in history that the human body was no longer perceived as something purely divine, given by God. A secular view of the human body began to emerge and tended more toward scientific discoveries. Michelangelo and Da Vinci were not only artists, they also had enormous knowledge of science and anatomy. The first autopsies were performed at this time. All this contributed to important changes in the perception of human existence. Today we're at a similar turning point, on the edge of change. We are asking ourselves: What does it mean to be human?

**B.O. So are the Bionic Angels sending out a warning of sorts, and if so, what role can photography play in protecting humanity?**

M.N. The series is not really a danger sign. What I am trying to say is : Open your eyes. There's something happening that you're not necessarily aware of, something that is going to produce a fundamental change .We are going to evolve into a new species, which I call "the post human body". That is going to happen anyway, there's nothing we can do to prevent it. But the danger is if we just let scientists completely control that change, the new creation of humanity. What happens if your body becomes a sort of brand, used by corporations or scientists?

**B.O. Let's look at a few specific pieces in the series. The Cryonic tanks for example.**

M.N. This was shot at the Cryonic Institute, near Detroit, Michigan. Each tank contains six human bodies, frozen at -198° C. This is to preserve the bodies and neuron structure, with the idea that one day scientists will be able to reanimate them. The director of the Cryonic Institute, Robert Ettinger, invented this technology in the 60s and this is still going on today. In some ways these tanks are like the ancient Egyptian pyramids in which bodies were being preserved for the next life.

**B.O. And the Laocoon, with the snake wrapped around the bodies?**

M.N. This refers to the name of the Trojan priest who sent out a warning to his people that a horse had been sent by the Greeks, and that a danger may be hidden inside. The Greek gods sent out snakes to kill Laocoon and his children because of this warning. If you look closely you'll see the snake here is made to look like a flow of data that is not killing, but infiltrating the body. That refers to the idea that technology enters our body and alters our identity. Of course that's the main point: we really don't know what will happen the day that occurs, how it will transform us.

**B.O. And the robot that looks as if it's gone mad?**

M.N. This is linked to the Greek myth of Prometheus, the titan who created mankind by stealing fire from the gods. By providing the technology of fire, he allowed society to develop and progress. This robot really exists at the Charité hospital in Berlin and performs heart or stomach surgery. It repairs damaged bodies but there is no surgeon in the room. The surgeon can be in a control room in New York and conduct an operation on a patient in Berlin via a camera inserted into the body that sends him 3D images. When I saw this, I thought to myself: if a robot is able to repair a human body, it will also soon be able to create a human body! What we are facing now is not that God is creating human beings, but that man is creating man. The next step could be that machines are creating man.

**B.O. In the portrait of the blond Bionic Angel, she seems to be surrounded by shattered glass or stands of hair.**

M.N. These are actually her own fiber tracks, the pathways in your brain along which neurons move. I sent the model to get a brain scan at Charité. With the huge amount of data I got, I created a 3D model of her fiber tracks and combined them with her portrait, thereby mixing her physical appearance with the inner, invisible structures of her brain.

The idea behind this image is that the human body will be transformed into an interface with technology. This means that in the future, we will have different ways of communicating, brain to brain links, etc.

**B.O. And Danaë, in a chair with a gold cloud hanging above her?**

M.N. This idea came about after learning of the existence of nano-foglets, which allow scientists to shape or transform the physical appearance of an object by manipulating its molecular structure. The gold cloud refers to the Greek myth of Danaë and Zeus. The king locked his daughter Danaë in a room so no man could touch her. Zeus transformed himself into foglets of gold rain. He was thereby able to dematerialize and slip into room through a small hole, then rematerialize once inside the room and seduce her. I have reinterpreted this myth. The idea is that every element can be transformed into a level of pure molecular structure, then rematerialize into another structure. You'll see there is also a body hidden in the clouds, which is more visible in a large format of image. My photographs are printed in very large formats, 1m98x 1m78, or 1m48x 2m48.

**B.O. Each photo is framed in a very special way as well...**

M.N. They are in heavy, custom-made wood Renaissance frames. What is special about them is that each frame has ornaments on it. I conceive these graphic ornaments on a computer and then give them to the frame maker who paints them onto the frame. The ornaments are related to the contents of the image. They are like hyperlinks for understanding the image. The Laocoon for example has three nerve cells painted on the frame, which give you a hint that these three people are linked by their neuron structures. Frames are therefore part of the image. A lotus flower is painted on each frame, as it's a symbol of immortality.

**B.O. How do you prepare the models in this series so that they look more like sculptures than actual people?**

M.N. I work with the same makeup artist, Melanie Schöne, all the time, but use different models for each image. There is a long process in the studio of completely shaving and then painting their bodies in white and then applying their makeup. It takes about three hours. We have also developed a certain hairstyle, using wigs. So there is the real body and then the digital treatment of the body, to make the skin look like an artificial surface. You'll notice also that none of them have a belly button, since they are not created biologically, but technologically.

**B.O. Do you intend to pursue this theme in your next project?**

M.N. I still have to create four or five images to complete this series. There is also a video I'm working on. The whole project should be finished early 2007. Then I will move to the next field of investigation in which technology is changing our lives. I produce a new body of work roughly every two years.

**B.O. This is all pretty heavy stuff. How would you sum up the Bionic Angels project in a few words?**

M.N. It's based on the concept of metamorphosis, just like all Greek mythology is based on Ovid's metamorphoses. The idea of transgressing, morphing the body from one state into another state underlies my belief that technology will be able to transform the body into something different, what I call the post human existence. And it might be an immortal existence.

**B.O. So is that the goal mankind should work towards?**

I don't think so. Death is a very important part of human life; it defines how we live, how we behave towards each other and develop. Immortality would mean that everyone would have to make a decision whether to one day end his own existence or to continue to live forever. I think we are moving towards immortality, but that this is not really desirable.