

## **augmented realities**

### **Michael Najjar – works 1997 - 2008**

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A few years ago, I picked up a little book at a flea market with the intriguing title *Beyond Photography. The Digital Darkroom*. This slim volume was compiled in 1988 by Dr. Gerard J. Holzmann, a Dutch-born scientist who is currently one of the leading scientists at NASA, after two decades spent working for AT&T Bell Labs in New Jersey. Despite what you would expect from the title, this is not some weighty scientific treatise on the future of photography, but an amusing book full of examples of what a computer can do if let loose on a traditional portrait photo for only a few seconds. In his introduction, the author warns his readers that the results will appear both fascinating and confusing. He also comments that if these computerised image manipulations had not been so astoundingly simple to generate, they could almost be considered as 'art'. The scores of entertaining examples presented in Holzmann's book are no different to the effects produced by any image processing program in practically every home computer nowadays: faces formed into a vortex, a waterfall or a box of building blocks. It's all about playing around and having fun.

Holzmann's lack of pretension when presenting the new, playful possibilities that computers introduced to photography is quite remarkable, when one realises twenty years later that these original digital experiments unleashed a total revolution that has influenced every image that we see nowadays. No medium has been left indifferent to or untouched by the advent of the computer as a high speed image processor. Even artists in the creative professions traditionally considered to be closest to the crafts, such as wood carvers, potters, textile designers or painters, now make free use of computers as aids during both the conceptual and production phases. This glorified calculator is no longer anything out of the ordinary. In 2008, digital image processing has become common practice. Since the 1990s, the digital revolution has had an enormous impact on art photography, more so than on any other visual discipline. The Dutch photographer Inez van Lamsweerde (b. 1963) took the international art world by surprise with her photo series *Thank You Thighmaster*, which she worked on in New York in 1992-1993.

She used computer processing to erase the breasts and genitals of female nude models and replace human faces with those of shop-window dummies. This was a comment on the increasing manipulability of the human body in real life due to phenomena such as hormone therapies and cosmetic surgery.

The actuality of the theme of the “new body” in the early 1990s was demonstrated by *Post Human*, the trail-blazing exhibition by American curator, Jeffrey Deitch. This group show which toured Europe in 1992 (stops included Turin and Hamburg) showed a fascinating spectrum of possibilities conjured up by visual artists who created futuristic scenarios of the new human being, who was often genderless or otherwise alienated from humanity in a variety of ways. *Post Human* initiated a substantive discussion that mirrored the hotly debated academic issues of the time that we now know as “gender studies” and “cyber-feminism”. Three years later, a sort of follow-up exhibition, *Photography after Photography* (1995) by curator Hubertus von Amelunxen, was held in Germany. This exhibition focussed on the technical and pure visual possibilities of body manipulation, using computer manipulated photography. Whoever looks at the catalogue of this exhibition nowadays, sees a ‘sophisticated version’ of all the modifications reviewed seven years earlier by Holzmann, which already looked rather low-tech by then in hindsight. This superficial comparison shows us the extraordinary speed with which digital imaging technology developed within a space of ten years, moving from being an amusing toy to a serious practice, whose essential characteristic is the creation of an innovative, future-oriented visual idiom.

Photographer and visual artist Michael Najjar (b. 1966) belongs to the second generation of artists who, on the basis of the history outlined above, have made it their mission to further the development of these visual inventions. Najjar calls his manner of thinking and working ‘hybrid’. This heterogeneous approach applies to both his subject matter, which ranges from Ancient Greece to an imaginary future, via the Italian renaissance, and their purely practical implementation, in which models are made up and placed in theatrical poses before Najjar unleashes his creative mastery during the digital imaging process. The result is a series of arresting portrayals as ethereal as Meissen porcelain figurines. The artist is fascinated by scenarios for the future of mankind. In his large-format photographs and video works, he creates a simultaneously exciting and disturbing picture of human beings as artificial, technological beings with brain expansion implants and eyes like data scanners. The scope of Najjar’s source

research is most visible in his most recent series *bionic angel* (2006-2008), which is being shown for the first time in its entirety at the GEM / The Hague Museum of Photography. In this series, the artist has constructed a new, science-fiction like image of humanity, based on ideals of beauty derived from early art history that is both refined and ethereal, appearing to transcend everyday reality.

Michael Najjar's creative process is based on contemporary scientific ideas, which he uses with artistic freedom to create new visual worlds in which fact, fiction and pure fantasy interweave. These images vary from sober representations to fascinating interpretations or imaginative guesswork. The museum is exhibiting seven series, all dating from the 1997-2008 period, that at first sight are all extremely varied in concept, medium and execution. In this regard, Najjar's first mid-career overview in The Hague resembles a group exhibition that suggests the input of several artists. However, this oeuvre originated from one brain and is a witness to Najjar's rapid development and almost impalpable ambition to mould commonly accepted visual conventions into points for discussion. His earliest series is entitled *viva fidel! – journey into absurdity* (1997) and could easily be taken for a traditional black and white photo documentary on Cuba. However, this series is permeated with digital image manipulation that casts doubt on the truth of this photographic account. In the years that have followed Najjar has taken his 'chopping' of perceived reality even further. This process has culminated in his latest series, *bionic angel*, where the viewer wonders what role, if any, photography has played in generating such advanced, almost otherworldly images. However, these are still photographs of real, flesh and blood models and an entire team of stylists, make-up artists, lighting specialists and image manipulators have helped to create the final result. The above photos of Najjar's studio in Berlin are revealing: despite the achievements made possible by the 'magical digital image processor', meticulous, analogue toil was needed to prepare the production scene for digital image processing.

In the wake of the initial explorations by artists such as Inez van Lamsweerde, whom we mentioned earlier, Michael Najjar must be considered as a pioneer in the digital manipulation of photographic images. His self-invented definition of himself as a 'hybrid photographer' is an apt description: the artist works with a hybrid, heterogeneous, yet universal visual idiom which uses both analogue and digital techniques. For Najjar, technological advances do not only mean the end of clear-cut

reality – they also contain the seeds of liberation from it. At the same time, however, it has become essential to take a critical approach to the truth at all times in our ‘mediacracy’, in which the authenticity of images has become debateable. In his series *information and apocalypse* (2003), for example, Najjar examines the extent to which we can still assume a meaningful reality in times of war and ideological struggle.

For *netropolis*, which he worked on from 2004 to 2006, Najjar photographed twelve major world cities from the tops of their highest buildings. He first photographed the cities (which included Tokyo, New York, Mexico City, Dubai and Shanghai) from all four points of the compass and then used an ingenious logarithmic program to superimpose the pictures on each other. The result is a series of optical illusions, which Najjar sees as expressing the increasing complexity of our urban infrastructure. This series reveals that the leitmotif of Michael Najjar’s oeuvre is the dramatic moment of metamorphosis, the technology-driven transformation now taking place in both individuals and society as a whole. He does not necessarily perceive processes in the field of genetic and cosmetic manipulations in terms of good and evil, but merely regards them as a logical development for the future.

The decision to show *augmented realities*, Michael Najjar’s exhibition in GEM / The Hague Museum of Photography, stems from the policy of both museums to focus regularly on work by contemporary artists who use varied innovative visual techniques to take a critical look at society both in terms of subject matter and the media they use. This type of work has been featured in GEM, museum for contemporary art, over the past five years with video installations by Kutlug Ataman (b. 1961) in 2003, Daniel Pflumm’s (b. 1968) extensive film overview *Long Streams* in 2005 and Claude Closky’s (b. 1963) film *Journal*. Since it opened in 2002, The Hague Museum of Photography has shown a series of successful exhibitions in which the digital manipulation of intensive analogue preparation processes has produced intriguing images by artists including Desiree Dolron (b. 1963) in 2005, Loretta Lux (b. 1969) in 2006 and Gregory Crewdson (b. 1962) in 2007. The present exhibition of Michael Najjar’s work in GEM under the auspices of The Hague Museum of Photography forms a ‘hybrid’ between both museums and unites the worlds of alert and critical artistry with the drive for visual technical and iconographic innovation. Progress continues.