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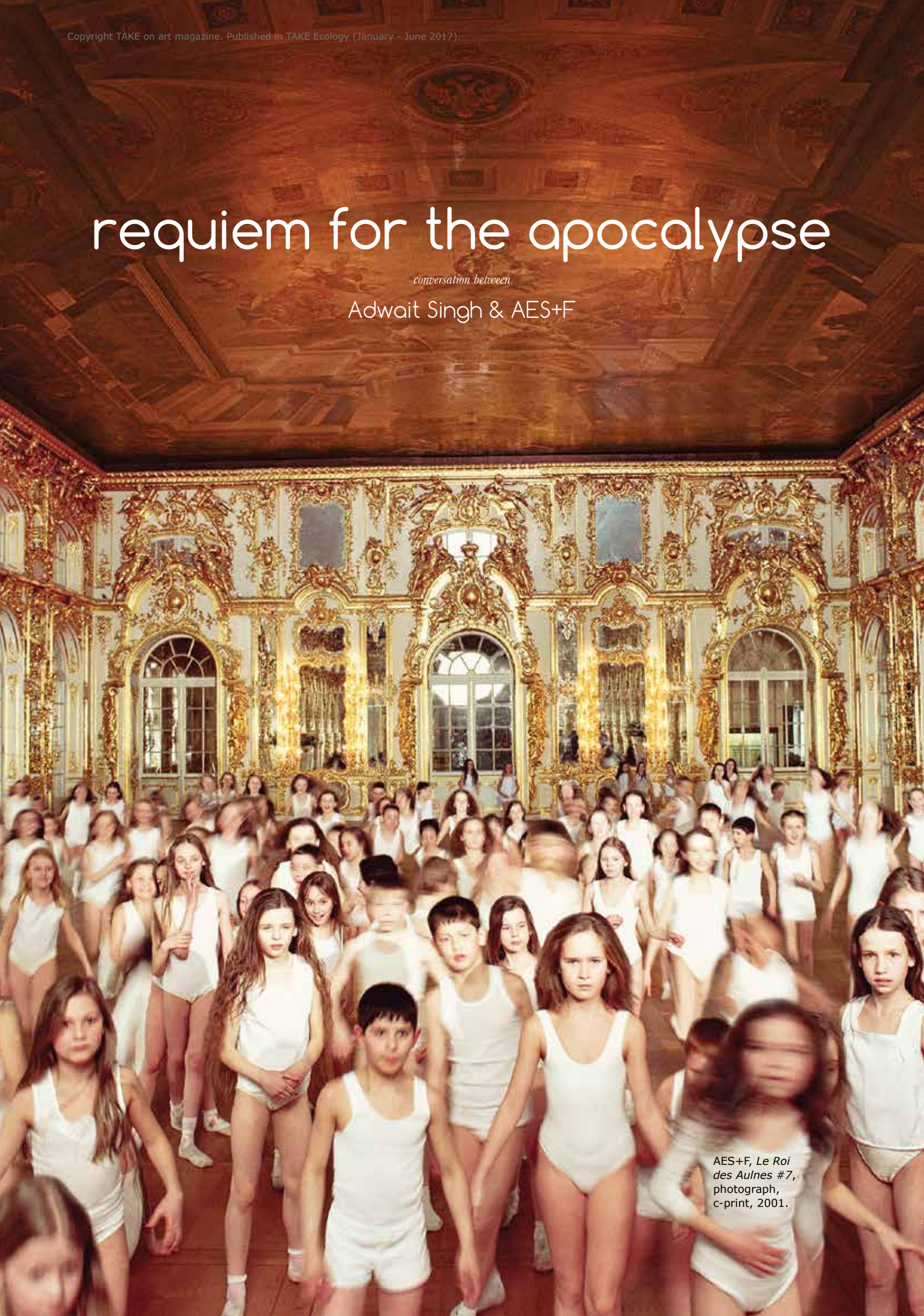
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requiem for the apocalypse

conversation between

Adwait Singh & AES+F



AES+F, *Le Roi
des Aulnes* #7,
photograph,
c-print, 2001.



Adwait Singh (MA History and Philosophy of Art: University of Kent; MA Contemporary Art Theory: Goldsmiths College) is a curator of the Students' Biennale 2016 (Kochi) and the assistant editor of *TAKE on art*. His work as a scholar-curator frequently weaves in and out of areas of inquiry such as subjectivity formation, gender and sexuality, posthumanism, contemporary technogenesis and ecofeminism. Recent curatorial projects include a group exhibition 'G/rove' (Feb, 2017) at Latitude 28 that examines the mythopoetic imperative of non-anthropocentric modalities of planet sharing. Adwait is the recipient of Art Scribes Award 2017.



AES Group was originally formed in 1987 by conceptual architects Tatiana Arzamasova and Lev Evzovich and multi-disciplinary designer Evgeny Svyatsky. Exhibiting abroad since 1989, the group expanded its personnel and name with the addition of photographer Vladimir Fridkes in 1995. For more than a decade, works by AES+F have been showcased in signature festivals and biennial exhibitions of contemporary art around the world, including – in addition to Moscow and Venice – those of Adelaide, Gwangju, Havana, Helsinki, Istanbul, Kiev, Kochi, Lille, Lyon, Melbourne, St-Moritz, Sydney, Taipei, Tirana, and Toronto. By now the subject of almost 100 solo exhibitions at museums, exhibition spaces, and commercial galleries worldwide, AES+F's works have been shown in such prestigious venues as the *Neuer Berliner Kunstverein*, *ZKM* (Karlsruhe), *Casino Luxembourg*, *Kiasma* (Helsinki), the *Moderna Museet* (Stockholm), *Tate Britain* (London), *Institute of International Visual Arts* (Iniva, various UK venues), the *Passage de Retz* (Paris), the *Vanhaerents Art Collection* (Brussels), *MACRO Future* (Rome), the *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza* (Madrid), *The State Russian Museum* (St. Petersburg), *Musée des Beaux-Arts* (La Chaux-de-Fonds), *Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium* (Brussels) and many others.

Photo credit: Egor Zaika

The 'carnavalesque', according to the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, instantiates an alternative phenomenological mode of being, with a 'bodily participation in the potentiality of another world'¹ that poses (however temporarily) a challenge to the extant social and political normative order. The ritualised pageantry of the carnival — laughter, mask and costume — ruptures the performative inscription of sanctioned codes of conduct, by offering a space of release where utopias and alterities can be lived out and corporealised. Furthermore, Bakhtin posits (in contradistinction to 'naturalism' — the idea of a fixed natural order and social hierarchies) the 'carnival' as one that simultaneously inaugurates its own social and ecological relations marked by contingency, creative improvisation and constant becoming. Closely connected to the 'carnival' is the notion of the grotesque body as incomplete, where one form passes into another in a chimeric becoming. The Grand Magical Theatre² of AES+F, through its evolved vocabulary of the carnivalesque, parodies a world where incredulity and absurdity are increasingly becoming norm in the face of triumphant capitalism and metastasising state of exception. In his work

Homo Sacer, the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben compares this pervasive normalisation of the state of exception the world over to a werewolf banned under the pain of death and occupying the liminality between inclusion and exclusion: "The transformation into a werewolf corresponds perfectly to the state of exception, during which (necessarily limited) time the city is dissolved and men enter into a zone in which they are no longer distinct from beasts."³ In a later work, Agamben further traces the link of *iustitium* (a term that connotes the state of exception) to Roman anomic feasts following the demise of the sovereign who having incorporated the *nomos* and the *anomie* in her person had become a 'living law'⁴. Consequently, the anomic feasts emerged as an institutionalised carnival/tumult in the interim before sovereignty could be reinstated. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin critiques the institutionalisation of the carnivalesque in the form of state controlled parades and holidays. Even so, the grotesque body in its radical materiality/carnality retains the transgressive potential to unsettle a configuration that has become sterile and oppressive. As forerunners of a 'new grotesque', AES+F deploy this aesthetic of 'excessiveness and availability of pleasure'⁵



AES+F, *Inverso Mundus*, Still #1-01, pigment InkJet print on FineArt Baryta paper, 70 x 70 centimetres, edition of 10, 2015.

as a positive tool to critique the perpetual state of apocalypse that the contemporary has come to resemble.

Adwait Singh (AS):

The French symbolist writer, Alfred Jarry is known to have said, "It is conventional to call 'monster' any blending of dissonant elements. I call 'monster' every original inexhaustible beauty."⁶ The term 'monstrous' according to this definition appears to me particularly well suited to describe your works such as *The Liminal Space Trilogy* (2005-13) which patches together a unique bricolage of disparate mythologies, temporalities, pop cultural icons as well as artistic, cinematic and literary technologies and tropes, to present an inverted allegory of contemporary times (with borrowed elements from past and futures) familiar, yet queer. In this modern Dantesque reconceptualisation of heaven, hell and purgatory, the chosen



AES+F, *More Than Paradise #1*, (King of the Forest Trilogy), photograph, c-print, 2002. (detail)

mise-en-scène — be it the video game setting of *The Last Riot* (2005–7), the island resort where *The Feast of Trimalchio* (2009–10) is staged or the futuristic airport of *Allegoria Sacra* (2010–11) — oozes a certain liminality and spatial significance. This spatial character is perhaps even more pronounced in an earlier trilogy, *The King of the Forest* (2001–3) which was shot variously at Catherine the Great's palace in Tsarskoye Selo (St. Petersburg), the Mosque of Muhammad Ali (Cairo) and in Times Square (NYC). Can you tell us more about these 'heterotopias'⁷ as well as the suturing of different historical moments in your works?

Tatiana Arzamasova,

Lev Evzovich, Evgeny Svyatsky & Vladimir Fridkes (AES+F):

The period of time in which we live consists of previously unthinkable hybrids. Jarry calls them monsters — we call them chimeras. The area of our interest is our time, in which medieval myths and consciousness mix with contemporary technology and media. An Islamic extremist, like anyone else, uses the internet and lives in a globalised world, and uses modern technology for his goals.

In *King of the Forest*, for example, we used a pre-Christian myth of Erlikönig, the ogre, as a metaphor for contemporary media. The ogre kidnaps the most beautiful children, and brings them to

his castle to kill them eventually. We investigated the phenomenon of professional children who work in certain industries like fashion, dance, advertising, etc. In St. Petersburg, we shot children from ballet school, in New York it was children from one of the top modelling agencies — Ford Models, and in Cairo, the children were shot in front of a mosque, which mimicked near-Eastern ideological propaganda that often uses children for its purposes. In the likeness of these kids, it was important to capture an ambivalent expression, somewhere between the natural state of a child, and the state of a child as an agent in an adult context who wears a particular mask.

In *Last Riot*, we were interested in the juxtaposition of classical paintings that depict heroic battles with the aesthetics of video games. Video games have a particular kind of heroism where a character can defeat thousands of foes without spilling a drop of blood, and remain unpunished.

In the *Feast of Trimalchio*, we showed an ultra-luxury hotel, where the aesthetic draws on Pompeiian frescoes, and where the idea of an ancient Roman festival in which patricians switched roles with slaves for one day, Saturnalia, is depicted as a contemporary scene.

The guests are from the 'golden billion' — the 'First World', and they switch roles and partake in orgies with servants from countries that used to be called 'Third World'. We present the complex relationship between a slave and a master as a new world that is not Eurocentric. We play on the fears of the West about the economic power of China and the growth of India. In *Allegoria Sacra*, the super-modern international airport, which somehow resembles the architecture of Zaha Hadid, depicts a metaphor for Purgatory. Like in the eponymous painting by Giovanni Bellini, we gather people from very different lands and cultures — Muslim immigrants, Chinese workers, representatives of Christian mythology, like St. Paul as a security guard and St. Sebastian as a tourist, as well as pagan mythologies, like the centaur, and the Hindu

god Ganesh.

The most important thing for us is to remain on the edge of ambiguity, where it is unclear whether we are in a utopia full of beauty, or a dystopia full of ugliness and kitsch.

AS: Bakhtinian tropes of 'grotesque realism' and the 'carnavalesque'⁸ are frequently deployed in your aesthetic to weave surrealistic tableaux with a cultivated humour and language of their own. For instance, your characters, though detached and zombie like in their 'biomechanical' acting style, inhabit ironical relations and situations as in the closing scenes of *Inverso Mundus* (2015) where the entire cast of abhuman hordes are absorbed in taking selfies whilst simultaneously being envired and colonised by alien viral formations. Another example is the scene where two of the

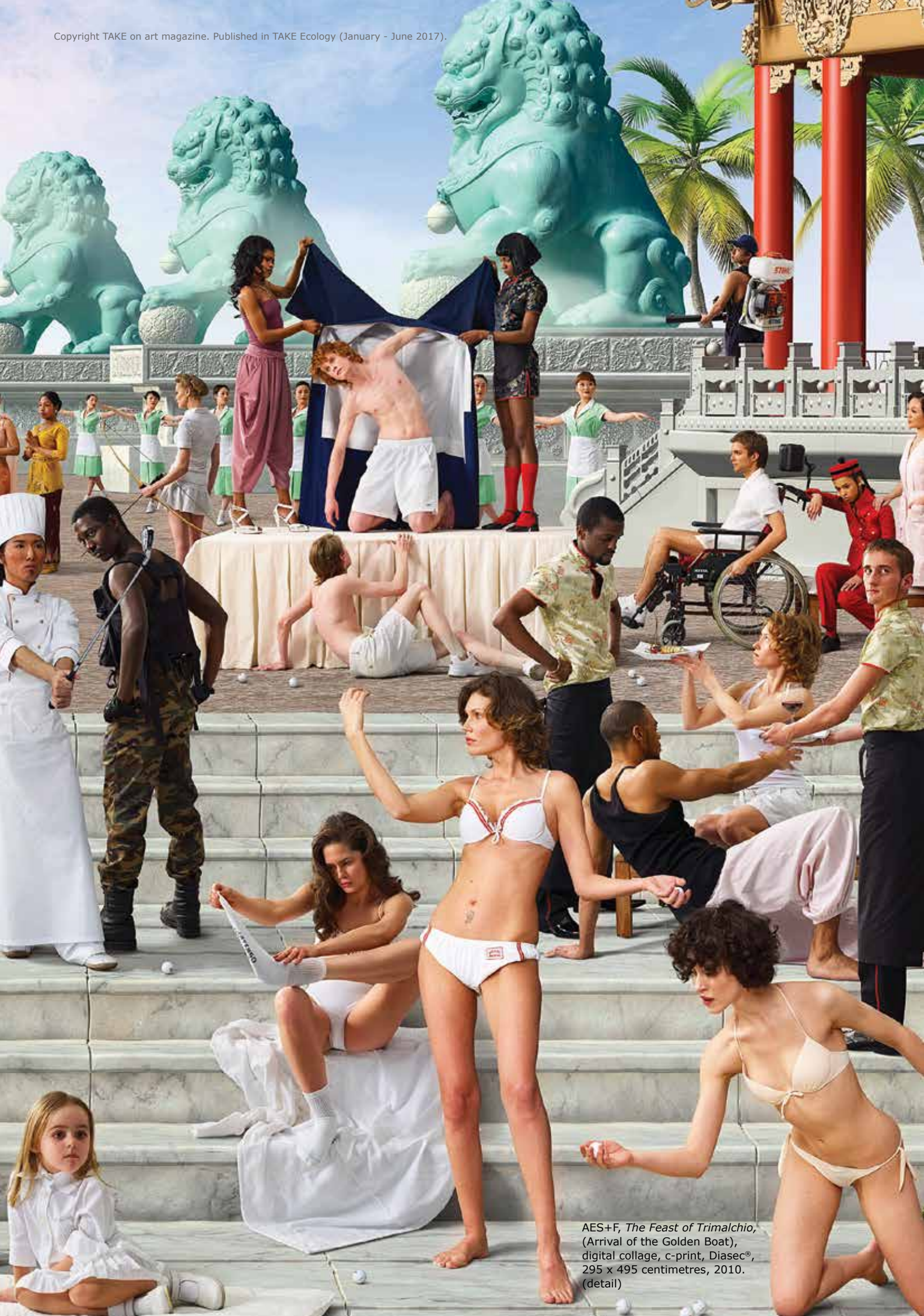


AES+F, *Last Riot 2, Tondo #2*, digital collage, c-print, D150 centimetres on canvas, 80 x 80 centimetres on paper, 2005.

protagonists appear to be carrying donkeys on their backs in reference to the picaresque 16th century illustrative genre 'inverse world' exemplified by the likes of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel the Elder. The dangerously seductive chimeras, or perhaps mutants that drift in and out of the scenes of bacchantic feasts and erotic reconciliations, straddle the space between the abject and the sublime. With reference to your eclectic visual



AES+F, *Inverso Mundus*, Still #3-01, pigment InkJet print on FineArt Baryta paper, 52 x 140 cm, edition of 10, 2015.



AES+F, *The Feast of Trimalchio*,
(Arrival of the Golden Boat),
digital collage, c-print, Diasec®,
295 x 495 centimetres, 2010.
(detail)



AES+F, *Allegoria Sacra, (Snow Elegy)*, triptych, digital collage, c-print in Diassec®, 295 x 590 centimetres, 120 x 240 centimetres on Fina Art Barita paper, 2012.

language that combines photography, video and digital technologies, could you reflect on this sickly-sweet aesthetic that at once appears to be an orgiastic rite as well as a disturbing mirror of our times?

AES+F: In *Inverso Mundus*, we portray chimeras not as scary mythological creatures, but as pets — who could be very ugly, but are loved anyway. The Russian art historian, Irina Kulik, called this aesthetic one of “guilty pleasure”. This is the feeling we strive to get from our projects. Where the viewer cannot pull her gaze from the image, but at the same time receives a feeling of slight nervousness and shame from what she sees. What the Australian collector David Walsh finds interesting in our work is that about half the people see only the glossy surface, while the

other half delve deeper and find different layers of meanings. Our language is a product of our approach to the eternal problem of surface and depth.

AS: In an interview you once stated, “You could call us vampires when it comes to the work of other artists, we don’t care about the post-modern game of citations, but the energy contained in old masters as well as in comics and video games is interesting.”⁹ In addition to certain overt allusions to Stanley Kubrick’s films such as *A Space Odyssey* (2001) one could, for instance, in the angel-like, gender-less inhabitants of the *Last Riot*, detect resonances of the American science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin’s sexually latent androgynes, the Gethenians from *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) who come into a state of

sexual activeness (*kemmer*) only for a short period. If one were to browse through your archives what kind of vampirism would one be witness to? Also, what are your views on utopian thinking?

AES+F: In the casting of *Last Riot*, we really did pick out androgynous young men and women. This is primarily because we find these types of characters in the paintings of Caravaggio. We were interested in virtual sexuality, where any variation of genders is possible, where there is no particular age or aging, where the traditional understanding of gender and gender politics do not mean a thing. The next step in human sexual behaviour would not be virtual sexuality, but a kind of robotic sexuality and the relationship between the human being and the android. It



AES+F, digital collage, light-box, 205 x 106 centimetres, 2000-2007. From left to right: *Défilé* #4, 5, 2 & 7.

won't be the androgyne, the transgender, or homosexual, but the relationship with androids, which will concern humanity and policymakers. Humans keep thinking and hoping that we will create a robot as an ideal partner; but we don't really think about whether the robot will find us boring and dull.

AS: Your work *Défilé* (2000–7) stands on, what might seem to some, an ambivalent moral ground in that it presents a series of life-sized photographs of the deceased apparelled in high-end fashion. Needless to say, it confronts the viewer with an abject horror that arises from a sense of purported sacrilege that speaks to our cultivated ignorance of themes macabre. Philosophers such as Reza Negarestani¹⁰ have conceptualised the

living body as complicit and continuous with its perpetual decay. In some ways, *Défilé* exposes this duality between old/young, ugly/beautiful as a differential of the same continuum. Evoking the death portraits of the Victorian era, *Défilé* highlights its own medium of photography as an index of our ageing, a theme similar to one developed in *The King of The Forest* with its beautiful children captivated by the modern equivalent of the Ogre i.e., mass media culture... Though somewhat sporadic and unexpected, but there are nevertheless instances of fashion expressing a gothic sensibility as in the various collections of the late British designer Alexander McQueen, and even of fashion delving into eschatology as instanced in the *Garments for the Grave* practice of

the Australian designer Pia Interlandi. Tell us about your experience of conceptualising and creating *Défilé*.

AES+F: We could draw a parallel between our *Défilé* and the dialogue between fashion and death in the epic poem of Leopardi. Only at the end of the poem does one realise that the dialogue is between two sisters. The idea goes back to the prehistoric tradition of decorating the dead, and the European tradition of *danse macabre*, where everyone dances with death, from the beggar to the Pope. In our project, we were interested in the juxtaposition of fashion as a temporary phenomenon, which is treated in our culture with such piety and reverence, while death, despite being permanent and unavoidable, is pushed out of sight. The models in *Défilé* are unidentified



Pia Interlandi started her current practice, *Garments for the Grave* in 2012 where she designs bespoke biodegradable funerary garments in collaboration with the family of the client. This directly evolved from her previous research *The Pig Project* partly undertaken with SymbioticA (Perth). Image courtesy: The artist.



AES+F, *Inverso Mundus*, Still #1-20, pigment InkJet print on FineArt Baryta paper, 32 x 57 cm, edition of 10, 2015.

cadavers, people who have no name, no relatives, no home, and are dressed in renowned luxury brands. The photographs of the cadavers were taken in a special morgue for unclaimed, unidentified bodies, and the clothes were photographed on people in the same poses in a studio. Then, the clothes were rendered onto the dead bodies. Initially, the project implied the participation of the various luxury fashion brands, and we sent invitation letters to many. It turned out that, although most designers understood and sympathised with the concept, their participation proved impossible due to corporate marketing policies of their companies. In the end,

we just hired a stylist who borrowed the clothes from boutiques, just like one would do for a typical fashion editorial. We digitally manipulated the clothes to be closer in essence to haute couture.

This conversation took place at the Cochin Club (Fort Kochi) in the light of AES+F's works *Inverso Mundus* and *Défilé* on view at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016.

- 1 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 (1965), pp. 48.
- 2 To borrow from the title of David Elliott's essay "The Grand Magic Theatre of the World: AES+F and *Inverso Mundus*" in the catalogue *001 Inverso Mundus* AES+F on the occasion of the eponymous exhibition at Magazzini del Sale, Venice (May 6 - November 22, 2015) curated by Ewald Stastny.
- 3 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998 (1995), pp. 71.
- 4 Giorgio Agamben, "Feast, Mourning, Anomie" in *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 67.
- 5 AES+F, *AES+F: The Feast of Trimalchio*. Moscow: Garage/Triumph Gallery, 2010, pp. 9.
- 6 As quoted in Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.

London and New York: Routledge, 1979, pp.102.

- 7 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" in *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, trans. by Jay Miskowicz. October 1984 (March 1967).
- 8 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Helen Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 (1965).
- 9 AES+F, "A Brave New World. Oleysa Turkina interviews the AES+F group" in *AES/AES+F*. St. Petersburg: Russian Museum, 2006, pp. 13-26.
- 10 Reza Negarestani, 'Differential Cruelty: A Critique of Ontological Reason in the Light of the Philosophy of Cruelty' in *Angelaki*, Volume 14, Number 3. London and New York: Routledge, 3rd December 2009.

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