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Ovidius Pictus: Afterlives of the *Metamorphoses* in Europe, from Books to the Arts

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Ecological Myth: Ovid and the Anthropocene in Three Examples of Contemporary Danish Art

Jonathan Barnes*

Abstract

In a time of increasing ecological anxiety, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* gains a new relevance for its distinct portrayal of the relationship between humanity and the environment. While the poem has exerted a significant historic influence in the visual arts, the text's importance reemerges for artists today as they explore current preoccupations with anthropogenic climate change, environmental degradation and posthuman futures. The significance of this 21st-century reception of Ovid in the visual arts, however, is yet to be fully examined. In this paper, I consider the work of three contemporary Danish artists, who draw the *Metamorphoses* into ecological discourse, representing the afterlife of the poem in the Anthropocene.

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1. *Introduction*

The *Metamorphoses* has enjoyed a rich afterlife in European visual culture, as an important source for mythological narratives in the art of the Renaissance and subsequent centuries[1]. In the 21st century, the epic poem endures as an inspiration for artists today, as they respond to anxieties about current ecological devastation. In the era of climate crisis, «Ovid's myths acquire a new set of meanings»[2]. For indeed, we live in Ovidian times. The ancient narrative of inevitable transformation, ephemeral ontologies, and landscapes populated by vestiges of humanity has resonance with the global changes we currently experience. Recent scientific discoveries about the capabilities of plants, animals, and other lifeforms on the planet are undermining long-standing assumptions about intelligence as a unique, defining quality of the human species. The recent Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the capacity of a virus to shape our societies and transform the experience of our daily lives. Developments in computer technology, particularly in artificial intelligence, have invested machines with the capability to simulate humans. The fabric of our bodies is gradually changed from the microplastics we ingest and inhale, particles of which are spread over every surface of the Earth. Ancient forests, metamorphosed underground for millennia, are being extracted and transformed again by human activities into atmospheric gases, which alter the systems of the planet. We are witnessing the transmutation of the world before our eyes. Over the last summers, in countries as distant as Pakistan and Italy, landscapes have been altered by cataclysmic floods, in which swathes of farmland and human settlements were submerged. As I write this paper, southern Europe faces the enduring onslaught of 'Cerberus' and 'Charon', anticyclones which are causing monstrous heatwaves, wildfires, gales, and deluges across vast areas. In this context, Ovid, and his preoccupation with *mutatas formas*, "changed forms", has achieved fresh relevance. In this paper, I will examine the work of three contemporary Danish artists, Maja Ingerslev, Sif Itona Westerberg and Uffe Isolotto, to consider how they draw the mythological tales of the *Metamorphoses* into ecological discourse, establishing the afterlife of the poem in the cultural imagination of the Anthropocene.

The term 'Anthropocene' was coined by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000[3]. It is the proposed title for a new epoch in the geological history of the Earth, a distinct 'chapter' from preceding periods of deep time on the planet's geological timescale. This period's distinction lies in the pervading impact of one species on the Earth's

[1] Allen 2002, p. 336.
[2] Cox 2028, p. 2.
[3] Crutzen, Stoermer 2000.

ecology and geology – that of the 'anthropos', humankind, whose «activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of nature»[4]. The mass emissions released since the processes of industrialisation in the nineteenth century, and particularly the 'Great Acceleration' of the mid-twentieth century, as well as continuing fossil fuel consumption have led to increased levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. This has triggered significant changes in temperatures, climate and ecologies across the globe, the consequences of which are beginning to be observed and experienced at this very moment. The dispersal of radioactive elements from the testing of nuclear explosives in the post-war period, the historic and contemporary extraction of minerals, oil and coal through mining, and the dramatic increase in plastic pollution in the 21st century, are further examples of the human release of materials which create potential changes to the geological structure of the Earth's surface. Such anthropogenic change, Crutzen suggests, has brought the planet, and all its human and nonhuman inhabitants, out of the stable Holocene interglacial period – in which human civilisation developed – into the less predictable conditions of the Anthropocene, 'the Age of Man'.

This term, which has sparked controversy and inspired abundant discussion, makes a fundamental assertion: that the human species has transformed, and continues to transform, the planet in unprecedented ways. While closely associated with changes in global climate, environmental degradation, and widespread species extinctions, for Anna Tsing the Anthropocene revises previous narratives about humans and nature, representing a more profound epistemic shift on how humanity thinks about itself and the limits of its own agency[5]. Its advent announces a loss of human supremacy over the Earth and a consequent state of flux in the human condition. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz posit that this recognition of humanity as a 'natural' force involves the cessation of viewing nature as separate from the human domain, or rather to see the «end of nature», to use Bill McKibben's phrase[6]. Such assertions destabilise the epistemological binary of human/nature in operation since the Enlightenment, in favour of a philosophy of relationality and multiple interconnections, a nature-culture continuum which acknowledges the deep entanglement of the planet's human and nonhuman dimensions[7]. The Anthropocene, thus, poses a posthuman challenge to inherited notions of anthropocentrism, human self-containment and mastery over the nonhuman world. Rather than a misanthropic dismissal of humanity, it urges a recontextualization of the human species within a larger ecological picture to confront the environmental emergency. The Anthropocene requires

[4] Clark 2018, p. 1.
[5] Tsing 2015, p. 20.
[6] Bonneuil, Fressoz 2016; Dancer 2021, p. 22; McKibben 1990.
[7] Braidotti 2019, pp. 349-342.

a reorientation of our perspective on what it means to be human[8]. Owing to the manner in which its tales stage a range of transformations and transitions across boundaries, Martelli has commented on the pertinence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to such discourse, as a «parable of sorts for the procedures whereby the human and the non-human, culture and nature relate and become entangled with one another»[9]. In the three artworks which I consider below, Ovid is being received anew in the 21st century as a resource for the iconography of posthumanism.

2. Metamorphoses *(2018), Maja Ingerslev*

Metamorphoses (2018) is a photographic series by the Aarhus-based artist Maja Ingerslev[10]. Nine plants in flower were captured originally as photograms, for which they were laid directly onto 'analog c' photographic paper and exposed to light, creating images through the physical contact with the film. The use of the negatives to produce the final prints results in the presentation of each flower as a silhouette of neon colour against a black background. The series, through both its appearance and the technique of production, immediately evokes the historic use of photograms in science to record specimens, particularly the photogenic drawings of the inventor William Henry Fox Talbot and the cyanoprint work of the botanist Anna Atkins in the nineteenth century. While these early experiments in photographic images were produced as contributions to scientific research, the artistic intentionality which underlies Ingerslev's series is evident. Each flower is arranged to display its unique species morphology, accompanied by the use of bright, iridescent blues, yellow-greens, pinks and purples to differentiate each photograph. Where the images contain multiple flowers or leaves, these grow from the same singular plant; its individuality is emphasised, rather than being portrayed as part of a collection or bouquet. Through such stylisation, Ingerslev draws the attention of the viewer to the distinctiveness and personality of the plants, encouraging them to view the flowers as more than background nature, but as entities of an idiosyncratic character. The series is a gallery of 'portraits', in an artistic approach more customary for the human subject.

The title of the work, *Metamorphoses*, provides an immediate allusion to Ovid's epic poem, a connection which is further consolidated by the plant species represented by Ingerslev. A majority of the flowers included in the series re-

[8] Dancer 2021, p. 20.
[9] Martelli 2020, p. 39.
[10] For images of Maja Ingerslev's *Metamorphoses*, see: <https://www.majaingerslev.com/eng/photography/134-metamorphoses-eng#nested-tab-1>, 19.7.2023.

late to youthful Ovidian protagonists, who experience a floral transformation at their human death. Among these are well-known figures, who have enjoyed repeated portrayal throughout postclassical art. *Narcissus pseudonarcissus I*, *Narcissus pseudonarcissus II*, and *Narcissus poeticus* relate to the self-consumed youth described in *Metamorphoses* Book 3, whose body becomes a flower "with a trumpet of gold and white petals" after his death[11]. The deep red flower which grew from the spilled blood of Adonis, the mortal lover of Venus, after he is fatally gored during a boar hunt, is invoked in *Anemone nemorosa*. *Hyacinthus orientalis* refers to Apollo's Spartan boy-beloved, Hyacinthus, who is killed during a game by the god's rebounding discus and becomes a flower «brighter than Tyrian purple» in *Metamorphoses* Book 10[12]. *Crocus* refers to the less celebrated figure of the same name, whose transformation into the saffron-coloured flower is fleetingly mentioned in *Metamorphoses* Book 4.

To these four identifiable examples from the *Metamorphoses*, Ingerslev adds three plants which do not feature among the tales of transformation – *Viola odorata*, the sweet violet, *Rosa*, the rose, and *Primula veris*, the cowslip. The inclusion of these flowers is an intriguing departure from the Ovidian canon, which is otherwise a prominent foundation for the work. Is Ingerslev engaging in her own act of Ovidianism here? The suggestion made by this extended repertoire is that she is speculating on further plant species that have human origins, which, like those recounted by Ovid, result from an act of transformation. Notably, the flowers correspond to the female names 'Viola', 'Rosa' and 'Primula', which, although uncommon in the present day, nonetheless relate to ongoing naming conventions in Denmark. Through selection of these species for inclusion in the series, Ingerslev supplements the male, Ovidian precedents of floral metamorphosis with contemporary, female possibilities.

These additions are not the only instance of Ingerslev's Ovidianism. The choices of her artistic process, in particular the use of negatives to produce the final images, result in a notable change in the colours of the flowers from their original description in the *Metamorphoses*, and indeed from how living examples of the plants are observed today. The interventions of her own practice enact a broader artistic metamorphosis of both Ovidian material and the appearance of the nonhuman world. While drawing away from direct engagement with the *Metamorphoses* as a source, Ingerslev maintains an Ovidianistic approach as she embarks on her own act of transforming a beauty that occurs naturally in the lives of plants into a cultivated, human beauty in her photographic compositions. The natural origins of this art, however, remain abundantly clear.

[11] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III, 510.
[12] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X, 211.

Metamorphoses offers an imaginative disruption of multiple binaries which operate in the construction of human exceptionalism. Through allusions to antique tales of floral transformation, Ingerslev invokes mythological precedent for the ontological transition across the boundaries of the human and nonhuman. She establishes an Ovidian framework through which to view the works, one which problematises the perception of the nonhumanity of their subjects: the flowering plants captured in the photographs may once have been human. At the same time, a tension is developed within the photographs between myth and science by the use of taxonomic nomenclature in the title of each piece in the series. This serves as a reminder of nineteenth century practices of collecting and recording plant species as part of a broader impulse to order nature, to regard it as an object in an empirical sphere of human knowledge, and ultimately an entity within the domain of human control[13]. However, through the evocation of Ovid and the considered aesthetics of their portrayal, Ingerslev asserts the status of the flowering plants as subjects of the series, rather than objects of a botanical archive, thus not only confronting the human/nonhuman dichotomy but also the «deep rooted Cartesian dualism of the subject and object that underpins the assumptions of human exceptionalism»[14]. The original photograms for the series, produced by the contact of the flowers laid out by the artist on photographic film, are presented as the result of the mutual participation of human and plant actors. Ingerslev's photography transforms natural phenomena into human art. In her series, however, the division between these domains of nature and culture is uncertain: *Metamorphoses* is a multi-species artwork.

Through her mediation of Ovidian myth, Ingerslev's series offers a challenge to oppositional dualisms. Her engagement with the theme of ontological mutability at the core of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provides important material for the broader exploration of the entanglements and intersections between the categories of human/nonhuman, subject/object, culture/nature, and imagination/science in her photographic series. The posthuman challenge her work poses to these binaries replaces a divide with a sense of interconnectedness and relationality in a nature-culture continuum. In this way, Ingerslev uses Ovid to present a broader ecological commentary on the human condition and our relationship with the environment at this current moment of the Anthropocene.

[13] Soper 1995, pp. 42-44.
[14] Martelli 2020, p. 37.

3. *'Immemorial' (2021), Sif Itona Westerberg*

In October 2021, ARoS in Aarhus presented 'Immemorial', an exhibition of the work of the contemporary artist Sif Itona Westerberg. The exhibition was divided into three installations or 'acts', separate collections of large sculptural reliefs carved from slabs of aerated concrete and joined together by industrial bolts.

The 'first act', 'House of Dionysus', was originally displayed at the Gether Contemporary gallery in Copenhagen, before being transferred to ARoS to feature in 'Immemorial'. Representing a Bacchic procession, a series of six reliefs depict groups of ecstatic figures in various states of transformation. The reliefs, set against exuberantly bright yellow walls, imitate a classical frieze. In diverse combinations of human, animal and plant, the figures form grotesques whose mutability weirds the human body. The transgression posed by their hybrid physicalities corresponds to the transgressive loss of control and an expansion beyond the constraints of acceptable 'human' behaviour caused by their intoxication. Presiding at the head of the procession, a sculpture of Dionysus rides a panther, drawing formal inspiration from the Hellenistic mosaic of the god discovered at the 'House of Dionysos' at Pella in Greece; its four front legs indicate Westerberg's experimentation with this template of ancient art, her intervention contributing to the theme of distortion and disruption which characterises the installation. The 'second act', entitled 'Swan Song', was exhibited for the first time as part of 'Immemorial'. It featured an arrangement of ten reliefs which illustrate the tale of Phaethon from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book 2, in which the son of the Sun God, seeking confirmation of his paternity, requests to drive his father's chariot. Unable to manage the task, he allows the sun to career too close to the land, causing widespread destruction, before Mother Earth herself begs in pain for Jupiter's intervention. The works in the third and final 'act', 'Fountain', juxtaposed hybrid creatures derived from the visual culture of the European Middle Ages with speculative flora and fauna, which Westerberg imagines might be synthesised through modern technology and future advances in genetic modifications. The sculptures of fantastical medieval beasts and a human-animal chimera holding a scientific beaker were arranged around a construction of steel pipes which grow into plant-like tendrils, from which water pours into blue basins decorated with DNA helices.

The three 'acts' of 'Immemorial' are unified by the prevalent theme of metamorphosis. Drawing inspiration from different sources, the ensemble of metamorphic forms in Westerberg's sculptures forge an aesthetic of entanglement, which repeatedly and variously visualises the interconnections between the human and nonhuman, the past and future. In this way, the artist reinvents historical visual and narrative material by foregrounding its relevance to contemporary ecological concerns. The use of aerated concrete, typically used in

industrial construction, as her chosen medium for carving testifies that Westerberg's interest in transformation extends to the very materiality of her art. It is interesting that both the first and second 'acts' have a classical pedigree: 'House of Dionysus' evidently draws inspiration from Euripides' *Bacchae*, although the tragic narrative is reimagined as one of posthuman euphoria. 'Swan Song' privileges the *Metamorphoses* as an apposite resource not only for a general consideration of the idea of transformation, but one with which to contemplate climate crisis in particular. Of the three 'acts', the narrative of this second one relates most directly to a particular literary precedent. In its portrayal of the Phaethon myth, 'Swan Song' engages closely with the original text, as well as with later artistic receptions of it. At the same time, the installation innovatively 'environmentalises' the ancient story, adapting it to portray the issue of man-made global warming.

'Swan Song' features an arrangement of ten of Westerberg's carved reliefs in a room bathed in the red glow of a semi-circular tube light mounted to the wall (Fig. 1). A divine female nude is fixed high on the wall. She carries the crescent moon in her hand as she balances on a cloud, identifying her as the goddess Luna. Her shawl billows behind her in the suggestion of flight. Her face is characterised by a frown of concern as she surveys the room, reflecting, as Ovid describes, the moon's amazement at seeing «her brother's horses careering below her own; and smoke rose up from the smouldering clouds»[15]. Two large reliefs portray women in states of 'arboromorphosis', or tree transformation. One shows a woman clutching another around the midriff, her face strained, while her companion gazes up in an idealised classical profile; a mass of branches sprouting leaves erupt from the heads and shoulders of the women (Fig. 2). These figures relate to the Heliades, Phaethon's sisters, who, after months of grieving at his tomb, are changed into a grove of poplar trees[16]. Another separate sculpture of a single woman echoes this relief. Her head is also tilted up, her eyes open and lips apart in astonishment. Her body is turned away from the viewer, her arm is bent at the elbow raising her open palm upwards. Plant stems with foliage twist and curve around her upper torso; fine strands of hair on her head thicken into tendrils, some of which fall down her back, while others lift elastically above her (Fig. 3). She is Tellus, the personification of the Earth, who is choked by the heat of the conflagration as she cries out for help[17]. The smaller components of the installation relate more generally to the environmental disaster caused by Phaethon's perilous drive. Beneath a carved curving wave, two humanlike, abstracted heads emerge on elongated necks from beneath the breaking swell, their hair flowing behind

[15] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 208-209.
[16] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 344-363.
[17] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 300-326.

them with liquid fluidity. This alludes to the Nereids, eyes wide and mouths gasping as the seas heat up[18]. A relief of a dog rearing up in terror in front of a burning bush and another of a tree, its branches aflame, refer to vivid and terrifying descriptions of the conflagration of the land and forests and the animal extinctions narrated by Ovid. There is a visual resonance between the shape of the flames and the outcrops of foliage of the transforming women, which suggests a connection between the themes of personal lamentation and environmental tragedy displayed in each. A final sculpture presents a swan – the evocative animal of the 'act' – its neck gracefully arching into its chest, its wings open to display the pattern of its feathers; the swan's legs, however, are immediately recognisable as human, stretching out from the avian body, ripples emanating where they make contact with the water (Fig. 4). This is Cycnus, described by Ovid as a friend and relation of Phaethon, but whom Westerberg also characterises as his lover. He is transformed into the bird in his distress.

The iconography of the larger reliefs corresponds closely to Ovidian details, revealing how attentive Westerberg has been in her engagement with the text of the *Metamorphoses*. The influence of the historic mediation of the poem in art is apparent. Westerberg's portrayal of Cycnus, as a swan-hybrid with muscular human legs, has a strong figural similarity with the representation of the same character in an engraving by Cornelis Bloemart, after Pierre Brebiette, which featured as an illustration for Michel de Marolles' *Tableaux du Temple des Muses* (1655), a treasury of tales from antiquity. The connection between Westerberg's Heliades and those of de Marolles presents itself in the nudity of the figures and the stylisation of their hair becoming branches, aspects of their transformation which is not explicitly described in Ovid's narrative. The dynamic upward motion of the hair-foliage of Phaethon's sisters is also reminiscent of Daphne in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-1625), which as a celebrated work of sculpture and perhaps the most renowned example of an Ovidian tree transformation in the history of art, bears a strong affinity with Westerberg's reliefs. While, however, the face of Daphne in Bernini's work captures her fear of sexual assault, the Heliades in 'Swan Song' might reflect grief-stricken terror not only at the death of their sibling or their own metamorphosis, but also at the prospect of ecological catastrophe.

'Swan Song' displays elements of both continuity and divergence with the tradition of the Phaethon episode, as Westerberg modifies this myth to form a commentary on the Anthropocene condition. For artists from antiquity to the nineteenth century, the tale of Phaethon presented an opportunity to capture the dramatic zenith of Ovid's narrative, where the youth is struck by Jupiter's lightning and slips, lifeless, to the ground from his father's vehicle. In Wester-

[18] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 268-269.

berg's portrayal, however, Phaethon has been omitted. While his presence and the destructive consequences of his actions loom over the exhibition's narrative in the lingering neon red glow from the semi-circular tube light illuminating the exhibition space, the figure is given no anthropomorphic form.

Indeed, there is no straightforwardly human representation in 'Swan Song'. In selecting the later narrative of the episode as the subject of her work, Westerberg has brought the aftermath of the catastrophe and the series of dramatic metamorphoses at the conclusion of the tale into greater focus. Her sculptures ultimately translate the rich, ekphrastic quality of Ovid's verse but also prioritise the portrayal of transhuman and nonhuman elements: the focus on the characters of the Heliades and Cycnus, rather than the customary interest in Phaethon, gives Westerberg the opportunity to foreground the hybridity of their bodies at this moment of disaster. This presents a deliberate contest to anthropocentrism in the contemporary reworking of this Ovidian myth. In the absence of Phaethon, Westerberg brings the visitors to the installation to occupy his position in the narrative[19]. As both victims and perpetrators of environmental degradation in the 21st-century, they become a human audience which bears witness to Phaethon's accident as the first anthropogenic climate catastrophe in history[20]. In the mythical scene of environmental destruction, Westerberg's sculptures recount the impact on each of various systems of the Earth - geosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere and biosphere. There is, however, a clear additional concern to display the psychology of grief and fear among its protagonists. The lamentation of Phaethon's family is an expression of personal anguish at the demise of their brother and lover. Through their metamorphic forms, it also becomes a broader elegy for the nonhuman losses caused by his actions. Through the interweaving of these dual emphases of earthly material destruction and individual loss, Westerberg demonstrates that this Ovidian cataclysm, like the Anthropocene, is not only a profound environmental occurrence, but also an «affective and psychical phenomenon of unprecedented proportions»[21].

Westerberg's interventions in the literary and visual tradition of this Ovidian tale demonstrates the strong intention to reimagine it as a myth of contemporary ecological anxiety. In her portrayal of a mythical apocalypse of global heating, Westerberg engages innovatively with Ovid, identifying elements within the original, ancient text which not only resonate with the Anthropocene condition, but which allude to the precarious consequences of assumed human privilege over the nonhuman world.

[19] ARoS 2021. Didactic panel to introduce 'Swan Song', the second 'act' of 'Immemorial', a solo exhibition by Sif Itona Westerberg, ARoS: Aarhus, Denmark, 1 October 2021 – 23 January 2022. Visited 1 October 2021.

[20] ARoS 2021.

[21] Braidotti 2019, p. 339.

Westerberg draws on the visual afterlife of the *Metamorphoses* to establish a new artistic tradition for Ovid, which foregrounds environmental and ecological issues. She reimagines the Phaethon episode in the *Metamorphoses* as a fable of the Anthropocene. As Phaethon's uncontrolled, unmanaged course in the chariot of the Sun has destructive consequences for people, animals, forests, rivers, and oceans alike, as Ovid describes, so anthropogenic climate change impacts both human and nonhuman beings. Thus, Westerberg's reliefs employ the Heliades and Cycnus, and their bodies that combine human, botanical and avian elements into new forms, to illustrate the epistemic conclusion of nature-culture binaries in the context of environmental crisis. The title of the exhibition, 'Swan Song' seems to confirm this idea of a conclusion, as a double-entendre which refers both to the transformation of Cygnus and a metaphorical phrase in English which refers to a person's final, concluding gesture or performance which prefigures death. The expression originates in the ancient belief that a swan sings a funereal dirge in anticipation of the end of its life; indeed, Ovid himself refers to this idea in his tale about Picus and Canens in *Metamorphoses* Book 14[22]. In transposing the behaviour of a bird onto human actions, the phrase recognises that humans can possess animal characteristics and, thus, implicitly acknowledges a deeper connection between the human and nonhuman. It forms, therefore, an appropriate title for the installation, in which Westerberg uses Ovid to capture contemporary solastalgia and present a poignant reminder of humanity's communion with other beings on the planet at this ongoing moment of loss.

4. *'We Walked the Earth' (2022), Uffe Isolotto*

The installation 'We Walked the Earth' (2022) by artist Uffe Isolotto and curator Jacob Lillemose transformed the Danish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale into an uncanny version of a traditional farmhouse[23]. The stone floors of the modernist building were covered by heaped piles of horse manure and eelgrass, a kind of seaweed used as a traditional material for the roofs of houses on the Danish island of Laesø. This haylike vegetation also hung down in fronds from fixtures in the ceiling, darkening the aspect of the rooms. Agricultural tools were oddly and sporadically placed around several small 'outhouse' rooms; a leg of ham was hung from the wall, blackened on one side by some

[22] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XIV, 428-430.

[23] Uffe Isolotto was commissioned to create 'We Walked the Earth' by the Statens Kunstfond, following an open call for a Danish entry to participate at the Venice Biennale 2022. After seven months at the Giardini, a variant of the exhibition 'We Walked the Earth: Harnessing' was shown at Den Frie Centre for Contemporary Art in Copenhagen.

mutated growth. On the floor were a number of bulbous glass forms, whose twisted stems and flared apertures conjured an artificial semblance of plant life. By far the most impactful feature of the installation, however, were the two hyper-realistic sculptures of deceased centaurs which occupied this space.

A female centaur was collapsed on the floor at the end of the main hall (Fig. 5). Her head rests on her hands and forearms, her human torso attached to the body and legs of a dappled horse. Her face is demonstrably human. Her eyes, which remain open, are bloodshot. Her skin is mottled, with streams of paler skin patterned individualistically over her face, the areas of whiteness in contrast with her ruddy cheeks. Her hair delicately curls along her jawline, and down her back, as we can see from behind her through the interlaced strings fastening her shirt. The delicacy and design of the female centaur's blouse, her plaited hair, betray her former sophistication. The awkward position of her legs indicates her collapse as a signifier of death. She appears to have just given birth. A bright blue amniotic sack, containing an infant, sags on the floors immediately behind the centaur mother, containing a child whose corporeality is complicated: it has inherited a hybridity but not, it seems, in a combination which resembles its parent.

In the adjacent room, the body of a male centaur, the assumed partner of the collapsed female, was suspended high from a cord attached to the roof (Fig. 6). His equine hindquarters were glimpsed through the chamber to the right; only upon entering was his centaur identity apparent. There is a deliberate blurring between the human, the animal and the hybrid in these sculptures. The male centaur does not wear clothes but rather a harness of belts and cords around both his human and his horse chests, the complexity of which imply some practical purpose. The elongation of the body caused by the centaur's suspension both enhances the impact of his equine hybridity and strangely anthropomorphises him, arranging his body as a bipedal creature. The position of his arms relates more closely to that of his hooved horse limbs, creating a coherence between human and animal not visible in the collapsed position of the female centaur. The mottled skin of his upper body and face corresponds with the dappled black patches of hair on the lower half. His face is tranquil, his eyes closed in the semblance of calm sleep, betraying none of the violence or struggle which is implied by the harsh tautness and strain of the rope around his neck.

The curated scene, which visitors are invited to enter and observe, is testimony to the fatal circumstances which led to the recent death of the centaur couple. Although Isolotto described that «there is deep uncertainty in understanding what has happened to the centaurs and the world they live in», there are hints at self-destruction[24]. Underneath the blouse of the female centaur is

[24] Katsikopoulou 2022.

an aesthetically arranged system of tubes, which appear initially as decorative threads or tassels; on closer inspection, these tubes contain a blue liquid, which corresponds in colour to that secreted by the glassy plants and smeared on the floor. These tubes also form strings on the harness of the hanging male centaur. Whatever the nature of the substance contained in these tubes, there is a suggestion of the centaur couple's dependency on it: the liquid, derived from the alien flowers, may have been depleted through use without replacement supply. The centaurs of myth were infamous for breaking 'civilised' standards in their excessive wine-drinking, and here too there are visual implications of addiction and perilous consumption, with, however, an ecological overtone: in this case, their dependency was on exhaustible resources. How the drug is related to their demise, the aftermath of which the viewer is witness to, is ultimately unknown. Clear answers are not provided to the abundant questions inspired by 'We Walked the Earth'.

A spectre of apocalypse haunts this exhibition. The distressed appearance of the building's interior - the mould stains, water damage and flaking plasterwork of the farmhouse walls – are testament to the damage which might accompany a «violent ecological disaster»[25]. The centaur couple are enlarged in size, which is most noticeable at obvious points of human comparison – their hands and heads. Beyond obvious differences, however, the intense verisimilitude of the sculptures fosters a measure of empathy within the viewer, in addition to the pervading curiosity about what has happened. Isolotto expressed in a contemporary interview that, «even though the centaurs may not be real, we feel their struggle»[26].

Isolotto's choice of the centaur as a form to explore the boundaries and definitions of human ontology is interesting, but not unprecedented. Since antiquity, the mythological creature has been rich in symbolic meaning[27]. Its hybridity problematised the distinctions of the human and the animal by suggesting the potential overlap across these categories. Extant artworks from the Graeco-Roman world attest to the prominence of the centaur in the classical imagination. It appears notably in the metopes of the Parthenon frieze (c. 447-432 BCE), as well as in other examples of antique visual culture, such as Athenian vase painting, mural frescoes discovered at Pompeii (c. 1st century CE) and the Villa Adriana at Tivoli (circa 120-130 CE) and in second-century CE mosaics from Roman Tunisia. Numerous references to centaurs also appear in ancient literature, including in Homer and Hesiod. Above all, however, the most significant literary portrayal of the centaurs is found in *Metamorphoses* Book 12, in which Ovid narrated the tale of the 'Centauromachy', the battle between the

[25] Den Frie 2023.
[26] Katsikopoulou 2022.
[27] Lawrence 1994, p. 61.

Lapiths and the centaurs at the wedding feast of Hippodamia and Pirithous, as recollected by the Greek hero Nestor. The tale features over thirty centaur characters, most of whom have no precedent in other literary or visual sources and appear to have been developed by Ovid for his rendition of the tale. The episode is among the most inventively violent in the epic, evoking the usual image of the centaur as a violent and transgressive entity which occupies a tense space between *cultus* (civilisation) and *natura* (nature)[28]. Amid the descriptions of extreme physical combat, however, Ovid digresses momentarily into a tragic interlude about the relationship of two centaurs, Cyllarus and Hylonome. After a description of their individual characters and a history of their courtship, the pair enter the fray together: Cyllarus is struck down by a flying spear, dying in the arms of Hylonome, who commits suicide with the same weapon that killed her lover. In his portrayal of the centaur couple, which strongly departs from the customary stereotype of this mythological being, Ovid explores and collapses the multiple categoric dichotomies contained by the figure of the centaur – human versus animal, nature versus civilization, and male versus female[29].

Although Isolotto made no explicit reference to Ovid, or indeed to mythology in general, in his discussions of the exhibition, the indebtedness of 'We Walked the Earth' to the poet's mediation of the centaur in the *Metamorphoses* is apparent. The use of the centaur form in the exhibition imports the oppositional tensions implicit in the portrayal of the hybrid creature in *Metamorphoses* Book 12. The choice, however, to imagine his centaur sculptures as a familial pair in the domestic setting of a traditional Danish farmhouse draws on the alternative aspect of Ovid's characterisation of the centaur, which is foregrounded in the idealised partners Cyllarus and Hylonome. Both Ovid and Isolotto complicate traditional conceptions of the exaggerated, excessive masculinity of the centaur through their portrayals, and no more so than the inclusion of a female centaur. While visual evidence bears witness to the notion of a female centaur in the Graeco-Roman imagination, the image was frequently overshadowed by the 'absolute maleness' which came to typify the creature[30]. Ovid's Hylonome emerges as an archetypal figure as the only named example of a female centaur known from antiquity. Isolotto's female centaur in the installation thus becomes a charged site of classical reception, at which the artist can be seen to engage with the Ovidian corpus of mythological images which survive from Graeco-Roman antiquity to the present through the *Metamorphoses*.

Ovid and Isolotto in their respective works across millennia use the figure of the centaur to articulate the same fundamental question regarding human

[28] DeBrohun 2004, pp. 418-419.
[29] DeBrohun 2004, pp. 418-419.
[30] Lawrence 1994, p. 63.

ontological definition. Isolotto resorts to images inherited from the classical tradition, and specifically the afterlife of the *Metamorphoses*, to question this in the current ecological context[31]. The Anthropocene may extend the series of dichotomies which the centaur has the potential to inspire. The creature's embodiment of human and nonhuman elements provides a means of contemplating the increased intimacy between the human and the environment at the current moment, thus questioning the experience of what it means to be human, when, in the words of Lillemose, «human life is becoming more and more integrated into – if not inseparable – from the contexts and processes that are both other-than-human and larger-than-human»[32]. Isolotto's insertion of the centaur into his pastoral dystopia, a setting characterized by its unsettling, futuristic strangeness, merges temporalities in a manner which universalizes the scene. The installation, seen in the present, reflects an ensuing history which also has clear origins in a mythical time. The figure of the centaur in 'We Walked the Earth' therefore also collapses categories of past, present and future, between mythological legend and empirical history, facilitating the change in perspective which the Anthropocene demands of humanity in the 21st century. As Isolotto's vision of a "transhuman world", 'We Walked the Earth' meditates broadly on the theme of human metamorphosis in a world of rapidly changing and «challenging realities, whether ecological, political or existential»[33]. Through his centaur sculptures, Isolotto has appropriated an antique form for contemporary commentary in the era of climate crisis: the Ovidian centaur assumes fresh relevance as not only as being of symbolic oppositions but as a speculative being whose hybridity communicates the increasing entanglement between human and nonhuman on a human-altered Earth.

5. *Conclusion*

For these three contemporary Danish artists, the mythological narratives of the *Metamorphoses* provide rich material for a posthuman contemplation of the human at this moment of flux. The Ovidian theme of «forms changed into new bodies»[34] presents an opportunity to challenge assumed dichotomies which have bestowed humanity with mastery over the planet, foreground the material interconnectedness of human beings with nonhuman elements around them, and create artistic narratives through which to consider the ontological and ecological challenges posed by the Anthropocene. Ovid, for whom «there

[31] Ivi, p. 61.
[32] Danish Arts Foundation 2022.
[33] Katsikopoulou 2022.
[34] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, 1.

is little or nothing in nature that was not once a human being, and might not once again become one»[35], emerges as a compellingly contemporary voice and important source of inspiration.

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Appendix

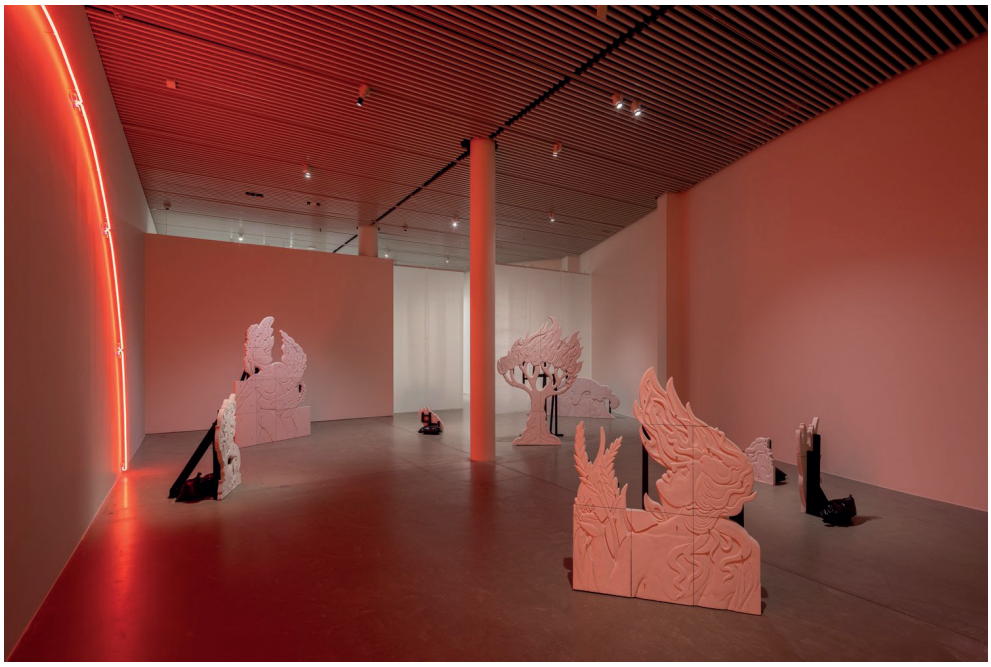

Fig. 1. Installation photo of 'Swan Song', part of 'Immemorial', a solo exhibition by Sif Itona Westerberg, ARoS: Aarhus, Denmark, 2021. Photo: © David Stjernholm

Fig. 2. Installation photo of *The Heliades Turned into Poplar Trees* in 'Swan Song', part of 'Immemorial', a solo exhibition by Sif Itona Westerberg, ARoS: Aarhus, Denmark, 2021. Photo: © David Stjernholm

Fig. 3. Installation photo of *Earth complaining* in 'Swan Song', part of 'Immemorial', a solo exhibition by Sif Itona Westerberg, ARoS: Aarhus, Denmark, 2021. Photo: © David Stjernholm

Fig. 4. Installation photo of *Cygnus* in 'Swan Song', part of 'Immemorial', a solo exhibition by Sif Itona Westerberg, ARoS: Aarhus, Denmark, 2021. Photo: © David Stjernholm

Fig. 5. Installation photo of 'We Walked the Earth', an exhibition by Uffe Isolotto and Jacob Lillemose, Pavilion of Denmark, Biennale Arte, Venice, 2022. Photo: The author

Fig. 6. Installation photo of 'We Walked the Earth', an exhibition by Uffe Isolotto and Jacob Lillemose, Pavilion of Denmark, Biennale Arte, Venice, 2022. Photo: The author

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