The Cryptomnesia of Mark Mothersbaugh: B e a u t i f u l  M u t a n t s  i n  e i n f a l l  a n d  s h a d o w
Cristina Bodiker-deUriarte

Cryptomnesia, something creeps up into consciousness...always unconscious until the moment it appears...as though it had fallen from heaven. The Germans call this an einfall, which means a thing which falls into your head from nowhere...like a revelation.'
—Carl Jung

Mark Mothersbaugh’s art leads the viewer to see the hidden mutant in us all. The artist renders a “study of humans via symmetry using photos, both recent and vintage” in which each photograph is, like the “self” in Jungian analysis, transformed to “emerge from its chrysalis as something with expected and uninvestigated properties. It no longer represented anything immediately known... Rather, it now appeared in a double guise, as both known and unknown.”

Mothersbaugh’s images are real yet unreal, of this world yet otherworldly, mysterious yet deeply, if unconsciously, meaningful. According to Gombrich, such “images apparently occupy a curious position somewhere between the statements of language, which are intended to convey a meaning, and the things of nature, to which we can only give a meaning.” The mutants are taken from nature in the form of “images pulled from man’s past...then corrected into sickeningly beautiful beings” to become, through this “correction,” symbolic. They convey meaning, yet depend on the viewer to complete that meaning as an intuitive, internal act. The more “mutated” the image, the more intuitive the responses. Jung’s description of dreams applies equally well to Mothersbaugh’s mutants: “...you cannot see where they came from and you cannot know where they go...you get the hunch...what is called intuition, a sort of divination, a sort of miraculous faculty....whereby you see round corners...a kind of perception which does not go exactly by the senses, but goes via the unconscious.”

In “Beautiful Mutants,” one looks around corners into images at once alien and familiar, other and self. The more open the viewer, the more visible the “self” in the mirror-image mutant. Einfall occurs precisely in this self-recognition. Reconciling this with more typical self-conceptions involves looking at processes that lead to self-feeling—vis-à-vis Mothersbaugh’s deconstruction of such processes through art.

Cooley explained “self-feeling” in terms of judgments that we believe others make; he described the way we adapt to increase our comfort and self-esteem in view of those judgments, creating a “looking-glass-self.” However, the “thing that moves us to pride or shame is not a mere mechanical reflection...[and] ideas that are associated with self-feeling...cannot be covered by any simple description....That other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference.” In this case, Mothersbaugh is that “other in whose mind we see ourselves,” through the alchemical looking-glass images of the beautiful mutants. His art challenges our predisposition to credit only those who think well of us and to repress or deny parts of our character in order to think well of ourselves.

Goffman believed that people who recognized this looking-glass process used it not for self-improvement, but for self-promotion through “image management” and a manipulated “presentation of self.” He held that most people tacitly collude to maintain such illusions.

8. Cooley.
Conversely, Cooley hoped that people who recognized this process would choose better “looking glasses,” leading to greater personal development. Mothersbaugh does not wait for people to choose, but manipulates his virtual mirror. Before realizing it, we recognize secret truths of the self in his mutants—cynomnesia.

Mothersbaugh takes the metaphor of the self-reflecting mirror-image and turns it back on itself in his recognition that “humans are basically asymmetric—we have this lie of being symmetric...you can see deeper inside people when you split them in half...when you look at a mirror [image] and when you see an image that wasn’t there before.”

His symbolic mirror-images reflect both a physical and metaphorical asymmetry. He shatters the looking-glass-self and reconstitutes it so “a closer look reveals what is truly inside the people—around us, viewed without the disguise we all so expertly hide behind.”

Jung advocated the use of the expressive arts, dreams, and other projective-associative media to help people shed their “conventional husk” and develop “a stark encounter with reality, with no false veils or adornments...wherein man stands forth as he really is, and shows what was hidden under the mask of conventional adaptation: the shadow.”

Mothersbaugh, through his transformed images, provides a more universal looking-glass and the challenge to not merely see but to truly look. It is a Jungian-style appeal to a more universal looking-glass and the challenge to not to stagnation, and eventually to neurotic disassociation... Recognition of the shadow is reason enough for humility.... The man without a shadow thinks himself harmless precisely because he is ignorant of his shadow. The man who recognizes his shadow knows very well that he is not harmless—once the naked truth has been revealed...once ego and shadow are brought together in an—admittedly precarious—unity.

For Jung, archetypal figures represent the “universally human”—their appearance is a warning that: The individual is at variance with unconscious collectives. That somewhere he has fallen a victim to his ambition and his ridiculous designs, and, if he does not pay attention, the gap will widen and he will fall into.

Mothersbaugh’s inspired images compel us to “pay attention.” They are not merely objective, split-half-mirrored portraits but are filtered through a particular vision that provides a means of seeing more clearly hidden selves of others and, through archetypal qualities common to all humans, into our own “selves.”

Jung used the recognition and interpretation of archetypes as a means of working through the primary principles of psychological health—“entropy” and “transcendence.” Entropy is the recognition that we are a mixture of good and bad, that for each good impulse a dark impulse exists but may go unrecognized. In transcendence, we rise above these opposites by seeing and recognizing both in our own identities, thereby recognizing who we really are.

Mothersbaugh engages the principle of entropy when he shows that “humans tend to have a beautiful side and a dark side,” illustrating this by differentially mirroring the two halves of our asymmetry. This reveals archetypes among the mutants in “images that were very compelling through their grotesqueness or through their weird beauty where it was almost creepy.”

Viewers resonate with these images at the interstice between individual subconscious and collective unconscious. Mothersbaugh is, indeed, a master of this interstice, offering the potential “miraculous” experience that art can provide. As Gombrich describes it, “the true miracle of the language of art is not that it enables the artist to create the illusion of reality. It is that under the hands of a great master, the image becomes translucent. In teaching us to see the visible world anew, he gives us the illusion of looking into the invisible realms of the mind—if only we know...how to use our eyes.”

Cristina Boing Boing, A Directory of Wonderful Things (November 15, 2006).

Mothersbaugh takes the metaphor of the self-reflecting mirror-image and turns it back on itself in his recognition that “humans are basically asymmetric—we have this lie of being symmetric...you can see deeper inside people when you split them in half...when you look at a mirror [image] and when you see an image that wasn’t there before.”

His symbolic mirror-images reflect both a physical and metaphorical asymmetry. He shatters the looking-glass-self and reconstitutes it so “a closer look reveals what is truly inside the people—around us, viewed without the disguise we all so expertly hide behind.”

Jung advocated the use of the expressive arts, dreams, and other projective-associative media to help people shed their “conventional husk” and develop “a stark encounter with reality, with no false veils or adornments...wherein man stands forth as he really is, and shows what was hidden under the mask of conventional adaptation: the shadow.”

Mothersbaugh, through his transformed images, provides a more universal looking-glass and the challenge to not merely see but to truly look. It is a Jungian-style appeal to a more universal looking-glass and the challenge to not to stagnation, and eventually to neurotic disassociation... Recognition of the shadow is reason enough for humility.... The man without a shadow thinks himself harmless precisely because he is ignorant of his shadow. The man who recognizes his shadow knows very well that he is not harmless—once the naked truth has been revealed...once ego and shadow are brought together in an—admittedly precarious—unity.

For Jung, archetypal figures represent the “universally human”—their appearance is a warning that: The individual is at variance with unconscious collectives. That somewhere he has fallen a victim to his ambition and his ridiculous designs, and, if he does not pay attention, the gap will widen and he will fall into.

Mothersbaugh’s inspired images compel us to “pay attention.” They are not merely objective, split-half-mirrored portraits but are filtered through a particular vision that provides a means of seeing more clearly hidden selves of others and, through archetypal qualities common to all humans, into our own “selves.”

Jung used the recognition and interpretation of archetypes as a means of working through the primary principles of psychological health—“entropy” and “transcendence.” Entropy is the recognition that we are a mixture of good and bad, that for each good impulse a dark impulse exists but may go unrecognized. In transcendence, we rise above these opposites by seeing and recognizing both in our own identities, thereby recognizing who we really are.

Mothersbaugh engages the principle of entropy when he shows that “humans tend to have a beautiful side and a dark side,” illustrating this by differentially mirroring the two halves of our asymmetry. This reveals archetypes among the mutants in “images that were very compelling through their grotesqueness or through their weird beauty where it was almost creepy.”

Viewers resonate with these images at the interstice between individual subconscious and collective unconscious. Mothersbaugh is, indeed, a master of this interstice, offering the potential “miraculous” experience that art can provide. As Gombrich describes it, “the true miracle of the language of art is not that it enables the artist to create the illusion of reality. It is that under the hands of a great master, the image becomes translucent. In teaching us to see the visible world anew, he gives us the illusion of looking into the invisible realms of the mind—if only we know...how to use our eyes.”

Cristina Boing Boing, A Directory of Wonderful Things (November 15, 2006).

Special thanks to author Mark Mothersbaugh and Associated Press for providing links to his work. These images are for use by researchers only and may not be reprinted in any form. For more information, please contact the author.

Scholars Referenced
1. Carl Gustav Jung (1871-1963): Swiss psychiatrist who founded analytic psychology. For many years he was Freud’s close collaborator (Jungian analysis was developed, in part, as an alternative to Freud’s psychoanalysis). Jung proposed and developed the concepts of archetypes and the collective unconscious.
2. Sir Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich (1909-2001): Austrian-British scholar widely recognized as one of the world’s most influential art historians, particularly in the area of perception and art. Gombrich held a number of endowed professorships including those at Harvard, Cornell, and the Royal College of Art. He was knighted for his accomplishments in 1972.
3. Charles Henry Cowey (1864-1929): American sociologist and precursor to the symbolic interactionist school of thought in sociology. A prolific scholar, Cowey’s most famous original concept is that of the “looking glass self,” a concept still valued in contemporary sociology. Cowey’s view of the individual is where it was almost creepy.”
4. Erving Goffman (1922-1982): Canadian-American scholar known as one of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century. He pioneered concepts in face-to-face interaction through his famous book Building Self and Symbolic Interaction.
5. Hermann Rorschach (1884-1922): Swiss Foundation psychoanalyst and art teacher famous for seeing the analytic potential in the inkblot test which is now known as an inkblot projective-associative test that was given his name.

2. Sir Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich (1909-2001): Austrian-British scholar widely recognized as one of the world’s most influential art historians, particularly in the area of perception and art. Gombrich held a number of endowed professorships including those at Harvard, Cornell, and the Royal College of Art. He was knighted for his accomplishments in 1972.
3. Charles Henry Cowey (1864-1929): American sociologist and precursor to the symbolic interactionist school of thought in sociology. A prolific scholar, Cowey’s most famous original concept is that of the “looking glass self,” a concept still valued in contemporary sociology. Cowey’s view of the individual is where it was almost creepy.”
4. Erving Goffman (1922-1982): Canadian-American scholar known as one of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century. He pioneered concepts in face-to-face interaction through his famous book Building Self and Symbolic Interaction.
5. Hermann Rorschach (1884-1922): Swiss Foundation psychoanalyst and art teacher famous for seeing the analytic potential in the inkblot test which is now known as an inkblot projective-associative test that was given his name.