



“David Altmejd: Beyond the Apocalypse.” In *David Altmejd*. Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2014

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**David Altmejd:
Beyond the Apocalypse**

I see my work as post-apocalyptic. The basis is disaster, but then it's about how things grow on top of that. There's nothing negative in my work.¹ — David Altmejd

A risk for American artists becoming prominent in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York City's World Trade Center — and especially for those like David Altmejd, whose art focuses on contrasts between dark and light subjects — is to have their work drawn so closely into the aftermath of 9/11 that it serves as only an addendum to it. Since Altmejd's statement in the above epigraph reinforces the view he has repeated on a number of occasions that "decay" is a "positive thing because it's also a form of regeneration,"² his sculptures can certainly be construed as occasions for healing after this major trauma, but his art is much more than a comforting postscript to a national disaster. In fact, Altmejd's work provides a basis for rethinking a vast array of topics, such as art and energy, the ongoing dynamics of becoming, the separation of humans and animals, lucid dreaming, the metaphor of the mirror and the self, the artist as facilitator instead of sole generator of an idea, and the postmodern grotesque.

A gardener by temperament and inclination, Altmejd regards nature's ongoing decomposition of organic substances as enormously renewing and replete with the very positive forces of regeneration, which he frequently underscores in his sculptures through a liberal use of crystals primarily because of their ability to multiply, giving them the appearance of growth. "A lot of people," he has reflected, "think that I'm really fascinated by death and morbidity, but I'm much more interested in life. I just think that things look more alive when they're growing on top of what's dead."³

This focus on regeneration has a source in Altmejd's childhood when his Catholic grandmother took him to Sunday mass, even though he identifies with the Jewish faith from the paternal side of his family:

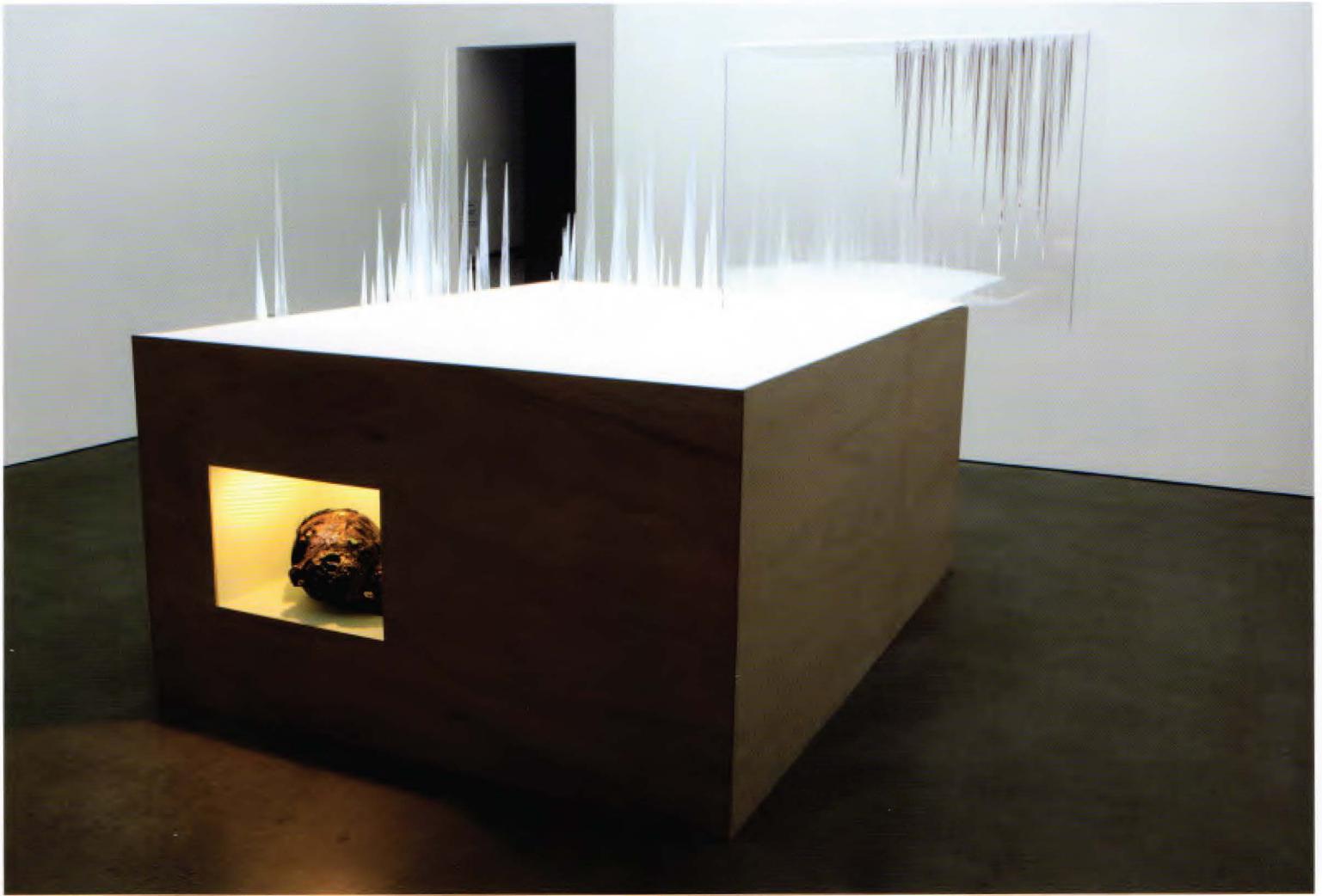
I later was conscious of how the architecture of the Catholic church influenced me, particularly the fact that it is symmetrical. I can feel the energy in the churches, especially where the lines converge; it is like a heart, there is something about the upward movement; the cross itself is defined by the shape of a body when crucified; the church imitates the shape of a cross, a body being crucified, and all this converges in a point that wants to be lived upward. I am not religious but am very sensitive to these things.⁴

The metaphoric connection of traditional Catholic Gothic architecture with the human body is well known. It is evident in the Gothic church's symmetry, rib vaults (understood as a pun), and movement of the ambulatory around the high altar that enacts, at least for some of us today, the analogous movement of the human circulatory system around the heart.

Altmejd was perhaps more impressed by the liturgical function of the church's architecture than he might have been had he been brought up a practicing Catholic. Because his parents are not particularly religious — his mother was born and reared a Catholic; and his father, whose parents were Jewish, had grown up in post-Holocaust Poland and consequently maintained a strong Jewish identity — Altmejd's frequent visits to his grandmother's church appeared strangely exotic and thus assumed special and privileged meanings for him. In addition to the architecture of the Catholic church, Altmejd became intrigued with religious reliquaries as containers of special types of power. Responding to the often-remarked observation that his sculptures, beginning with the displays used to house his earliest werewolf pieces of 1999 and 2000, were like reliquaries, Altmejd stated, "I think reliquaries are the most powerful objects, so a sculpture as powerful as a reliquary would be great."⁵

Considering sculpture in terms of contemporary and secular reliquaries has enabled Altmejd to develop his art in the following two directions that he often combines in mutually supportive ways: The first extends the idea of Minimalism as well as commercial and museum displays; it consists mainly of painted wood daises for staging Plexiglas and mirror constructions and for showcasing a series of organic and mineral forms; later this reconfiguration of sculpture as repository took the form of giant Plexiglas cases. Altmejd's second direction assumes the form of organic decapitated fragments of werewolves; upside-down humanoid heads skewered on stanchions, which upset gravity's norms; and fantastic sets of figures including the artist's many series, including the "Giants," "Bodybuilders," "Architects," and "Guides."

The power Altmejd originally discovered in spiritual objects assumes in his art the secular form of highly concentrated energy, a force understood both through earlier works of art and his early study of biology. He views this power and its ability to



First Werewolf, 1999; wood, lighting system, acetate, Mylar, Plexiglas, polystyrene, expandable foam, acrylic paint, latex paint, Sculpey, synthetic hair, rhinestones

activate his art as the single most important aspect of his work, as he has emphasized on numerous occasions and has explained most succinctly and saliently in an interview with American art historian and critic Michaël Amy:

I am much, much, much more interested in energy. I seek to inject energy and create tensions in a work because in my mind, tensions generate energy. Think of the negative and positive poles in an electrical circuit. I am much more interested in the object being alive and being able to develop its own intelligence and generate meaning. I do not want to use the piece as a tool to communicate meaning. I want it to be able to generate its own meaning.⁶

Altmejd has indicated an interest in thinking about energy scientifically by considering it in terms of “physics, electricity, and

biology.” Of particular importance to him is the ability to regard energy as functioning systematically like the human body. However, simply filling a work with energy is not his goal; instead he wishes to move beyond single entities in order to look at them systematically. “I want to make objects,” he has emphasized, “that really exist in the work as a body exists in the world, and energy is a condition to get them there.”⁷ On another occasion, he stressed how energy initially was much more significant for him than meaning, even though he now thinks of the two as united in his work. “I thought meaning in itself was overrated,” he explains, “it seemed to be simplistic, because it seemed to belong to language. Now my understanding of the word ‘meaning’ is much more complex and not simplistically related to language; now I am creating objects that are able to generate meaning; now generating a narrative is the same as generating energy: both are connected to the life force.”⁸

Altmejd's conception of energy in his art both differs from and yet is similar to that of his early artistic hero, the German sculptor Joseph Beuys, who became known in the United States in 1974 during his first visit to the country when he presented a series of lectures in a multicity tour under the overarching title "Energy Plan for Western Man." Beuys's title, which he had originated years before this trip, was no doubt strategically reactivated for his American tour because the United States had experienced only the year before a severe energy crisis caused by the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OAPEC's) oil embargo, even though this fact has not been mentioned in the art historical accounts of this trip. In his overall work, Beuys conceptualizes energy mainly in terms of the caloric potentials of such materials as honey and fat, the high conductivity of copper and the relative low one of iron, the insulating properties of wool felt, and the traditional iconographic association of gold with its "spiritus vitae" catalyzing spiritual and fire-like associations, so that his sculpture functions metaphorically as a nonactivated repository of energy.

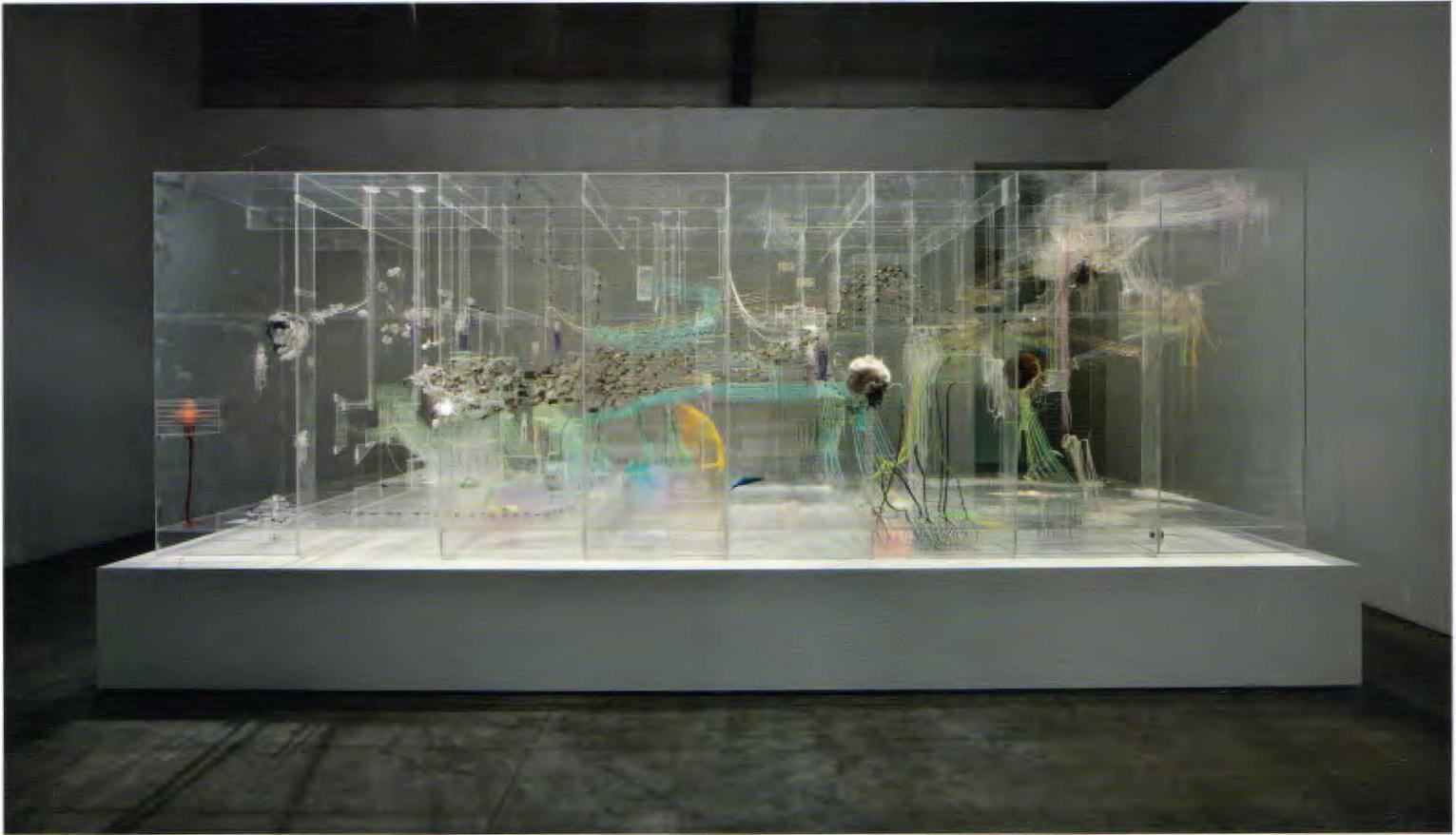
This idea of power as an associative and symbolic force *in potentia* rather than actuality is far removed from Altmejd's much more dynamic views of it. Where the two artists are in agreement is in their interest in the possibility or narrative of metamorphic change as a means for releasing energy. Rather than picking up on Beuys's primarily static materialistic and iconographic views of energy, Altmejd is much more indebted to the older artist's profound regard for the "deep alterity of things, of nature and of the world," as author Annie Suquet cogently notes.⁹

Regarding the role power assumes in his work, Altmejd has pointed out:

I really need to feel as if the piece is not a product. I always want my piece to be an object that carries the energy related to its making. Like process art, I don't want my work to be an object that is there to generate a certain specific reaction . . . For me every object is an element and the whole thing is one sculpture.¹⁰

Altmejd does not invoke energy as a potential stored in his art as Beuys does, even though his work might indirectly be connected to this artist's reliance on honey through the appearance

of bees in *The Swarm* (2011; see pgs. 200, 246–49) in which the work of art can metaphorically be construed as the rich sweet substance these insects produce. Altmejd views the cheap gold chains — available in Chinatown or in craft stores, that start to appear in his work in 2007 and replace his former reliance on the silver chains he began employing in 2002 — as conveyors of energy, capable of distributing it throughout his works. He has pointed out that these chains provide ways for "energy to circulate through a piece" and has compared them to the "nervous system" in creating "the impression of the whole thing coming alive."¹¹ In addition to metal chains, Altmejd has relied on threads and spools of threads to trace to create webs of energy in such works as *La chambre d'hôte* (2010; see pg. 186) and *The Vessel* (2011; see pgs. 242–45). Unlike Beuys, then, Altmejd thinks of energy as more actively embodied and represented in his sculpture. In Altmejd's work energy is communicated to viewers through a series of ongoing tensions, causing them to dwell on this feature of his art, even to the point of being transfixed by it, thus spending longer amounts of time than they might if his sculpture did not encompass such extreme polarities and span such different types of references. In addition to the already mentioned embedded differences between growth and decay in his work, as already mentioned, Altmejd's sculptures incorporate such strange contrasts and unfamiliar disparities as taxidermy or sculpted birds with apparently rotting cadavers; ersatz plastic flowers with real crystals; gold chains and costume jewelry adorning werewolves; gaping cavities perforating his ten-foot tall "Giants" that unfold into fantastic landscapes; sleek modern stages, resembling commodifying department store backdrops coupled with highly organic elements; geometric structures, both large and small, sheathed with mirrors to set up irrational states of mirrored reflexiveness; the totem- or stele-like "Guides" that reflect viewers back to themselves, thus steering them both inward and outward; and old fashioned horrific elements acting in tandem with humorous meretricious rhinestone accoutrements, sometimes additionally elaborated with generous sprinklings of glitter. For viewers these polarities create an energizing ricocheting effect, forming an ongoing spinning vortex comprised of real and kitsch components, physical signifiers of life and death characteristics, dynamic and inertial parts, angelic and damned allusions, as well as elements that suggest both natural and artificial environments.¹² Seen in this way Altmejd's contrasting registers and allusions constitute an ongoing metamorphosis



The Swarm, 2011; Plexiglas; chain; metal wire; thread; acrylic paint; epoxy resin; epoxy clay; acrylic gel; granular medium; synthetic hair; plaster; polystyrene; expandable foam; sand; assorted minerals including quartz, amethyst, pyrite; glue; pins; needles

between the insistent materiality of the media and objects he utilizes as well as art's sublimating/transcending power, in addition to contrasting the different substances and modes of display found in natural history and art museums that in the words of critic Alessio Ascaari "[release] a magnetic force, a disturbing, turbid erotic charge"¹³ and according to critic J.J. Charlesworth produce a "fault line . . . where the prosaic and the recognizable fuse and recombine to open on the sudden materialization of the imaginary. . . . [to become] the energy of transformation."¹⁴ Charlesworth's insight approaches the contradictory openness and closure as well as the mixture of tragedy and humor caught up in the ongoing and unresolvable dialectic known as the grotesque, a subject that will be investigated below.

The ongoing dynamics of Altmejd's art can best be understood in terms of Aristotle's *energeia*, this philosopher's neologistic term for moving beyond the teleological coming into being of Plato's universals by considering life itself as a mode of continuous becoming. According to German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's insightful essay "Artworks in Word and Image: 'So

True, So Full of Being! (Goethe) (1992),"¹⁵ Aristotle needed a new concept to differentiate ongoing movement, *energeia*, from the type of object representing an already achieved goal, known in Greek as *ergon*.

In order to theorize the captivating process of looking or thinking about a work of art, Gadamer speculates that *energeia*, defined as "a tarrying over," can be redirected to provide a means for identifying and understanding this type of sustained engagement. He concludes:

An experience of art is . . . not a mere copy of something. Rather one is absorbed in it. It is more like a tarrying that waits and preserves in such a way that the work of art is allowed to come forth . . . what comes forth addresses us and so the person who is addressed is as if in conversation with what comes forth Being in the mode of tarrying is like an intensive back-and-forth conversation that is not cut off but lasts until it is ended.¹⁶

While Aristotle utilizes the word *energeia* for distinguishing such

ongoing activities as living, observing, and cogitating as well as for expressing God, the Unmoved Mover of the universe immersed in creation, Gadamer considers this idea aesthetically and regards it as a possible combination of the Greek words *aletheia* (unconcealment) and *theoria* (the gods' complete and undivided participation in a given act) in order to explain how art viewers participate fully in the ongoing being distinguishing art.¹⁷ Put in terms of Altmejd's work, we can look at how he views the energy in his work as at times the equivalent to "the nervous system or natural aspects of the body. So if you frame the discussion in terms of energy, it's more about the way it travels through the spine or the nerves rather than being contained in a box." In addition to this organic metaphor, Altmejd has described his art as a "field of energy."¹⁸

Besides setting up the polarities in his work that put in play its many shifts between different types, registers, and levels of references, thereby creating the dynamic conditions Gadamer calls *energeia*, Altmejd's mature work can be dated to his first semester as a graduate student at Columbia University in 1999; it represents a conceptualization of sculpture as an open-ended container for setting up contrasting fields of energy. In New York, Altmejd continued the series of worktables as sculptures, incorporating dramatically different types of materials and objects, which he had been making during the preceding two years as an M.F.A. candidate at the Université du Québec in Montreal. These works include *Untitled* (1997; see pg. 28), comprised of six Chinese porcelain vases placed on a plywood table, supported by two sawhorses, beneath which he positioned two aggressive motors, which vibrate so much that the vases shake vigorously, often coming perilously close to the edges of the table before viewers would take it on themselves to move them back a safe distance, even though the breakage of these vases would not have upset the artist. *Table no. 2* (1998; see pg. 25) is notable for its three artificial hair wigs and the motion detector incorporated into it, which serves the dual function of setting the work into action when viewers are detected within close range of the sculpture, a tactic useful for keeping motors from overheating and, even more importantly, for creating situations whereby the mutual encounter of percipients and work of art could be registered by the artwork itself. In *Amenagement des Energies (Layout of Energies)* (1998; see pgs. 26–27), consisting of audio equipment, crystals, and paint, the voices of Altmejd and his sister Sarah



Jardins Intérieur, 1999; table (melamine over particle board), plaster, wire, beads, fan, strobe light, synthetic hair, electronics

making ambiguous moaning sounds of pleasure and pain can be heard through the headphones included in the piece. *Jennifer* (another work from 1998; see pg. 29), also incorporates audio equipment, a motion detector, and artificial hair but becomes more of an installation with the addition of chairs. This work presents the story of a fictitious girl for whom the work is named, who is suffering from a traumatic event. While Jennifer says nothing, Altmejd's mother, Danielle Laberge, plays the part of a therapist and asks a series of obscure and clichéd questions. *Jardins Intérieur* (1999; above) continues Altmejd's combination of hair and electronics, this time with the addition of a strobe light as well as beads, thus establishing the theme of seemingly irreconcilable opposing types that has continued to be a hallmark of his mature work. In *Jardins Intérieur* the plaster head with syn-

thetic hair, in conjunction with this evocative title, references the extraordinary space of both the mind's and the body's interior — a fact reinforced by the title of the overall show “Modèles d'esprit et jardins intérieurs [Models of the Spirit and Inner Gardens]” in which this work was included. *Jardins Intérieur* is the prototype for a number of persistent Altmejdian themes: fascination with the infinite space of the human mind, fragmentation of the body, and the use of plaster, which as a material traditionally considered useful only in initial phases of making sculpture, give the works that incorporate it a sense of urgency and contingency.

Because Altmejd had been making work tables for the two preceding years and because his studio space at Columbia was so small, he decided to begin graduate work by constructing a much larger piece: it became a light table instead of a purchased folding one, and it occupied almost the entire studio, with the exception of a border of a couple of feet, so Altmejd could move around. This new sculpture served as his worktable for his first semester, and he decided everything created during this time would become part of this overall piece, titled *First Werewolf* (1999; see pg. 198). The finished work resembles both a Minimalist sculpture and a commercial display. Comprised of wood, acetate, Mylar, and Plexiglas, it provided a setting for a werewolf's head created in Sculpey (an oven-baked material marketed mainly to children), synthetic hair, and rhinestones. A dialectical thinker, Altmejd decided during his second semester at Columbia to reverse his mode of working by first creating a series of objects before constructing a structure for displaying them. He titled this work *Second Werewolf* (2000; see pgs. 32–35).

Whenever Altmejd is asked the obvious question of why he decided to make werewolf heads, his response begins art historically. He acknowledges having been a long-time fan of both Louise Bourgeois's and Kiki Smith's sculptures while wanting to do something with the body that differs substantially from their work. “By using a monster's body part instead of a human body part,” he explains, “I thought I'd be able to keep the strength and the power of the object but could eliminate the familiar aspect,” and adds, “I felt it was a more interesting experience because it was both powerful and weird.” He also notes that the werewolf is of particular interest as a “metaphor” for good and evil.¹⁹

After making these art historical references, Altmejd acknowl-

edges wishing to create a special narrative about the werewolf in order “to explain the sort of weird energy that interests me.”²⁰ This oft-quoted story is of great import for highlighting the tremendous power he imagines his decapitated lycanthropes embodying:

*If a man transforms into a werewolf, it constitutes the most intense transformation experience that one can have on both a physical and a mental plane. In a matter of seconds, one goes from one state of mental and physical identity to a totally opposite one. Right after the transformation is over, the monster's head would be chopped off and placed on a table. The head would be so filled with energy that it would crystallize immediately, instead of rotting.*²¹

Lest one think of his werewolf sculptures as mere illustrations, Altmejd is careful to say, “this story did not precede the making of the sculpture.”²² For Altmejd, the werewolf is a prominent signifier of transformation and regeneration after death, and his fascination with this metamorphosis does not rely on the mythologized traditional and historical views of this creature.²³

One constructive art historical way to begin thinking about Altmejd's early preference for werewolves in his work is to view them as a conflation of aspects of Beuys's aforementioned “Energy Plan for Western Man” and his well-known concomitant performance entitled “Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me” as a merging of energy, artist, and animal in a totally new and compelling incarnation whereby the mythic is transformed into the horrific, albeit, as we will see, with a distinctly postmodern type of humor. For his very famous 1974 three-day performance in René Block's New York gallery, Beuys arranged to occupy a specially constructed cage with a wild coyote. Besides the animal, Beuys's only accompaniments were a cane, triangle, felt blanket, fifty copies of the *Wall Street Journal*, and a stack of hay. Considered a preeminent trickster in North American Indian myths, notable for being able to survive concerted efforts over the years to eradicate it and infamous for managing to thrive under such new and challenging conditions as suburbanization, the coyote incarnates a range of primal energies with which Beuys professed being able to commune. Regarding the performance “I Like America and America Likes Me,” Beuys said,



Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974; performance at the René Block Gallery, New York.

*I believe I made contact with the psychological trauma point of the United States' energy constellation: the whole American trauma with the Indian, the Red Man. You could say that reckoning had to be made with the coyote, and only then can the trauma be lifted.*²⁴

The coyote appearing in Beuys's work can thus be viewed as symbolizing the trickster and therefore capable of representing mythic qualities, including the transformative ability to reinvent itself, thereby upsetting the status quo while still subsuming under its aegis the anarchy it sets in action. When I asked Altmejd for his thoughts about Beuys and the coyote, he replied that he has conceived of them as occupying the positive cathode and negative anode of a battery, thus comprising in their American wild and European sophisticated outlooks a highly articulate form of electricity.²⁵ To see Altmejd's werewolf as the most recent incarnation of this renowned shape-shifting trickster, whereby the horrific is merged with glitz and ersatz glamour — obvious signifiers of lowbrow drag — and to view it as belonging to the same tradition as Beuys's coyote is not as extreme an idea as one might initially think, especially when one considers, as noted author David Levi Strauss does, Beuys's considerable respect for “the coyote as the progeny of the paleo-Siberian,

Eurasian steppe-wolfe that came across the Bearing Straight ... [and] carried the paleo-Asiatic shamanic knowledge with him, spreading it throughout the North American West.”²⁶

At this point in the discussion, it is important to take note of the quartz crystals used in *Second Werewolf*. This geologic formation has become one of the mainstays of Altmejd's sculpture; its first appearance was in *Amenagement des Energies (Layout of Energies)*, created two years earlier. “When I was a kid,” Altmejd reflected, “I used to collect crystals and rocks. My father traveled to Brazil as part of his business, and he would bring back rocks, and they were very, very precious to me. I had a fetishistic attachment to these cold things. . . . There is maybe something about them that reminds me of Superman . . . when he walks to the North Pole, and then the Forest of Solitude grows from the single piece of crystal he has with him. . . . The fact that crystals grow is important for me.”²⁷ In addition to these films, Altmejd was intrigued as a child with Jim Henson's film *The Dark Crystal* (1982) and its story of the misfortunes taking place in a fantasy world one thousand years ago when the cracking of a magical gem divided the world into the two rival groups of reptilian Skeksis and hunchbacked wizards called “Mystics,” and the rectification of this tragic bipolarization that occurs when a

Gelfing replaces the missing part of the crystal, thereby joining and healing this opposition of conflicting forces so that they could be transformed into light transcending beings. Similarly, one might view Altmejd's werewolf sculptures with their crystals as symbolically correcting the wrongs created by a monstrous world, particularly when one understands the type of pairing evident in *The Dark Crystal* as a play on the enantiomorphic ability of certain types of crystals to develop into mirrored images of each other, a state evident in Altmejd's early *Untitled (Dark)* (2001; see pgs. 42–43) and *Untitled (White)* (2001), each comprising a mirrored pair of decapitated werewolf heads. Although they do not contain crystals per se, Altmejd's even earlier *Jennifer* and *First Werewolf* incorporate sharp cones of acetate made to resemble the memory crystals making up Superman's Arctic-based Fortress of Solitude, appearing in the 1970s films of this heroic DC Comic figure, which Altmejd saw as a child. Thus, their appearance in his early work can be understood as alluding, among other things, to these mass-media images of power and inexhaustible energy. In addition to the actual crystals Altmejd incorporates into many of his figures, particularly the werewolves and giants, a radiating constellation of mirrors comprising the work called *The Eye* (2008; see pgs. 136–39) creates a stirring reference to Superman's sunstone crystal used on the planet Krypton.

Altmejd has acknowledged another source: J. G. Ballard's apocalyptic piece of science-fiction, *The Crystal World*, for the crystals utilized in many of his werewolf sculptures and incorporated as well in a number of other works.²⁸ Predicated on viruses' ability to span animate and inanimate worlds, thereby assuming respectively organic lives and inanimate dormant states in which they can remain for decades, Ballard's text conjures a radiant encroaching world simultaneously overtaking a jungle in Gabon, the Florida everglades, and the Pripyat Marshes in the Soviet Union. The spectacular horror and surreal beauty of this altered realm is due to the ability of emerging faceted crystalline shells to encase living forms indefinitely, thus enshrouding them in a life-death immortality, as the following passage makes evident:

Glittering below her in the sunlight was what appeared to be an immense crystalline orchid carved from some quartzlike mineral. The entire structure of the flower had been reproduced and then embedded within the crystal base, almost as if a living specimen

*had been conjured into the center of a huge cut-glass pendant. The internal faces of the quartz had been cut with remarkable skill, so that a dozen images of the orchid were refracted, one upon the other, as if seen through a maze of prisms.*²⁹

This eerie world, both frozen and gemlike, and resembling a three-dimensional rendering of an analytical Cubist painting, can be understood as a fanciful and hyperbolic means for assessing the energy first expended and then stored when crystals grow, and this two-step force certainly deserves to be recognized as a science-fictional backdrop for Altmejd's many crystalline additions to his sculptures as well as his series of mirrored figures made in 2007 and given such names as *The Hunter*, *The Architect*, *The Astronomer*, and *The Thinker* (see pgs. 124; 120–21; 126–127 and 165; 122–23, respectively). In 2008 he followed with *Le dentist*, *The Guide*, *The Cave* (see pg. 141), *The Quail*, *The Big Moth*, and *The Clock*. Despite the fact that the mirrors comprising these figures tend to disembody them, or because they do function in this manner, Altmejd has chosen to title these works substantively with nouns denominated further by the definite article "the," thereby enhancing essentially static beings in contradiction to the movements created by the myriad reflections of the many passing figures, objects, and images coming within their purview.

Altmejd's invocation of werewolves in his early sculptures correlates well with interests in the past few decades in establishing theoretical bridges to span the once impregnable divide separating humans and animals, a segregation transgressed until recently only by such monstrous folkloric and literary figures as werewolves and Robert Louis Stevenson's hirsute Mr. Hyde. Regarding the great effort expended in separating humans from other mammals, French theorist Georges Bataille observes:

*Man is the animal that negates nature: he negates it through labor, which destroys it and changes it into an artificial world; he negates it in the case of life-creating activity; he negates it in the case of death. The incest prohibition is one of the effects of the repugnance felt for his condition by the animal that became human. The forms of animality were excluded from a bright world which signified humanity.*³⁰

Because Altmejd's werewolves sport costume-quality wigs, are often encrusted with quartz crystals, which appear to be taking



Louise Bourgeois, *Red Room (Child)*, 1994; mixed media

sustenance from their decapitated heads and dead carcasses, and are frequently ornamented with chains, beads, and costume jewelry, making them enormously decorative, even though they remain horrific with their wide open mouths revealing threatening sets of canine teeth, these glam ogres do break down some of the obstacles formerly securing an animal/human divide. In doing so, they enter the state of *becoming* so important to the French intellectuals Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who theorize differences between *major* (constant) and *minor* (variable) conditions, with the minor representing profound *detritorializations* so that subjects no longer need to defend an autonomous human purview and can begin to enter the far more fecund nomadic existence between such formerly stringent categories as humanity and animality.³¹

Deleuze and Guattari's *becoming minoritarian* is even more evident in Altmejd's three-dimensional portrait of his sister Sarah from 2003 — a work far removed from the major state of invariant self-identity (see pgs. 49–51). Not concerned with crossing the human/animal divide as Altmejd's werewolves appear to be, this portrait can be seen as moving away from the mass of static mat-

ter called *molar* by Deleuze and Guattari in order to become its opposite, *molecular*, so that the threshold between Sarah's external face, a gaping hole, and his interior mind, spirit, and internal flesh are transgressed and left open, thereby enacting the desirable condition these thinkers call *lines of flight*.³² An enigmatic, troubling, and alluring piece, *Sarah Altmejd* is a tremendously important work for Altmejd and the development of his thinking, as his extended account of it indicates:

After Columbia, I had no studio and could only work on the floor of the bedroom of my apartment. I wanted to make the most powerful work I could. I started with the idea of a self-portrait, with my mother and father, as if their heads were joined, since I am a part of them both. Then I thought, I could do my sister rather than them, since she is also a combination of both. I wanted to make something very powerful. Instead of sculpting my sister's face I made a black hole. I really love my sister, but I did not wish to reproduce my feelings. I have always tried to avoid representation. I wanted to make something new in the world by going a different route; to make something not meant to be representational. To make something new is posi-

*tive; even when working with horror. I found myself focusing on tiny glittery structures that were growing on the edge of the hole. So all that time I was facing a dark void, which is my sister or myself.*³³

Reflecting on his completed portrait of Sarah, the artist has noted how the hole constituting her face reminds him of the unseen visage of the male figure painted from the rear by German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich in *The Wanderer Above the Mists* (1817–18). For Altmejd, this sculpture is intended to be a positive affirmation of the unlimited possibilities human beings can embody and project:

*This work makes me think of Friedrich, and the figure looking from above the clouds. If I could see the face of the figure in the Friedrich, it could be a black hole. I like the idea that figures can contain the infinite within themselves — there is infinity outwards and also inwards.*³⁴

This lateral movement both inside and outside, turning transcendence into a transversal operation, calls to mind Deleuze and Guattari's "line of flight," as mentioned above. Concisely and aptly defined by their translator, the Canadian social theorist, writer, and philosopher Brian Massumi, *ligne de fuite* "covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distances (the vanishing point in a painting is a *point de fuite*."³⁵

Infinity is an important concept for Altmejd and his art, and he first recognized its significance in the 1990s when viewing the retrospective exhibition of Louise Bourgeois's work from 1982 to 1993, subtitled "The Locus of Memory" at Montreal's Museum of Contemporary Art. "This was the first time," he reflected, "I realized an object can contain infinity within itself — that it has an inside space, which can function like a body. In my work I'm always trying to convey the fact that a body, which inhabits a finite space, can contain infinity within itself. I responded to Bourgeois's cells, her large structures, where there are glass objects allowing one to peek inside — it's like looking inside a head."³⁶ As positive and perpetually open a "line of flight" as Altmejd may have intended his portrait of Sarah to be, with its great cavity in place of a face, representing the possibility of infinity first discovered in Bourgeois's work, there is no deny-

ing the fact that this work is also definitely shocking. Altmejd's *Sarah*, with its central black cavity making it appear as a black hole, which is both literally and symbolically a receptacle, also corresponds with Deleuze and Guattari's overriding concern in the chapter on faciality in *A Thousand Plateaus* for underscoring the fact that "the [static] face is a horror story." They deem it as "naturally inhuman, naturally a monstrous hood" and they end up comparing it to a white wall with a black hole analogous to white paper overlaid with black type.³⁷ Instead of viewing face-to-face encounters, as does the French thinker Emmanuel Levinas, as necessary for the development of human compassion and even for the formation of humanity itself, Deleuze and Guattari go beyond this dialogical approach to humanity and both the face's and human being's limitations in order to theorize a heretofore unparalleled nomadicism, a movement beyond the *molar*, evident in Altmejd's unforgettable portrait of Sarah, with her facial void, enabling her to remain perpetually open, itinerant, creative, and alive.

Altmejd believes the strength and feeling of power associated with lucid dreaming³⁸ and its ability to dramatize how the mind itself can generate distinct spaces is crucial to his sculpture. He began the practice of having lucid dreams in his teens when he felt he could consciously direct the activities and even people appearing in them. Despite Altmejd's convictions about lucid dreaming, the question of whether or not people can influence and even consciously direct their own dreams, which traditionally have been restricted in psychology to the purview of the subconscious mind, remains unresolved. A continued objection to this approach to dreaming is the idea that the ability to consciously influence one's own dreams might simply be part of an enlarged and more inclusive dream. Philosopher Kathleen Emmett has clearly articulated the possibility of this type of layered or nested imagery in the following manner: "To dream that I am dreaming involves having a dream in which I have a dream."³⁹ Conceived in this way, lucid dreaming might only be a case of *mise en abyme* and not an occasion of the conscious mind's intervention.

When considering lucid dreaming in relation to Altmejd's art, the question of whether one can consciously direct one's dreams is far less important than being aware of the artist's unassailable belief in his ability to play a determining role in

managing them. Of crucial importance to our understanding of Altmejd's work is the realization that its conviction derives in large part from nightly oneiric sojourns, which for decades have been exercising and heightening his imagination, providing both him and his art with the same kind of power and passion as Edgar Allan Poe's daydreams, which this nineteenth-century writer, known for his invocation of the horrific and fantastic, called "fancies."

The only time Altmejd has officially discussed the significance he attributes to lucid dreaming is in his interview with this author. This approach to the limitlessness of the human mind merits being cited at length, beginning with the following narrative of the way lucid dreaming freed him from terrifying nightmares, while providing opportunities for realizing seemingly limitless sexual fantasies:

As a teenager I started lucid dreaming because of recurring nightmares, and lucid dreaming became a way of combating the nightmares. I found that if I closed my eyes while in a dream and counted to ten, I could come out of the nightmare. I realized that if I could close my eyes in a dream, I was not in the reality of the dream. I understood that I did not need to come out of the nightmare; I could make the dream something I was in control of. I could simply ignore an evil force chasing after me and walk around the street where this force was located, so my dream could do whatever I wanted. At that point I had all this power in my head. I could turn the dream into a sex dream. Later I learned this is what most lucid dreamers do. When I was a teenager, I could go up to any person in the world in my dreams and have sex with them.⁴⁰

In this account, Altmejd does not even consider lucid dreaming as the source of the inspiration for the mythological figures populating his works, starting with the werewolves and continuing with his series of "Giants," "Watchers," "Bodybuilders," and "Guides." Whenever asked about his sources of inspiration during the years 2000 to 2009 when he was achieving increasing prominence, Altmejd has consistently maintained a belief in the fecundity of the studio process and the enormous benefits resulting from an engagement with specific materials.

In 2010, the sexual excitations and satisfactions Altmejd consis-

tently associated with his lucidly generated sex dreams took a new turn:

I decided, instead of trying to have sex, I was going to make art to see how the work in my head compares with the art developing from my daily life. I started looking for a pen and paper to make a drawing. I found a pen, but the only paper I could find was newspaper covered in print, with the exception of a few tiny areas around and in-between the text. These spaces were too small to make any visible drawing. Even in lucid dreaming, I cannot control everything, and I wasn't able to make any art.⁴¹

Since Altmejd was unable to locate the necessary materials in his dream for creating art, he decided the following evening to look for a mirror, even though it constituted an entirely different type of representational scheme and involved some risk:

Now you have to know that I tend to fear mirrors at night, when it's dark. I'm afraid to see something that doesn't want to be seen. Despite these fears, I decided to try and find a reflection in my dream in order to see what I looked like in my own head.⁴²

Haunted the following day by this chilling self-image, Altmejd decided immediately to go back to his former pattern of dreaming:

The night after seeing my reflection in my dream, I decided to go back to having sex. I was walking down the street and saw an attractive person walking ahead of me. I turned the person around, and this individual looked at me with its eyes black — in a confrontational way. This had never happened before. People in my dreams are under my control, they are in my head, they don't have will power. When I awoke from this dream, I tried to make sense of it. I think the night before, when I looked at my reflection, I opened a door that shouldn't have been opened. For the first time, something or someone else was in my head. That was so terrifying. Since that time, nothing else has appeared in my dreams.⁴³

While Altmejd attributes this frightening encounter with a mirrored reflection of himself to the lucidity of his self-directed oneirism, there is a long literary tradition involved with the strange, miraculous, and horrific aspects of mirrors, including the



Untitled 4 (Guides), 2011; wood, mirror

writings of the Argentine fantasist Jorge Luis Borges whose work Altmejd has noted on several occasions as being of great importance to his thinking. Often in his writings, Borges plays with the first personal pronoun, which oscillates between referencing himself and the fictional character predicated on this self. In the tale “The Draped Mirrors,” this polyvalent figure reveals a great personal aversion to mirrors,

One of my insistent pleas to God and my guardian angel was that I not dream of mirrors. . . . I feared sometimes that they would begin to veer off from reality: other times, that I would see my face in them disfigured by strange misfortunates.⁴⁴

In his poem “Mirrors,” Borges summarizes his view of their ability to diminish humans’ sense of autonomy by reducing them to

the level of mere likenesses, “God has created nighttime, which he arms / With dreams, and mirrors, to make clear / to man he is a reflection and a mere / Vanity.”⁴⁵ The idea of people being no more real than their reflections, coupled with the concomitant theory of mirror images being subject to tampering, is a frightening concept enormously fascinating to Altmejd who has remembered the Borges’s line analogizing mirrors and copulation because of each one’s mutability and wanton reproduction of human beings,⁴⁶ an insight particularly affecting in view of this artist’s desire to create not only bodies but “never-ending” ones, which he has compared to the seemingly infinite reflections created by objects placed between parallel mirrors.⁴⁷

Borges’s intrigue with mirrors and the fluidity of identity, which at times can outpace one’s sense of self, has a source in the French Symbolist tradition, which reached its apex in the second half of the nineteenth century. Literary specialist Margaret Stoljar has eloquently pinpointed the role mirrors play in this often-arcane tradition both for their ability to create ambiguity and just as often for forestalling it:

The Symbolist imagination consistently employs the mirror as an icon for the ambivalence of existence, because of its mysterious betrayal of uncertainty in what is perceived and the strangeness of its shadowed world. A sense of ontological anxiety underlies many uses of the motif⁴⁸

Considered positively, the new insights mirrors afford can affirm the rush of excitement attending one’s earliest discovery of oneself through a reflected image, but these quixotic foci on momentary and chance encounters can also imperil any sense of continuity, as evidenced in Altmejd’s early sculptures resembling Sol LeWitt’s cubic sculptures sheathed in mirrors, creating myriads of dazzling ricocheting reflections, thus becoming occasions for self-distrust as well as an exhilarating type of entropy in terms of information overload (such as *Untitled* [2000; see pg. 41] and *The University 1* [2004; see pg. 71])

Despite this excess or perhaps because of it, mirrors are doors to fantastic and mysterious realms, a means of insight and opportunities for self-extension, as is evidenced by Altmejd’s group of mirrored figures, anticipated in 2008 and pursued more concertedly in 2011, called “Guides.” Comprised of imbricated

mirrors, these sculptures ironically entice viewers into looking at their own self-reflections, with all the aforementioned hazards this can entail, at the same time these percipients are regarding these mirrored beings as sculpted personages. However, viewers' reflections are fragmented because of the artist's decision to break discrete portions of the surfaces of these pieces in order to "release energy," as he points out:

With the action of the hammer, energy is released with the sharp glass shards. Such a release gives a sharp edge to an object; it creates a tension between the viewer and the object, particularly when one considers that viewers can hurt themselves. Another way to express this same concept is: before a mirror is broken, a mirror is not material; but when it is broken, it becomes physical and is all about the surface.⁴⁹

With the breakage of mirrors, the former preponderant role assumed by viewers' reflected dematerialized images gives way to a new emphasis on mirrors as resistant materials, a change Altmejd characterizes as a move "from being nonphysical to becoming super physical."⁵⁰ In this situation, mirrors' role as artistic media takes precedence over any images they might reflect, and thus the discomforting uncanniness of mirrors Borges refers to is lessened, even if it is not totally eradicated. Deciding that the broken mirror alone was expressive enough to constitute a work of art in its own right, Altmejd in 2012 initiated the flat relief mirror pieces known as "Ushers" (see pgs. 320–25) and "Puddles," notable for the gaping holes randomly distributed across their surfaces. These discrete works had been anticipated in 2011 by the wall installation entitled *Index 1* (see pgs. 266–67).

As in all of Altmejd's art, the process of drawing out the constituent material as both subject and object enables it to be recognized as important in and of itself as a source of inspiration and a condition of the work's meaning. "I really understand myself as a process artist," Altmejd has explained. "I like it when the piece suddenly starts to make choices by itself."⁵¹ Instead of viewing himself as the art's sole originator, a legacy of early nineteenth-century Romanticism, Altmejd opts for the less auspicious, yet still essential role of the work's initiator and perhaps just its collaborator, who carries out the decisions his art dictates at a certain point. "I'm just helping it stay alive," he has explained; the goal is for it "to build itself and to create its own intelligence

. . . . I like the feeling that I'm losing control and I'm not the one making the choices I always hope that my work is going to be bigger than me, that it will outgrow me. I want to learn from it. I want it to say things that I never said."⁵²

An example of such transferred accountability is the incorporation of birds in Altmejd's 2007 installation for the Canadian pavilion at the Venice Biennale entitled *The Index* (see pgs. 108–11). For this elaborate work, which he conceptualized as an aviary, with a birdman and a reclining and decomposing giant whose body has been opened up to become a landscape, he employed both taxidermy birds and animals purchased on the Internet with hand-molded versions of them in Sculpey as "little helpers to carry the [gold] chain[s]" from place to place, thereby energizing the work. "It was not me who chose to make the chain go there and there and there," Altmejd avers, thus underplaying his role in the creative process. "It was really the birds" that enabled him, in his words, "to pretend that the shape of the whole was generated by a logic inside the piece itself."⁵³

Similarly with his series of plaster angels, referred to by the artist as "The Watchers," initiated in 2009, Altmejd attributes the creative act to the sculptures themselves, with the result that any associations of divinity attending the creative act can then be attributed to these beatific creatures' ability to self-originate:

The first time I made an angel it came from the process of making a sculpture. It was a plaster figure made of casts of hands that I use to move matter around. It's as if the sculpture is shaping itself, and this is important. It's like everything in the sculpture comes from the sculpture itself. If I use thread to create a web of thread, then somewhere there will be spools of thread, since the generator of the thread needs to come from within the sculpture. And where are the spools coming from? They are made of Plexiglas because the box itself is made of Plexiglas, so they are like a secretion of the structure.⁵⁴

Since Western artists, participating first in Greco-Roman times and then in the modern Western tradition initiated in the Renaissance, have claimed at the very least to be working with the constraints imposed by their chosen media in order to achieve their own very personal vision, it is strange to shift, as Altmejd does, responsibility for the creative act away from the



artist to the material. However, his radical position accords with the Aristotelian/Gadamerian desire, discussed earlier, to create works capable of transmitting *energeia* throughout a given piece instead of just embodying it as a concept of potentiality. No longer the form giver per se or even art's chief collaborator, Altmejd assigns himself the much more modest position of facilitator, even though his role is much more essential than that since he initiates the process in which his subjects then appear to be fully participating:

I liked the idea of dragging the material upward when forming "The Watchers." The sculpted figures are themselves dragging the material upward. There is something fundamental in the idea of trying to transcend the material by simply moving it: taking material from the bottom and bringing it up to the top. When I brought material up, it provided the extra amount needed to create the angels' wings.⁵⁵

In the type of creative situation Altmejd is describing, he first sets up a situation with given media before taking cues from these materials and trying to follow their inclinations as much as possible, as opposed to leading them. By relinquishing a certain amount of control, he sets up a situation, ironically enough, diametrically the opposite of lucid dreaming since he works intuitively and, in creating his art, prefers to be led rather than to lead.

However, as with any interaction between artist and medium, the material can elicit responses, but it is the artist who makes the initial and the final decisions. Even though Altmejd releases some of the control of his work to his collaboration with the material, he also maintains control of the overall form and the iconography, and he is the one who chooses the material in the first place. Plaster, associated with the first stages of making sculpture and highly responsive to the artist's touch, enables Altmejd to emphasize the provisional nature of his work. For his group of figures in *The Healers* (2008; see pgs. 152–57) he made casts of his own hands in a number of different positions — a gesture reminiscent of Auguste Rodin's many studies of hands — and used them throughout these sculptures. The next year in *Untitled 5 (The Watchers)* (2009; see opposite and pgs. 280–81), the first work in this series, he connected these hands with open mouths, some with tongues sticking out, to create a highly sex-

ualized figure with an extended penis. And these multiple cast hands, together with the impressions of grasping hands and open mouths with the addition of other body cavities, which transgress the autonomy of these figures, are found in the "Bodybuilders" he initiated in 2010. The playfulness of his sexual references come full cycle with his alphabet sculpture, comprised of all the letters in the alphabet (2013; see pgs. 336–37). Although it is conceived in dyed resin, this figurative sculpture is comprised of a multitude of cast peeled-banana and phalli-resembling components, punctuated by several clumps of grapes making up the forehead and part of the chest cavity of this Arcimboldo-influenced sculpture — a connection Altmejd readily acknowledges.

As noted earlier in the discussion of Deleuze and Guattari, Altmejd places much more emphasis on his own insights than on theory, but he has not been able to live and work in New York City for over a decade in total isolation from the rest of the art world. Most likely he has picked up on his contemporaries' interest in these two thinkers' approach to *becoming*, interpreted as a unceasing dynamic the work of art sets up, even though he has personalized this theory in terms of energizing his work, so that it correlates with the Romantic-era objective of art continuing to become — a heroic striving, extending into infinity. As suggested in the discussion of Aristotle's *energeia*, becoming is neither heading toward a preordained goal nor premised on the idea of moving toward a stable universal realm, as in Plato's system, rather the images of this intransitive state abounding in Altmejd's work are predicated on their own continuous dynamism. Consequently, they necessitate being conceptualized as only a brief moment in life's ongoing continuum. Not only do Altmejd's "Watchers" need to be understood as perpetually self-fashioning themselves in a never-ceasing creative endeavor but also his "Bodybuilders," and "Architects," a series he originated the following year as works which appear to be using material from the gallery's walls in which they are shown in order to shape and give form to their bodies.

Even though these groups of figures epitomize the power of *energeia* and constitute a celebration of life's ongoing dynamics, they also participate in the aesthetic sensibility of the grotesque, a type of becoming epitomized in Altmejd's work in terms of his werewolves and giants. Altmejd has readily acknowledged the importance of the grotesque as "necessary to understand beauty"

since “things [in my art] . . . have to be infected or else they don’t exist — they don’t have a presence.”⁵⁶ Even though this aesthetic approach has been mentioned several times briefly in the criticism on Altmejd’s art, the type of grotesque connected to his work is a postmodern one, needing to be understood first by looking at the grotesque in general before appreciating how it has been rethought more recently.

According to the sixteenth-century Italian Mannerist painter, architect, and historian of Renaissance art, Giorgio Vasari, the grotesque was initiated in the fifteenth-century by the Venetian painter Morto da Feltre when he discovered subterranean grottoes near Rome with wall paintings featuring entwined human, animal, and plant life. The theorist who has subsequently most clearly articulated the surprising conjunctions distinguishing the grotesque is twentieth-century Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. In his book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin cites the fifteenth-century Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s 1486 speech, *Oratio de hominis dignitate* [“Oration on the Dignity of Man”], often referred to as the Renaissance’s manifesto, in which humanity’s superiority is predicated on a heretofore unrivaled free will, enabling it to move far beyond the relatively static and preordained forms of being in order to enter the enlightened state of everlasting becoming. Bakhtin summarizes the extraordinary ability della Mirandola attributes to humans in the following way:

*All the other beings remain forever what they were at the time of their creation, for their nature is ready-made and unchanging; it receives one single seed But man receives at his birth the seeds of every form of life. . . . Man can become a plant or an animal, but he can also become an angel and a son of God. . . . [making him] open, uncompleted . . . [and thus he] can combine in himself the higher and the lower, the near and the distant, and can penetrate into all the secrets hidden in the depths of the earth.*⁵⁷

Bakhtin also cites the first chapter of the sixteenth-century French novel by François Rabelais entitled *Pantagruel* (published c. 1532) for epitomizing this open-ended approach to life, and he begins to define the grotesque sensibility by noting how the “grotesque figures [in this narrative] are interwoven with cosmic phenomena.”⁵⁸ Both *Pantagruel* and his father *Gargantua* are

giants with appetites larger than life, enabling Rabelais, who was trained as a physician, to revel in grotesquely scatological humor. Regarding the permeability of these two giants’ bodies as well as those of other such legendary figures, Bakhtin observes:

*Most local legends connect such natural phenomena as mountains, rivers, rocks, and islands with the bodies of giants or with their different organs; these bodies are, therefore, not separated from the world or from nature.*⁵⁹

Altmejd, who remembers reading in French one of Rabelais’s novels, either *Gargantua* or *Pantagruel*, in high school,⁶⁰ has made statements about the “Giants” he began to create in 2006 that parallel in many ways Bakhtin’s insights about these mythic beings:

*I felt that I could allow myself to make a standing body if it was a giant, because in some way, it was not a body: it was a landscape or a piece of architecture before being a body. I did a bit of research on giants and found that in many mythologies, they are created before men and women, so for me, they are metaphors for nature. . . . In fairy tales, giants take on the qualities of a particular landscape.*⁶¹

Consistent with Altmejd’s desire to open up the bodies of his giants so that they can become landscapes, Bakhtin notes that while the skins of individuals form an “impenetrable” defense, “the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its exercises (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths.”⁶²

Even though Bakhtin’s references to the grotesque make it seem clear and conformable to a prescribed set of predicates, this sensibility is “the slipperiest of aesthetic categories,” according to literary scholar Geoffrey Harpham.⁶³ One of the reasons for this is that the grotesque traditionally threatens a given society’s view of normalcy by opening new and often strange possibilities, involving fusions of formerly separate groupings. However, in the twenty-first century after decades of groundbreaking reassessments of traditional views of such topics as nationalism, internationalism, and globalism; the storage and retrieval of information; and ethnicity and gender as fixed and not fluid, there have

been increasing doubts about exactly what comprises a standard view. Instead of being able to upset through surprising and even monstrous transgressions of cultural norms, the grotesque today shocks less through setting up polarities of repulsion and attraction, which formerly would constitute hybrids capable of defying ensconced rationality, than it does by engaging with recently established patterns of contravention, thus forging a postmodern critique by looking at the rules of formation for specific genres and their infractions, rather than simply reaffirming the genres themselves. In our postmodern world the grotesque does less to subvert the long familiar and habitual ways of seeing and thinking than to put in play the codes of horror films, the rules of the uncanny, and the semiotics of achieving an alien status, thereby giving pleasure to people versed in the rules governing any of these genres by providing them opportunities to assess, in a postmodern fashion, how these canons have been tweaked, redirected, and even reformulated. Whereas the grotesque in former times was able to shock when one type of entity, say a machine, was suddenly found germinating or even erupting in a biological form like the human body, causing a feeling of panic since one's views of the strict boundaries operative in the world were being threatened, such hybridizations no longer confound or displease; instead they reaffirm the dynamism of a world in which new and radical fusions are expected. English literature scholar and science-fiction specialist Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. regards the traditional grotesque as a "process [of] . . . steady 'descent' into interiors, into the 'grottoes' of being in the hope of finding a core, but always finding more transformation."⁶⁴ His observation can be updated to the present by leaving out the phrase "the hope of finding a core," since becoming, as evidenced by Altmejd's eminently postmodern work, no longer searches for a center and instead places its emphasis on an ongoing nonteleological dynamic. Rather than viewing the grotesque as perhaps superannuated today,⁶⁵ as does Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., this artistic and literary sensibility comes close to characterizing the norm of no norm endemic to our fast-paced and ever changing world.

Instead of glorifying the dark side and taking pleasure in its transgressions Altmejd's art begins with a concerted examination of life drawing sustenance from the decomposing bodies of werewolves; it is evident in the abundant crystals used in his work and their capacity to grow and heal, thereby appearing to bridge biological and geological realms. This life force in his

work is also epitomized in the self-creative feats of his "Watchers," "Bodybuilders," and "Architects"; and it is reflected in the mirrored refractions of his "Guides." This energy has also been traced and metaphorically activated through the nervous lines drawn by his gold chains, forming delicate sets of tracteries in often mammoth Plexiglas cases that update the class of religious sculptures known as reliquaries, so that they no longer honor the dead but instead celebrate the living. All of Altmejd's work, as he has often repeated, needs to be understood as energy, which I have assessed in terms of the Aristotelian/Gadamerian *energeia*, constituting an unending series of contrapuntal forces and representing an updating of the grotesque so that it confirms the dynamism of our still postmodern world by comprising different velocities working together to create a semblance of life's irrepressible and enduring dynamics.