



IL NUCLEO DELL'ARTE

The Body of Absence. Nine questions about Aneta Grzeszykowska's art



Aneta Grzeszykowska's body was a silicone doll a little girl played with, among the images that most impressed us at the last Biennale.

She lives and works in Warsaw, carrying out her research mainly through the medium of photography, film and sculpture, but the linguistic tool chosen by her artistic origins has always been the body. In fact it is its negation or fragmentation that activates its symbolic charge, that refers to a conceptual elsewhere, to what is unseen but lingers in memory. Through the manipulation of one's body the social norms surrounding identity and its representation are questioned, ideally dialoguing with the work of feminist artists such as Ana Mendieta, Cindy Sherman and Alina Szapocznikow.

The main theme of Grzeszykowska's research is the mystery of identity expressed by the dialectic between presence and absence, invisibility or disappearance, and the confrontation of the body and of thought with the non-existence, sublimated and prolonged in the work of art. Especially the perception of absence, or of an abnormal organism in relation to everyday life leads back to the possibility of other existences, to a tale of transforming vision. Within each work actions or gestures, anatomical parts challenge the relationship between natural and

artificial, act with physical perception to explore universal and intangible dimensions. Beyond the human the paradigm of Human Being.



Aneta Grzeszykowska-Selfie nr. 11, 2014. Courtesy the artist, Raster Gallery, Lyles & King Gallery



Untitled Album. Still nr. 7, 2022. Courtesy Aneta Grzeszykowska, Raster Gallery, Lyles & King Gallery

Why did you decide to use your own body, from Album onwards, and in the latest works that of your daughter?

The Album (2006) contains photographs from the period of 3 decades and is a testimony of a certain era. The procedure of removing the main character makes it easier for viewers to identify with the life recorded in the pictures. This work became the kind of my artistic creed, the beginning of the series of works in which, using various stylistic means, I develop a specific idea – the idea of leaving my own body in order to illustrate the loss of identity.

After the making of the Album, people often asked me about the reactions of my family – especially my mother – I found it extremely interesting that an artistic gesture leads the viewer to psychological digressions about artist's relationships. In my artistic practice, I often repeat gestures made earlier, by myself, but also by other artists, as in the case of Untitled Film Stills (2006). My studio is more mental than physical – I draw from it the ideas and the objects used to realize earlier works.

After the work Mama (2018) in which my daughter interacted with a silicone model of myself, i.e. her mother, an interesting aspect of the use of the maternal relationship in art appeared. I thought what would happen if the private zone, which is a natural exploration territory for an artist, was excluded from his work. In this way, I came to the idea of repeating the Album, whose main character, existing because of its lack, would be my daughter.

The new Album(2022) runs backwards, from my daughter's 11th birthday, to the moment she was born.

Paradoxically, such a chronology prevents the viewer from immediately learning the concept. Even with the previous Album in mind, he can't figure out what exactly was removed this time. It is only towards the end of the album, and in fact the beginning of the story, that the viewer notices the details that make him possible to understand my gesture.

Bodies, especially mine, begin to be posed in increasingly strange ways, until they appear mutilated and deficient. Because the child naturally separates from its mother as it grows up, the act of erasing becomes more and more apparent as the time in the Album goes back. In my opinion, Album is a story about love, visualized by the lack of its main object.

How did your research on the body start from and how did its expressive and symbolic function evolve over the course of your career, through the many disciplines employed?

The body and its identity are sufficient material for me to use at work. I treat them as a medium in itself, just like photography or film. I think about my art in a simple way and use basic formal solutions. I use my own body, its traces, image and life, because they are the most accessible and always at my disposal. In other words – there are technical reasons why my work is about me. On the other hand, in my work I develop the idea of moving away from the body, thus from its identity and existence. They are successively: removed, replaced, split, turned into objects and other beings; dead and alive animals, doppelgangers, dolls.

The loss of identity appears in my works also on a completely fundamental level. Indeed, I am not their subject myself. My body and its consequences are just an example here, an object of study with which I try to analyze universal problems. The objective attitude towards one's own body makes its identity, history and the body itself neutral and transparent, what allows the viewers to identify.

In “Love Book” (2010) we see several artists whose research is considered feminist. Do you think you are continuing their discourse? Can you explain if, and how, your work can be called feminist?

I think that one of the most important contexts of my work is the art of postmodern female artists who have verified the social status of their own bodies and the issue of the cultural identity of a woman. In my subsequent works, such as Love Book, I refer directly to the work of Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta and other iconic figures of contemporary art. From quotes and borrowings I create my own story. I'm particularly interested in dead female artists. More precisely – things which they left behind: images of the body separated from their bodies. I juxtapose the remnants of their performance documentation in a collage, with my own contemporary self-portraits.

In Love Book I place my own body – or rather its images – next to the bodies of female artists in a specific relationship of love and violence. All the female artists I have mentioned in this work used a naked body to express themselves on feminist issues. And I am perpetrating a kind of rape on them. Physical rape, which is expressed in the image of 'love'; and ideological rape, because they used their bodies for an entirely different purpose. In contrast, I objectify them in a way. But that does not alter the fact that my gesture is also a feminist act. However, the action here is perverse and radical.

What makes a film is the action. A story is built by your gestures, your intervention is thoroughly performative. Is it correct to say that even the construction of a still picture, a photo, is the last act of a ritual and that the subjects portrayed while interacting with previously created artifacts, staging a kind of performance?

I always wonder about the choice of medium to record the performative process, which is, after all, my works. I usually consider photographs and, of course, film. The prospect of showing the entire process in the form of film documentation is tempting and would seem a natural choice. However, the choice of photographic documentation, for example in the case of the Mama or Domestic Animals series, allows me to maintain control over the image, also through the selection of photos in the series – I only show frames documenting the moments that, in my opinion, best represent the ideas of the work.

Restricting the viewer's insight only to the images I propose, concerns the issue of representation. However, it is about representations of memory, made available to the viewer for inspection – projecting meanings on him.

In 2014, I presented a series of photos entitled *Selfie*, with objects that are fragments of the human body prepared from animal skin. The face, hands, breasts and belly were prepared by me from animal remains, specifically from pig skin, which is deceptively similar to human skin. The photos in the series show the objects at the moment of their final finishing – during cosmetic procedures involving the application of lipstick on the lips or rouge on the cheeks. The objects were placed on colorful leather backgrounds, properly lit and from a specific perspective. The procedure of showing photographs instead of physical sculptures or a film showing their decomposition, was dictated by the desire to take control over their representation. The photographs allowed to preserve the image of the objects just before decomposition, capturing their disturbing status of being dead, but still looking alive.

Controlling the image of one's own work de facto referred to one of the most important aspects of media-mediated modernity – representation, hence the title *Selfie* interpreting the works in terms of a contemporary self-portrait.

In an interview with an Italian magazine, Maurizio Cattelan talks about the “disturbing dream” unleashed by the Album project (2005-2006). Speaking of *Selfie*, on the Art Basel website I read “a radical shift in the direction of the grotesque”. How do you cope with these statements... are your images deliberately unsettling or misunderstood?

I treat art as a kind of parallel to life – a line running next to it, like its mirror image, ivy, climbing up a big tree. The performances that I produce, give the viewer the opportunity to try out and experience situations that will happen someday, but are now as if repressed or forgotten. We are safely wrapped in the space of art – even when we touch on the topic of our own mortality. We can experience fear without fear, what is a kind of existential catharsis.

If my works were compared to film genres, I think it would be a comedy-drama – the scary elements are intertwined with the comical in my works, just like in real life.

Back to *Selfie*. I find it very interesting that the reconstructed parts of your anatomy are “in progress”, often next to your real hands. Why do you draw attention to the implementation process?

The sculptural objects, photographed on leather backgrounds, made of pig skin, represent fragments of my body – face, head, breasts, belly, hands. They were immortalized at the moment of final care, finishing and presenting – in the frame, apart from them, my hands also appear. The already dead but still living-looking animal flesh is transformed into a human body here, and thus the true death remains hidden.

The dead, aesthetized human corpse has been presented only fragmentarily – painted nails or lips evoke the memory of the human body. At the same time, the division of the body leaves a strange understatement – it is not clear whether the individual elements were created as a result of creation or destruction / division into parts or vice versa – they are fragments prepared to be put together.

Paradoxically, the deprivation of the objects' overall form emphasizes their fragility and impermanence, arousing indefinite existential anxiety. After all, the *Selfie* series is also a kind of performance showing the process of final finishing of sculptures. The technical aspects appearing in my works are a very important space for me to create meanings.

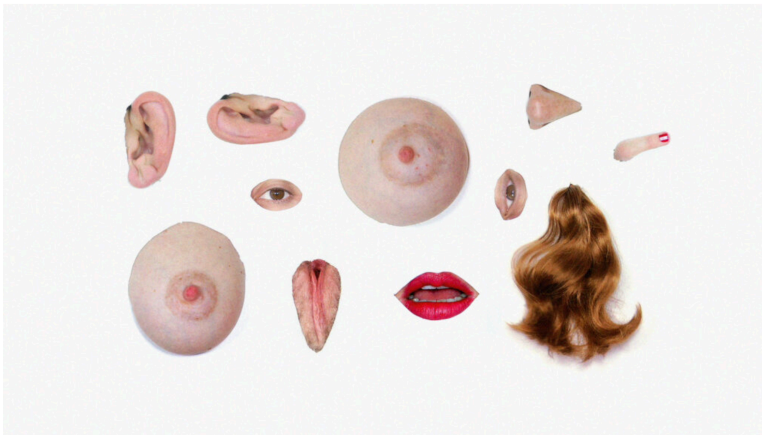
The short film *Black* (2007), seen on the website of the film library of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, shows clear references to Surrealism. Have there been other art experiences, even distant in time, that have marked or influenced your path?

I am very moved by the art of Alina Szapocznikow and at this point I could recall one of her works entitled Photosculpture 1973, depicting chewing gum sculptures formed by the artist's teeth and pulled out of her mouth.

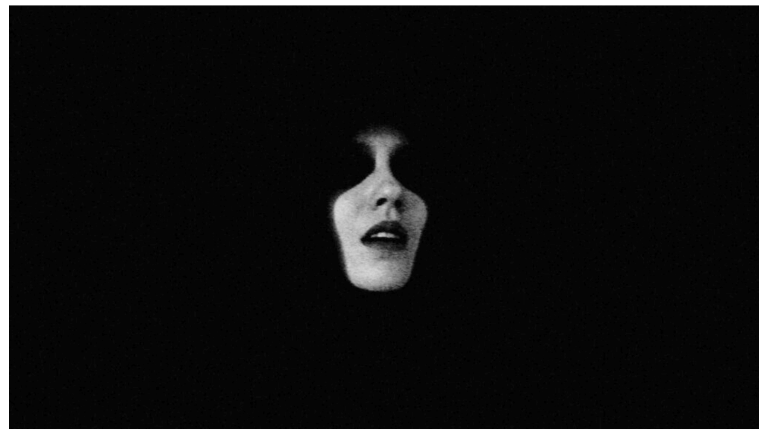
Fragile and carnal, Szapocznikow's sculptures are both egocentric and intellectually powerful. Teeth marks on chewing gum provoke the viewer's imagination – we see the artist pulling a small flexible object from her mouth, examining it and putting it on the table top for documentation. The aspect of scale is interesting here – in contact with the object, Szapocznikow physically appears as a giant, which allows us to consider Her sculptures also in terms of the ego.

Freedom and self-confidence entitles the artist to think of her teeth as tools.

The lack of control over the very process of forming the sculptures did not matter, because in fact their final form was the resultant of the concept. A similar situation occurs in my latest work, in which I decided to feed the dogs with my sculptures. Objects, which are in fact replicas of the skin sculptures from the Selfie series, are subjected to the process of feeding animals, as a result of which they gain the form that is the result of this process. Each of their shapes is correct because the physiological tool that shapes them (the dog's teeth) is also a conceptual tool. Interestingly, Szapocznikow also did not present her objects themselves – only photos showing them in an abstract context detached from scale. They are glued to the table top forming the horizon, and photographed from the right perspective, allowing you to break away from their small scale. They bring to mind monuments, which is additionally emphasized by black and white documentation.



Still da Holes, 2001. Courtesy Aneta Grzeszykowska, Raster Gallery, Lyles & King Gallery



Aneta Grzeszykowska, Still dal video Black, 2007. Courtesy the artist, Raster, Lyles & King

On Skinformer and Skinformer 7, seen at Raster Gallery, there are no more faces left, only leather and holes. What's behind these carnival and fetish masks?

As I mentioned before, lack – in the case of these works represented by holes – is an important element of defining the body in my work. This motif has already appeared in the work Album or Negative Book, my films revolve around it – it literally appeared in the film entitled Holes, 2015. It also returns formally in skinformers.

Could you tell us about your last exhibition at Lyles and King in New York?

Objects depicting my face, made in 2014 for the Selfie series, were reused by me in 2022. A series of photos, taken on the borderline of civilization and nature, presents a personal relationship of animals wearing human faces on their heads, specifically – my multiplied face.

The work was shown for the first time this year at the Lyles & King gallery in New York, with which I have been collaborating since 2015.

I have always been fascinated by a simple paradox – in any interaction with the environment, we are really the only ones who do not see ourselves.

Our subjective view of reality can therefore only be confirmed by someone/something from the outside. In *Domestic Animals*, the masks worn by dogs, like earlier in the *Mama* series, become mirrors that reflect the existence of another person. In this work, animals that are members of the family became participants in the narrative and creators of ideas. My identity is confirmed by their gaze, as if subjective feeling wasn't enough to prove its existence.

In *Domestic Animals*, the aspect of the unconscious is also essential for me, described earlier in the context of the *Mama* series, in which the activities performed by my daughter, depending on the point of view, became fun or performance. In the case of *Domestic Animals*, this dual status of participation goes a step further – dogs, completely unaware of what they are participating in, create art by performing a situation perceived by the viewer as metaphorical. Their unconscious participation is in my opinion an allegory of our existence, based on a misunderstanding of its meaning – hopefully – existing.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, still da Headache, 2009