



# Nelly Agassi Pleasure Garden

1 September – 14 October, 2023  
Curated by Aleksandra Kędziorek  
Foksal Gallery Foksal st 1/4, 00-366 Warsaw, galeriafoksal.pl

Nelly Agassi is a multi-disciplinary artist who works with performance, installation, video, animation, textile and works on paper. Her work deals with materials, body and space. She is particularly interested in public spaces in relation to architecture. Agassi often works site-specifically, inspired to reveal fragments of the site’s biography and thread vulnerable threads of her own personal history and life experience.

Chicago-based Agassi (b.1973, Israel) received her MFA from Chelsea College and her BFA from Central St. Martins, both in London. Her work has been shown internationally at art institutions and galleries such as The Graham Foundation Chicago, Chicago Cultural Center (Chicago rooms), The Arts Club of Chicago, Hyde Park Art Center Chicago, Poor Farm, The Israel Museum, Tate Modern, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, La Triennale di Milano, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art Warsaw, Foksal Gallery Warsaw.

Agassi is a co-founder of the non-profit organization Fieldwork Collaborative Projects and a 2019 Graham Foundation Fellow. Her work is part of museums and private international collections. Recently her work was acquired by The Art Institute of Chicago. She is represented by Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv and Pola Magnetyczne, Warsaw.

Pleasure Garden. A Nelly Agassi exhibition  
1.09–14.10.2023

The *Soft Tangle* sculpture was made in collaboration  
with Jonah Evron Agassi, the artist’s son

curator / text Aleksandra Kędziorek  
English translation by Caryl Swift  
sound / composition Ryan Packard  
harpichord Andrew Rosenblum  
post-production Karol Bagiński



This site-specific installation by Nelly Agassi is inspired by the origins of the word ‘Foksal’, the street from which the gallery takes its name. In it, the artist investigates the biography of the place, Foksal, a story which ranges from the eighteenth-century Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens in London after which it was named to the Foksal Gallery and the history of the artistic avant-garde bound up with it.

Agassi reaches back to the year 1776 and the suburban area of Warsaw where a banker and a royal valet, Fryderyk Kabryt and Franciszek Ryx, respectively, founded Foksal, a spot designed for the entertainment of the loftier spheres of society and modelled on Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. She listens intently to the echoes of the fun to be had there, the concerts, nocturnal illuminations and firework displays, the first balloon flights and the balls organised there by ‘robber prince’ Jerzy Marcin Lubomirski, a scandalous figure in the midst of high society in Warsaw at the time.

She also looks in on the Elizeum, an underground rotunda “for Friends and beauteous women”<sup>1</sup> in the sentimental Prince Kazimierz Poniatowski’s nearby gardens, now Park Na Książęcem. Designed to host social gatherings and revelries, its lavishly furnished interiors sent guests into transports of delight. William Coxe, a British traveller, would recall not only the columns of artificial marble, comfortable sofas and “paintings *in fresco*”, but also the way that:

[w]hile we were admiring the beauty of the rotunda, our ears were suddenly regaled with a concert of exquisite music from an invisible band, and a magnificent table was spread with such expedition as to resemble the effects of enchantment<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, Agassi turns to 1966. That was the year when, in the former library of the Visual Arts Studio in an outbuilding of the Zamoyski Palace, the Foksal Gallery opened. In *Wprowadzenie do ogólnej Teorii Miejsca* (An Introduction to the General Theory of Place), its founders defended the autonomy of art in the face of the reality around them. The place they describe as exhibition, gallery and space for creating and experiencing art:

is an abrupt breach in the utilitarian understanding of the world. The PLACE emerges from the suspension of all the laws in force in the world<sup>3</sup>.

1 “*Elisée suterrain dévoué ou aux Amis ou aux jolies femmes*”; a note written by the architect, Szymon Bogumił Zug, on his first design for the Elizeum, cited in Elizeum, City of Warsaw 2016; [https://um.warszawa.pl/documents/63122/17061617/broszura\\_ELIZEUM\\_en.pdf/a30060d0-beac-ce03-3d95-24bbad70df5e?t=1619801768131](https://um.warszawa.pl/documents/63122/17061617/broszura_ELIZEUM_en.pdf/a30060d0-beac-ce03-3d95-24bbad70df5e?t=1619801768131), retrieved on 16.08.23.

2 William Coxe, *Travels in Poland, Russia, Sweden and Denmark; illustrated with charts and engravings*, vol. 1, T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, London 1802, pp. 165 (#191); <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark%3A%2F13960%2Ft0pr83b5r&seq=191>, retrieved on 16.08.23.

3 Wiesław Borowski, Hanna Ptaszkowska, Mariusz Tchorek, *Wprowadzenie do ogólnej Teorii Miejsca* (An Introduction to the General Theory of Place), Warsaw 1966, translated from the Polish for the purposes of this article by Caryl Swift.

Alternatives to the realities of the communist People’s Republic of Poland were manifest in the exhibitions, vernissages, accompanying events and the famous Farewell to Spring Ball in Zalesie, a suburb of Warsaw. The set created in the gardens there by Edward Krasiński alluded to that place of idleness and bliss which was Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *The Land of Cockaigne* and allowed the partygoers to switch off from the hard realities of 1968 for as long as the fun lasted.

Agassi is not an archivist. She carves into the biography of a place as if it were material, extracting the threads that interest her and inverting meanings. Facts intertwine with fiction, history and fantasy in her works. She reads a place intuitively, filtering it through herself and constructing a personal connection with its past, present and future.

She fills the space of the gallery with scaled-up collages, sometimes featuring grotesque fusions of female figures, animals’ bodies, plants and furniture. The garden built from them is pleasant, yet, at the same time, bizarre and unsettling. This is nature subjugated, nature which could slip out of control at any moment and reveal its dark side. The form of some of the collages is akin to follies, those structures encountered in eighteenth-century gardens, like Elizeum or the now vanished artificial grotto, minaret, Chinese pavilion and imam’s home in the Na Książęcem gardens. Madness is contained within their name.

The collages Agassi has been using for several years now in her work on ‘the biography of place’ spring from archival illustrations. Modest in size at the beginning and monumentalised in her most recent exhibitions, they enable her to create an alternative reality, to weave female figures into a male-dominated world, to play with the myths growing around a place, to overturn order and to extract that which, as she herself says, is usually swept under the carpet.

One thing of the essence to her work on *Pleasure Garden* were the photographs of Krasiński’s 1985 exhibition which she found in the Foksal’s archives. For that almost forgotten show, the gallery was filled with trees created from birch branches and its walls were covered with photo wallpaper depicting a forest. Krasiński cut a horizontal strip out of the artificial nature which had been introduced into the interior of the gallery, reversing the action he carried out in works where he applied ScotchBlue™ tape to objects in non-gallery spaces. By cutting out that strip of the photo wallpaper and shattering the illusion, he made the border between art and reality visible.

Agassi does nothing as straightforward as repeating his gesture. She welcomes the public to *Pleasure Garden* and bids them farewell with a neon form *Soft Tangle* which, like Medusa’s head or an apotropaic sculpture, underscores the border between two worlds. With its interwoven structure, it also alludes to the complexity of contemporary interpretations of the gallery’s avant-garde legacy.