

## Line of emancipation: technology and reproduction in the works by Marianna Rodziewicz and Nelly Agassi

Agata Pyzik

### Wrung Cyborgs Manifesto

In 2022 as her student project Marianna Rodziewicz invented *Unlove*, a country existing only virtually. It was full of shiny, silvery and slick surfaces and cubes, which were off-putting, cold and unfriendly. From seemingly randomly situated glossy walls there were emerging metallic fragments, not sure if human or monstrous, remnants of vertebrae chords, bowels, bones, bulges and stretching monstrous umbilical chords and in the end, also elements of the human face. Even if this early project seemed slightly naive to me in its execution, I was weirdly moved by it. She didn't try to resort to irony, or discourse, or to distance herself. She spoke straightforwardly and sincerely about our greatest fear: fear of not being loved.

The last few weeks I spent staring at her 3D printed sculptures of mutated, monstrous torsos without faces and within the depths of my popcultural memory I tried to find out, what do they remind me of? My first association was Ridley Scott's *Alien*, with H. R. Giger-invented terrifying anatomy of the He/She-Alien, hermaphroditic xenomorph, who murders Nostromo's passengers one by one. I especially remembered the scene, where the alien foetus „hatches” from the John Hurt's character's belly and jumps over his face, slowly devouring him in the process. Then I thought about the beast from Andrzej Żuławski's *Possession*, lying in a mysterious flat in East Berlin in a lair made of slime and blood, fed with human remnants by his lover, played by Isabelle Adjani. In a memorable scene, Adjani endures a miscarriage in a dark U-bahn corridor, vomiting streams of yellow gunk and orgasmically spurting it from all of her orifices, crying hysterically. The beast pushes *Possession* into the realm of horror, and by the same token, the love affair with Adjani into a metaphor. But wouldn't that kind of treatment bereave the film's vision of some of its power?

No matter how exaggerated and grotesque, Żuławski's character's reactions are founded deeply in real emotions. I see mutated, enamel-shiny bodies of Rodziewicz similarly: created from this basic lack, from unlove. They emerge like growths on infertile, devoid of human base surfaces, begging for love in the world, where it doesn't exist anymore.

Slimy and borderline disgusting, Rodziewicz's mutants have no gender, aiming their desire for love into the void, where it cannot be actualised. They remind me of the weltering bodies in the lower depths of hell from the gothic painting of Hieronymus Bosch or Luca Signorelli, distorted, with hideous growths and wringing in convulsions. Similarly to them, we cannot but feel sorry for them, feel pity and participate in their suffering and condemnation. It is because deep inside we know we are just like them. Shaken by convulsions of desire to transgress and maleficence. At the beginning Rodziewicz's figures appeared solo, then started to emerge in twin couplings. Whether they are to impersonate a couple of lovers or a narcissist emanation of one's own self, it boils down to the same thing.

Rodziewicz began her journey from drawing, and her first drawings contour closed, claustrophobic spaces, resembling prison cells. It's an architecture of oppression, with no way out. At some point the interior architecture transmutes into the architecture of the body. Drawings' lines are transformed into corridors and splices of wire, into which there is entangled an incoherent mass of epoxy or fabric. Then there was hair, which in Rodziewicz's art is especially expressive and full of meaning. Hair tousled and ubiquitous, inspiring a knee-jerk disgust, attacking like a tangle of snakes. Medusa-like nest of vipers, wrapping the body like a carapace or a corset, squashing it, suggestive of the intense emotions flowing inside of them.

Is the body a similar prison? No, it is rather rationality and control presided upon it by reason and society. Bodies-interiors are like „vile bodies”, on which the Michel Foucault-inspired French author Grégoire Chamayou<sup>1</sup> wrote, bodies subjected to medical and social experiments. They were recruited among the condemned to death, galley prisoners, orphans, sex workers, hospital patients, paralyzed and disabled, slaves and those dying in hospitals. In Rodziewicz's universe these bodies gain their chance to avenge themselves, at the least by persecuting our guilty conscience with their own nightmarish visions, leaving us ill at ease.

„All of my bodies are one entity and I see them as a small community, bodies, which connect to one another, are trying to leave their hideouts and become somehow visible and present.” In a conversation with me, Rodziewicz says the body as subject emerged

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thefunambulist.net/editorials/history-the-body-as-a-terrain-of-experiments-medicine-and-vile-bodies-according-to-gregoire-chamayou>

for her as a result of being part of a very judgemental circle, which caused her social anxiety and great sense of shame. „These things accumulated in my body and day by day my body felt as if it was gradually freezing”. Spaces, which allowed her to set herself free were the internet, social media and art, which could be quickly and easily made available there.

Publishing online, which the artist calls „self-exposing”, was a way of a bold statement, through which she could finally show what remained hidden until then. Perhaps that is why, enamoured with that feeling, she began publishing increasingly bold pictures. Also of smashed, bruised skin, wounds and sores, skin covered in mucus, scratches, scabbing. It was a „self-exposure therapy”. Next to these images of a vulnerable body appear pictures which are glamour, with accentuated femininity, strong makeup, borderline erotic. „Sexuality, sexual experience and experiments gave me space for personal transgression and that of the body barriers.” The artist, despite self-celebration, always strives to slightly „spoil” the effect so that it wasn't too perfect, unwilling to subjugate to the dictates of a perfect body. With a beautiful dress and flawless pearly white skin she adds bloodied heels and toes after wearing sexy uncomfortable shoes.

THE ARDOR of the exhibition's title melts away the stagnant body, defrosts it in a fiery performance. The body takes the lead of the digital. On the stage of form-building it is the body, mostly the artist's own, which designated architectural directions, which are followed by the computer screen cursor. Literally speaking: it is a combination of the verticals and the horizontals, equilibrium and dynamic. The vertical line marks the spinal cord, which refers to normativity, rigidity, order and the general sculpture-organising rule. As a counter to it are the vastly overdrawn ribs, lungs and shoulders, open, as if in an act of growth. To them she adds metal parts - prosthetics, in the form of wings, tail and tentacles. They are like supporting props for a plant, which let it continue to grow. Perhaps after the growth stage is over, the bodies won't longer need them and will reject them.

If in Ridley Scott's movie the xenomorph symbolised everything abjectual, the naked, animal fear, the thing which the characters reject and repress, similarly in Rodziewicz's objects the unpretty elements which are growing on the surface seem to push out what is inside, and it's one of human's greatest fears: that other will see what's inside us. Like in the pictures Hans Bellmer took of Unica Zurn, entangling her with rope, with an

endless maze of lines, like a beast in a trap, confirming the triumphant manly dominance over a woman. A toxic, sadomasochistic tangle. Rodziewicz takes over control over her body, entangling into a hybrid with her own image on the computer screen, with 3D prints enabling her parthenogenetic, asexual reproduction. Like in Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* the technological, digital multiplication enables female emancipation from men-dependency and the control of the patriarchal structures of reproduction. In a work shown at Salzburger Kunstverein, *(How) I Don't Sleep (Overthinking)* a sculpture of deformed, but still beautiful creature, perhaps a self-portrait, is lying on a digital projection of a slimy, disgusting surface, melting into one another.

### **Biographies of bodies and places**

The body and human condition are also almost always the starting and ending point in the work of Nelly Agassi, an international artist of Polish and Czech roots, born in Israel but living in the United States. She's interested in the internal and external body landscape and how it relates to reality. Her art is about discovering intense mental and emotional states. „Before my children were born and before I became a migrant, my work was very solipsistic. And despite the gesture coming from the body that can potentially go into an unbarred wide space, after my kids were born I was looking for something grounded in an external reality.” Hence the works, where it was the building's „body” and its biography, the biography of a place, that has become key. The works started to become mixtures of various stories conjured by a particular location and the artist's mental state, her own biography. The body becomes a storage for life experience, which projects onto a particular space. „Biography is usually a word reserved for people, not places, but for me it means humanisation of space. Maybe it has something to do with being a migrant.” A migrant - observes Agassi - to be able to live in a new place, needs to make a special effort of domestication.

This time the idea for work has also emerged from the place. In Janów next to Białystok Nelly got to know the local weavers, working in a rare double-warp fabric technique, where the pattern is woven on two sides of the textile, working tirelessly and meticulously on the looms. In this contrasting technology two colours intertwine like a negative and positive.

Fibre has been a subject in Agassi's work before, and in this case fibre is at once metaphorical and literal tool of telling a story. The person to whom we owe the resurrection and preservation of the old two-warp weaving technique in the interwar and postwar years is Eleonora Plutyńska, who introduced modern motives to the traditional weaving, while trying to save them from perishing. Agassi began working with one of the Janów weavers, Karolina Radulska, communicating intuitively. The artist calls it „automatic weaving”, similar to the surrealist „écriture automatique”, because it similarly takes place without previous plan, and is done as it lays. Anyone seeing a woven rug from Podlasie region on the gallery wall might have immediate associations, but looking closer they'll notice something is not right: below a house two bunnies are fucking or a two headed deer. It may seem like the most natural thing in the world, but it was never put onto a traditional Polish folk fabric before.

Nelly's rug is her own vision of Janów, with its agriculture, nature and the duality of this world between the tamed nature and the wilderness. The countryside fascinates the artist as a meeting of two contradictory worlds. On one hand, we cherish nature, subjugate our life rhythm to it, on the other this life must be by force ordered and subjected to rigor. Survival depends on it, it's an existential question. Between people and animals an uneasy symbiosis is created, one could say, strictly controlled by the man, because it is them who decide about animals' life and death. But in the end they both depend on one another. By putting unfamiliar elements on a traditional fabric Agassi disrupts the norm.

Apart from the rug, at the exhibition there will be a collage animation installation, using the fragments of nineteenth century engravings from the press, books and graphic design, displaying curious imaginarium of a perished world. The animals from zoological atlases with characteristic details, botanical etchings of flowers, detailed depictions of porcelain and idealised figures of ladies from higher societal spheres, bringing to mind the American „gilded age”. The artist acquires her images from libraries, flea markets and old bookshops, reconstructing the stylised graphics through collage to give them new meaning.

It brought to my mind the collaborations between the Polish writer Agnieszka Taborska and the American artist Selena Kimball Smith, who created two fictitious „surrealist” female biographies: the 18<sup>th</sup> century mystic Leonora de la Cruz and the 19<sup>th</sup> century

medium Phoebe Hicks<sup>2</sup>, who both free themselves from the limitations put on women through unconventional, „hysterical” actions.

Agassi's animations are similarly apocryphal, using retro aesthetics from the past, to inspire very contemporary feelings. They are absolute apocrypha in the sense they emerge only from imagination and the ironic treatment of the material. In the subsequent, developed in the vein of silent cinema panoramic films, like in pop-up books, where pulling one element moves the whole thing around, we have grotesque, kitschy, postcard-like juxtapositions. These are seemingly pastoral scenes from the seaside or dolled up bourgeois interiors, where suddenly a regular animal interspecies orgy is taking place! Giraffes and pelicans, otters and rats, somebody make it stop! This work possesses a clear surrealist vibe: it wants to disorient the viewers, cause embarrassment, barely contained laughter, to direct them to what has been repressed. Animations act on our subconscious, and the animals, like in fairy tales, are references to human beings, so that, like in Brothers Grimm tales, the unbearable sexual violence and cruelty were more acceptable. Sex can release us humans from our misery, the artist suggests, but it can also cause us madness and suffering. Transposing these universal truths onto the out-of-context animal prints, the artist is building bridges of meaning between various species within their mutual life cycle.

By drawing on them Agassi, perhaps subconsciously, is referring to the cultural Jewish past of her ancestors. Her great grandparents were European, Czechoslovak and Polish, assimilated, bourgeois families, with one of her great-grandfathers being a businessman and art collector in Brno. Her drawing on the iconographic past and being inspired by the bourgeois imaginarium straight from Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* I consider as her regaining of things lost by the generations of European Jews in the Holocaust. By entangling the oneiric with the pessimistic take on human nature, she's looking for a „new myth”. Perhaps this is why she keeps looking for new places and their biographies, being a stylistic nomad, whose every work is so different from one another as if she'd contained multiple, contradictory selves. She's constantly shapeshifting, changing identities, as a way to nest and to hold on, and to hatch towards the new chapter.

Both artists are sculptors in the un-matter: Marianna Rodziewicz „sculpts” in her

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2 Agnieszka Taborska, Selena Kimball Smith, *The Dreaming Life of Leonora de la Cruz*, Midmarch Art Press, 2007, Ibidem, *The Unfinished Life of Phoebe Hicks*, Twisted Spoon Press, 2024.

imagination, directed by what her body dictates her, just like Nelly Agassi „sculpts” in histories, in places' biographies, filtering them through her emotions. In a new film the Substance the character played by Demi Moore, an ageing ex Hollywood star, sent by the misogynistic industry to a retirement, feels so worthless without the gaze of others that she decides to „re-sculpt” a new self from her old one paying a terrible price of deformation and death. Before she accepts the toxic substance, we see her gazing at her mirror image. Dysmorphia takes over: no lipstick, dress or hairdo can redeem the fact that she hates her ageing body. Because perhaps the real „body horror” is not the imagined monsters - these are only an emanation of the prosaic reality of our fallible, vulnerable and perishable bodies of our own.