

Flesh at War with Enigma, Kunsthalle Basel, September – November 2004

The title of the exhibition *Flesh at War with Enigma* is a play on the phrase 'aesthetics at war with enigma' coined by the French designer Jean-Michel Frank (1895-1941). Frank established his reputation for stark simple designs for the Paris apartment of the Vicomte and Vicomtesse de Noailles, Charles and Marie-Laurie, who were patrons of the surrealists and other artists in Paris for many years. In this displacement of aesthetics in favour of carnality we encounter one of the key characteristics of the surrealist image, but in this context of design it also suggests a provocative alliance between the objects of art and objects of design that filled the de Noailles' apartment. Yet, the range of work on display in this exhibition does not draw directly on those processes and forms associated with surrealism, such as automatism or the mechanisms of condensation and displacement in the symbolically functioning object or dream image. Curated by Anke Kempkes, recently appointed by the Kunsthalle's new director Adam Szymczyk, the exhibition instead places emphasis on how artists might reinterpret surrealism in accordance with contemporary concerns:

In *Flesh at War with Enigma* a voice in contemporary art can be heard reiterating surreal forms and motifs so as to express the physical anew in the face of historical and social restrictions. Surreal compositions turn up as prospective knowledge, as a perverse delight and a volatile narrative that runs counter to conventional meanings, to what to us seems known, familiar, safe.¹

There are two aspects of this exhibition that overturn our conventional ideas of surrealism: firstly, the legacy of surrealism bypasses the mainstream movement centred in Paris around André Breton and Georges Bataille; secondly, the display of the exhibition initially seems closer to modernist conventions of the white cube. These two factors come together in the figure of Alina Szapocznikow (1926-1973), a Polish sculptor whose use of materials like foam, grass, resin and wax displaces the dominance of symbolic forms commonly associated with the surrealist image.



Her oeuvre appears to be the inspiration for newly commissioned works by contemporary artists that constitute the rest of the display. Szapocznikow is an odd choice as a progenitor of contemporary surrealist art. She was never directly involved with the movement but was associated with the Nouveaux Réalistes and championed by Pierre Restany. Her use of casts of the body emerged in later work that bore greater affinities to surrealism and seemed to have struck a chord with Marcel Duchamp and others.² Aspects of her work have been associated with the writings of Bataille and the notion of transgression. Her early years in Prague may have brought her into contact with the work of the Czech surrealists. She was certainly a member of the Czech Communist Party and wrestled with questions of the private self, common to artists living under Communism in the post-war climate.³ She survived the concentration camps but died young leaving behind an extraordinary oeuvre rarely seen in Western Europe.⁴



Alina Szapocznikow, *Illuminated Lips (Lampe - bouche II / Usta iluminowane II)*, 1966, polyester, metal. Photograph: Serge Hasenböhler. © Piotr Stanislawski, Paris.

The legacy of surrealism appears here as a response to the carnality of the object in Szapocznikow's work. Kempkes points to a fusion of bodies and objects:



The physical becomes object and the object a chimera of flesh and mechanics. The moment they interpenetrate, something puzzling, enigmatic emerges, a hybridization of body and object...⁵

Examining the range of images and objects on show, the dialectical play of physicality and the object in which Kempkes argues 'harmony and disintegration go hand in hand' seem applicable mainly to Szapocznikow's objects.⁶ For example, Szapocznikow's use of polyurethane foam, grass and wax creates a collision of one material with another that draws attention to the space of the gallery in a manner conventionally associated with minimalism. *Pollution II* (1968), placed on the floor in a small alcove on its own, consists of a formless organic juxtaposition of foam, grass and metal that looks as though it has erupted from the floor of the gallery. Its ability to infiltrate and yet burst through the architecture seems to make literal André Masson's early surrealist paintings. Within the context of *Flesh* these objects realise the struggle between harmony and disintegration and the chimerical nature of the visceral made object. This is also the case with her *Dessert* assemblages: moulded breasts made in resin, brightly painted and placed in long crystal glasses or dessert dishes to resemble blancmange or knickerbocker glory. They conjure up the oral pleasures of childhood but, sickly-yellow with age and their colours slightly too artificial, they induce nausea rather than delight. They are powerful examples of how to suggest a devouring body that is itself a dis-tasteful object of consumption.

This dialectic seems less applicable to other works. The result is a lack of precision in how the object's utilitarian function might be subverted in a manner that evokes a surreal disruption. Much of the newly commissioned work attempts to convey this sense of the 'distasteful' through design but is almost entirely concerned with representational forms. This accounts for the uneven nature of the exhibition. In Piotr Janas' paintings, organic forms wrestle with figuration and the visceral condition of the painted marks that become gashes and wounds held in tension with the surface of the canvas. Julian Göthe's *La Java des Bombes Atomique* (2004), a large white metal and feather sculpture placed in the centre of the room, sits too comfortably in its elegant setting. Together with the grey modernist plinths used in the show, this work is too tasteful to subvert a



notion of the aesthetic in design through the drives of the body. In fact there seems to be a contradiction within the stated objectives of the exhibition between the carnality of the object and works of art that apparently hold a fascination through their equivalence to 'the silent rhetoric and static agility of designer objects.'⁷

By contrast, Szapocznikow's sculptures and photographs reveal abject connotations of materials that for some critics like Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux are suggestive of the bodily transgressions of a younger generation: Kiki Smith, Robert Gober or Cindy Sherman.⁸ Yet the functional nature of her lamps, *Usta Iluminowane* (1966) or *Illuminated Lips*, made from materials like coloured polyester, electric light and metal, is at odds with their decaying appearance: the light emanates from bright red lipstick mouths that are almost sickly against the yellowed hue of the polyester. As objects set on low plinths in the gallery, they contrast with the white walls and stand against the uncanny mimesis of Robert Gober's body parts. The wax forms in Gober's work essentially offer clean lines and translucent colour that is nowhere in sight in Szapocznikow's lamps despite displaying strong affinities with her work. Her *Fotorzeźby* (1971) are a series of striking photographs of chewing gum, objects of mastication that are sometimes marked by the indentation of her mouth but equally evade any illusion in their form. The shock of seeing this series comes partly from its contemporaneity. What prevents Szapocznikow's photographs of gum from evoking the everyday and the incidental is its careful positioning against surfaces like shelves, walls and in some cases on what appears to be a plinth that contrast with its formlessness. Their status as photographs bring them much closer to Salvador Dalí and Brassá's 1933 *Sculptures Involontaires*, relying on the expanded condition of an optical unconscious embedded in the lens that enlarges their scale and animates them. There is none of the drama of expressionistic shadows that transform indefinable matter into evocative fragments charged with the potentiality of the unknown. Her photographs expose the surfaces of granite floor, wooden shelf and stone plinth on which they are placed and reveal a materiality that sags, stoops and slumps, conveying a repulsion that is recognisably of our own bodies and not of the materials themselves. These images are closer to



the use of 'straight' photography in the 1950s and 1960s by Czech surrealists like Emilia Medková and Alois Nosicka to portray what is 'beneath contempt.'¹⁹

This disruptive eroticism defines the exhibition and places pressure on works of art that lack this carnality like Diango Hernandez's *Drawing, Umbrella* (2003). Covered with sheets of newspaper displaying advertisements for internet and financial companies selling stocks and shares, and with a long metal tip poking through the top, the umbrella acts as a lightning rod to connect with the flow of commodities, yet its futility in offering shelter from 'financial storms' is wonderfully parodied in its materials. Despite its distance from the visceral conditions of the body evoked by Szapocznikow's photo-sculptures, Hernandez's umbrella is indicative of sensitivity to materials and an economy of means and expression that matches the Polish sculptor's work. It exposes a fundamental contradiction in the exhibition between works of art that engage with design through a play on form and function and those that represent carnality through the image as subversive subject matter. A number of these artists work between image and object: Kate Davis' plinths, for example, appear to have walked out of one of her small pencil drawings that juxtapose a series of geometric forms with an amorphous visceral presence. Yet, very few of them are able to move from one to another and maintain a concern with materials and forms in terms of carnality and the subversion of design that evokes Szapocznikow's spirit of abjection. The result is a range of works of art some of which are unable to intervene critically in the space in which they are situated. Such a distinction might seem too bound up with a concern with aesthetics that is at odds with the place of art within surrealism. The image or object arguably enacted a reverberation between conscious and unconscious states of mind rather than a concern with the conditions of form *per se*. Yet, I would argue that this is a vital distinction to make in order to evaluate these works of art as part of a legacy that retains surrealism's vital potential for subversion.

Enrico David attempts to negotiate this contradiction between carnality as subject matter and the carnality of a desiring object, through an attention to a sense of exposure, of embarrassment in relation to the body that may be subtler than the overt physicality of Szapocznikow's lamps and



other objects. David's *Crotch-Flosser* (2003) quotes Max Ernst's *The Robing of the Bride* (1940) in the inclusion of a curtain to the side of what appears to be a stage. Ernst's feathered sorceress with her collection of hybrid creatures painted in bright contrasting oils is replaced by a much more tentative rendering in acrylic and a muted range of colours of a single asexual figure in profile that appears to be running dental floss between its clothed buttocks. David explains it as an allusion to the embarrassment of bodily actions and gestures exposed as public events but with none of the overt display of sexuality that one might associate with abject bodies and unruly desires.¹⁰ The result is a disruption of modernism through humour. This is nowhere more effectively conveyed than in a large-scale wooden cut-out figure entitled *Sign for Lost Mountaineers' Hair Grooming Station* (2004). A wooden pot-bellied giant that resembles a pathetic 'Ubu Roi' figure is painted in the black, brown and beige colours of art deco furniture in clean sharp geometric shapes. Closer examination reveals these shapes to be 'designed' sagging fleshy folds, multiple breasts and flaccid penises, indiscriminate bodily forms that droop and dip. The object was initially conceived as a large sculpture to be placed on a Swiss mountain, but within the gallery and on a smaller scale its redundant function becomes a crucial aspect of its parody of the narcissism embedded in contemporary design.¹¹





Enrico David, *Crotch-Flosser*, 2004, acrylic paint on linen. Detail of an installation view of the exhibition. Photograph: Serge Hasenböhler. Courtesy the artist and Cabinet, London.

David's strategy lies in his queering of early modernist design: *Sign for Lost Mountaineers' Hair Grooming Post* is a surreal meeting of Fernand Léger's tubular bodies and Hans Bellmer's photographs of Unica Zürn's bound body, made in the spirit of Meret Oppenheim's *Le Déjeuner en fourrure* (1936) and Dorothea Tanning's *Rainy-Day Canapé* (1970). His work is made with the awareness that these and other surrealist artists reacted against the dominance of modernism and the influence of the Bauhaus. It is tempting to consider how his disruption might infiltrate artistic modernism to effectively intervene in the crisis of the historical avant-garde outlined by Hal Foster.

In 'The ABCs of Contemporary Design,' Foster has argued that the historical avant-garde's dialectical play between art and life has been effectively nullified by contemporary design's



conflation of the utilitarian object with the aesthetic object. Design is now the paradigm for our contemporary era but although it 'is all about desire ... today this desire seems almost subject-less, or at least almost lack-less: design seems to advance a kind of narcissism that is all image and no interiority – an apotheosis of the subject that may be one with its disappearance.'¹² In response to this crisis, Foster calls for a political situated-ness of autonomy and its transgressions that has been lost by the shift towards interdisciplinarity resulting in a flat indifference, 'a posthistorical default of contemporary art and architecture.'¹³

Flesh at War with Enigma is an ambitious and uneven exhibition with certain contradictions running through it, not least the problem of locating the surrealist unconscious as a disruption of the everyday in a post-Freudian age. Its importance lies in its connections with Foster's critique of modernism now as the aestheticising of the everyday typified by the notion of a 'lifestyle.' The work of Alina Scapocznikow suggests that the neglect of the anti-aesthetic within Eastern Europe has resulted in its increased potential to offer a new site of resistance. Here surrealism emerges as a guiding light rather than a repertoire of images to be appropriated, which signals in turn the importance of this exhibition in raising questions regarding surrealism's vitality in the creation of a future avant-garde.

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¹ *Flesh at War with Enigma*, exhibition guide, Kunsthalle Basel, September 2004, np.

² Marcel Duchamp, Jean Arp, Roberto Matta and Max Ernst were on the jury panel of the *XXI May Salon* in Paris that awarded Szapocznikow's *Goldfinger* (1965) a prize. This was the first use of casts of the body in her practice.

³ See Urszula Czartoryska, 'The Cruel Clarity,' in *Alina Szapocznikow 1926-1973*, Galeria Zachęta, Warsaw 1998, 12-23.

⁴ Scapocznikow's presence in Paris from 1963 until her death ensured a degree of visibility in the mainstream of western European art but this changed dramatically after her death. Though her



work has regularly been shown in solo and group exhibitions in Poland there have been fewer occasions to see it outside of Eastern Europe for obvious political reasons. There have been a few exceptions: Spain in 1979 and Paris in 1980. Thereafter she was included in group shows in Bonn and Berlin in 1994 and recently in a group exhibition in Vienna in 2000; for full details see Józef Grabski (ed.), *Zatrzymać życie, Alina Szapocznikow, Rysunki i rzeźby (Capturing Life, Alina Szapocznikow, Drawings and Sculptures)*, Cracow and Warsaw 2004. Szapocznikow's work was also included in the exhibition *Paris, Capital of the Arts, 1900-1968*, Royal Academy, London, 2002.

⁵ *Flesh at War with Enigma*, exhibition guide, np.

⁶ *Flesh at War with Enigma*, exhibition guide, np.

⁷ *Flesh at War with Enigma*, exhibition guide, np.

⁸ Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux, 'The Accursed Part of Alina Szapocznikow,' in Grabski (ed.), *Capturing Life, Alina Szapocznikow*.

⁹ See Ian Walker's discussion of Czech surrealist photographers, 'On the Needles of These Days: Czech Surrealism and Documentary Photography,' *Third Text* (March 2004).

¹⁰ In conversation with the artist, November 2004.

¹¹ In conversation with the artist, November 2004.

¹² Hal Foster, 'The ABCs of Contemporary Design,' *October* 100 (Spring 2002), 198.

¹³ Foster, 'The ABCs of Contemporary Design,' 199.

