REDISCOVERING SELF: ATTEMPTS TO COMMUNICATE
PERSONAL NARRATIVE IN ART

A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

The human body is a main subject of my work. I use the body not only as a poetic metaphor, but also as metaphor of a cultural and a social battleground. Throughout time, the human figure has been a really powerful metaphor for exploring and maintaining any culture's dominant world view. A human figure is not directly present in all my work. The motif of it might appear through biomorphic forms instead, or through the fragments of garments. For me garments are shells or second-social-skins for the body. The fragmented body can serve as a site for the investigation of some urgent contemporary concerns such as homophobia, social inequity, disease, brutality and death.

My work takes various forms, from drawing to sculpture, from installation to computer art. I guess I am a product of contemporary life and culture with its lack of focus and sense of disintegration. My Lithuanian background serves me well when I try to include some sort of woman's traditional handicraft into my work. By combining handicrafts with the other media I am trying to emphasize the specificity of femininity in relation to the body, not as a biological entity, but as the psychically constructed image that provides a location for and imageries of the processes of the unconscious, for desire and fantasy. The body for me is a point of transfer between the social system and the subject, between what is presented as an intimate or private inside and a public or social outside.

My installations and objects usually hang in the air and employ a quite big space. Installation objects are light weighted and shifting. I consciously try to use
light materials as feathers, fine cotton, thin wire, aluminum window screen, thin sheets of latex to fulfill this illusion of instability. My installations almost "consume" space even if their actual scale on the ground might be small.
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Thank you.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I should say that at the very beginning of all my work there is always a real body but I like to transform it in various ways. Fantasies, obsessions and dreams find a place in these fabrications. Bodies can be given strange and wonderful attributes, or fashioned into mythic beings such as mermaids or Amazons, or can be made weightless, headless, transparent. The artist may refuse to bow to the laws of man or nature-to gravity, perspective, time, propriety, or common sense.

Every morning I wake up and do small daily routines in the epicenter of my domestic microcosm. "Ouch! I just cut my finger. My son is frightened by blood. He won't allow me to step on ants while we are walking on the sidewalk warmed by the spring sun. He is afraid of any tiny drop of their blood. ...I lift the pillow from the messed up morning bed and again OUCH. This time it was a feather sticking out of the pillow. I pull it out, sit near the heating duct, and play with the feather. The feather rises high when the heat comes on. I feel calm and relaxed when I look at it. It's like hypnosis, like a light afternoon nap. It makes me dream with open eyes. Different stories spin in my head. I like to tell stories...

Art is my way to tell stories. Visual language is closer to me than the others. I am not so good with sounds or with words, but I feel comfortable with visual signs. I
can play with them as with feathers. Arrange, rearrange, destroy. Sometimes I have a dilemma deciding upon medium and style. My artwork media vary from drawing to sculpture, from installation to computer art. I guess I am a product of a contemporary life and culture with its lack of focus and sense of disintegration. A result of Postmodernism, when truth is hidden behind images, language, culture. Maybe there isn't truth at all?

I used to live in Lithuania. Art based on female experience in life is rare in my country. People of my generation were shaped by a significant historical break. The old ideals of the Soviet system were thrown away, and the new attempt to reanimate old nationalist ideals existed only on the level of ideal (ideology). Belief in old icons was lost, and new beliefs were hard to find in the confusion. The main ingredient in the psychological state of a person was to doubt everything that in any way related to authority. In art, this took the form of disbelief in 'natural,' 'real' forms, distrust in the hierarchy of 'high style,' 'high media,' 'significant scale of the artwork,' 'actual theme' and etc. Once this belief in a natural state of hierarchy-or of social and political order itself was lost, we had questions such as: Who am I? What are my relations with society? A spectrum of body-gender questions was raised as well.

Avant-garde art in the early twentieth century had a liberating effect on many artists. Surrealism introduced the fragmented human body as a potent metaphor for the turbulence and fragmentation of the machirie age. This trend continues in contemporary women's art where the fragmented body is given a new political meaning (in contrast to the fetishized female in Surrealism). I can put myself into this Surrealist-inspired context in contemporary women's art.
My Lithuanian background serves me well when I include some sort of women’s traditional handicraft into my work. Because of the lack of consumer commodities during the Soviet period, everybody in Lithuania was forced to make things themselves. It was a sort of Renaissance for crafts. People were not allowed to use their Heads freely but they were allowed to use their Hands. I wasn’t an exception.

By combining handicrafts with other media I am trying to emphasize the specificity of femininity in relation to the body, not as biological entity, but as psychically constructed image. This image provides a location for the processes of the unconscious, for desire and fantasy. The body for me is a point of transfer between the social system and the subject, between what is presented as an intimate or private inside and a social or public outside.
CHAPTER 2

ON A BODY AS A METAPHOR

The human body is a main subject of my work. I use the body not only as a poetic metaphor, but also as metaphor of a cultural and a social battleground. Throughout time, the human figure has been a powerful metaphor for exploring and maintaining any culture’s dominant world view. The Socioeconomic order or beliefs might shift (as I have already experienced), but my body always stays with me. A human figure is not directly present in all my work. The motif of it might appear through biomorphic forms instead, or through the fragments of garments. For me garments are shells or second-social-skins for the body. The fragmented body can serve as a site for the investigation of some urgent contemporary concerns such as homophobia, social inequity, disease, brutality and death.

...in my childhood, each time I had a bad fever I would experience strange spatial sensations. For example, I am lying in my bed and suddenly my throat starts to grow huge, it’s filling the room, and I, myself, shrunken to the size of a raisin, hang in the very corner of the room, close to the ceiling, and observe all the action. Still now ,with my tonsils cut out, I have these strange dreams about my body expanding while my self shrinks. Here I see a connection with the formal side of my work. My installations usually hang in the air and employ quite a big space. Installation objects are lightweight and shifting. Sometimes I am amazed myself at how I can manage to fit a huge thing into a ‘cabbage case.’ I consciously use light materials like feathers, fine cotton, thin wire, aluminum window screen, or thin sheets of latex to create this
illusion of instability. My installations consume almost the whole available space even if their actual scale on the ground might be small.

Art theorist Michael Fried, in the essay *Art and Objecthood*, clearly was not in favor of Minimalist art and it's theatricality. He claimed that art was losing the purity present in the work of artists such as Noland, Olitsky and Stella. This essay was published about the time that minimalist sculptures by Judd and Morris started to appear on the art scene. In conclusion he wrote:

1) Success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater. 2) Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater. 3) The concepts of quality and value- and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself- are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theater.¹

I remember the essay, because I deal with theatricality a great deal in my work. And I don't think that theatricality appeared as a new phenomenon in Minimalist art. It has deep roots in the arts. Baroque art, DADA and FLUXUS movements also carried big doses of theatricality. Michael Fried was facing a change of art styles and the situation seemed to him like a large crisis at that time. I, a woman artist, am facing a total invasion of the theatrical Postmodern right now, and it seems to me like just a natural continuity in the cycle of changes in art. This matter, I think, is still open-ended. I would like to discuss how I approach a theatricality in my own art work.

I created a group of objects which employ lightness and volume at the same time. Aluminum wire cloth and feathers were the basic materials for all the objects. I should say that I was driven by theatrical intentions (pardon M.Fried) from the very beginning of my work. The beginning was very trivial: I saw some loose feathers on the floor of my bedroom. Almost immediately I subconsciously connected them to a
previous memory of myself sleeping on the worn out pillow, with some feathers poking out from the pillow case and as needles poking through into my ear. Then somehow I managed to connect it (of course in my mind) with an old fairytale narrative about sleeping beauties in glass caskets or luxury beds just waiting to be awakened. A needle, a rose thorn, or in other words, a sharp object was the cause of their sleep. I liked the duality of a feather: one end of it can tickle gently, another one can poke or hurt.

So, I am driven by metaphoric thinking in my work. The whole process is somehow similar to wandering in the giant maze where one doesn't know what is waiting for her around the corner.

My recent art work took the shape of sculptural objects. Object exists as a philosophical term and doesn't occur as a natural phenomenon. Object is our reaction to reality, our mechanism to analyze, adapt to and/or defeat reality. As an artist I created a part of reality with its own internal rules. Theatricality, as I mentioned above, is a significant component of my work. It grows from narrative which directly or not so directly is present in my art.

With the above in mind, here is an analysis of one of my sculptures, titled UNGRATEFUL (see Figures 2 and 3). This object has the shape of spread wings with an opening in the middle. The shape immediately suggests a biomorphic form. As Michael Fried wrote in his essay Art and Objecthood, anthropomorphic/biomorphic forms are immediately linked to theatricality. A contradiction between softness and gentleness on the inside of the object and sharpness on the outside emphasizes theatricality even more. I think that the contrast between the object's outside and inside textures creates a narrative for the spectator, and that this spectator starts to build metaphoric
links between what he sees in front of him (art object) and his Knowledge. As an artist I still believe in collective human experience (based on time) and I hope that through my art I communicate to other people.

My recent works SHAMEFACED (see Figure 4) and HUNCHBACK (see Figures 5 and 6) can be called hybrids or chimeras. I, as a product of the twilight of the 20th century, am exposed to immense changes in science and culture. The stream of genetic knowledge which began to flow in the 1970s has now reached overwhelming proportions. Within our lifetimes we can expect to see the full genetic blueprint of the human body (we already have one of the sheep). Human beings are gradually being given the tools to reinvent themselves. On the other hand this scientific development raises moral and ethical, social and political questions. As Walter Benjamin wrote in Illuminations (1936):

Mankind which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympic gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.

Am I involved in self destruction? No. Self contemplation will be my answer. As an artist I have a need and a right to reflect contemporary ideas by using the plastic language of art. My hybrids and chimeras reflect the great anxiety of the individual, who despite all scientific knowledge and practice, has a certain knowledge of his own eventual death.

Going back to my sculpture objects SHAMEFACED and HUNCHBACK, we will discover that both are highly self contained. I used a transparent material (aluminum screen) to create translucent outer forms which host smaller, feather-stuffed elements inside. These outside shells resemble garments. In SHAMEFACED it is a bell skirt, in HUNCHBACK it is a hybrid of shirt and vest. For me, garments have a
metaphoric connection with the human body. The notion of the garment as a shell arises from the history of dress, from a time when dress was restrictive and concealing. Elements within the shell can be seen as parasitic rather than symbiotic forms. This is especially evident in HUNCHBACK, where deformation of the shell is followed by deformations of the internal form. In SHAMEFACED I see the inner form as a growth/tumor inside the body. Tiny extensions made of feather-wrapped wires remind me of the roots of weeds, rapidly spreading around in order to live, at the expense of "good" plants. I chose the fluorescent green color to enhance this vegetation-flesh feeling.

The French artist Annette Messager, who has used the human body ingeniously and provocatively for years, explains how it serves her imagination:

I stick eyes back on
I unstick ears
I cut off fingers
I tear off a breast
this is my law of exchanges
I carve up
I pull to pieces...
... I give birth only to chimera. 2

We are all drawn to chimeras and chimerical ideas in order to defeat our own mortality...
CHAPTER 3

ON ARTIST'S IDENTITY

Personal identity issues are not the freshest news in the art world today, but for more than twenty years they have had a great influence on Western art, especially women's art. Since the modern art era these issues have changed a lot. Modernism was based on the heroic, but arrogant ego, inflated and cut off from its embeddedness in the social world. It encouraged separation, distancing behavior, and diminishment of the "other". One can find the roots of this "style" in the launching of the modernist project with the First Futurist Manifesto, written by Filippo Marinetti in 1920. He wrote: "We intend to exalt aggressive action, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap." The diminishment of the society became a cultural convention of modernism in which the failure to relate was considered an essential characteristic and indicator of radicality. All these comments reflect a personal and cultural myth that has formed the modern artist's identity. According to Suzi Gablik it was:

...the model of the egocentric, 'separative' self, whose perfection lies in an absolute independence from the world. Behind modernism itself lies the struggle for autonomy, with its mystique of an autonomous art work, beyond all ethical and social considerations, and an independent creator, who likes to see himself as independent and in control of things, impervious to the influence of others. Fitting into this myth of the patriarchal hero became the precondition for success under modernism for both men and women -- an archetype in which the feminine value of relatedness was virtually stripped away. 3

Modern art functions as an esoteric system requiring itself to be itself and carries the same dualistic model of subject - object as the objectifying metaphysics of science
does. This "static" autonomy brings the modern aesthetic to a 'dominator' model of patriarchal consciousness. Suzi Gablik writes: "within the 'dominator' system, the self is central; power is associated with authority, mastery, invulnerability and a strong affirmation of ego-bounds- which is precisely what the modern artist's "self" came to convey."4

Women's art gained its power in a postmodern context. The postmodernist theorists claimed that values are not universal but context-bound, not discovered in some 'platonic sky' but fashioned by historically situated human beings, and are for that reason subject to change. The major claim of the modernists is that only by ascribing universal validity to one's ethical beliefs is one able to act ethically. A postmodernist ethics refuses to take that step. Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist, writes:

The ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised. Ethical tasks of individuals grow while the socially produced resources to fulfill them shrink. Moral responsibility comes together with the loneliness of moral choice.5

What is the postmodernist subjectivity? Postmodernist subjectivity seeks to undo a unitary and essentialist conception of the self that would allow for statements like : "I am the only, absolute X" to occur. Postmodernism questions representation of identity and beliefs in subjectivity which are not visibly representable. These issues appear in the works of feminist theorists Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray. In the work Speculum 6 Luce Irigaray interprets Western philosophy from Freud back to Plato. She goes even further than Simone de Beauvoir7, who claimed that man sees woman as the 'other', as if in a mirror where he looks more superior than he is in reality. Luce Irigaray claims that Western philosophy positioned
male/culture/spirit against female/nature/body and took away woman's possibility to represent her subjectiveness in the symbolic world order. This philosophy sacrificed physicality, associated with femininity. Luce Irigaray thinks that the discourse of Western philosophy from Plato until now is speculation, because a philosopher (usually a man) reflects it's own being by seeing what is identical to him. Woman can't be represented according to this "logic of identity".

As one can see, Western philosophy created distinctions and evaluations across two terms of a binary system. One member is marked with value, the other one is unmarked. The male is marked with value, the female is unmarked. Cultural theorist Peggy Phelan sees potential prospects remaining in the unmarked condition:

The current contradiction between "identity politics" with its accent on visibility and psychoanalytic/deconstructionist mistrust of visibility as the source of unity or wholeness needs to be refigured, if not resolved. As the Left dedicates ever more energy to visibility politics, I am increasingly troubled by the forgetting of the problems of visibility so successfully articulated by feminist film theorists in the 1970s and 1980s. I am not suggesting that continued invisibility is the "proper" political agenda for the disenfranchised communities, but rather that a binary relationship between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying. There is a real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal.8

In Phelan's opinion, "visibility provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession."9

In 1965 artist Eva Hesse10 wrote to Ethelyn Honing: "I wonder if we are unique. I mean the minority we exemplify. The female struggle.... She also lacks conviction that she has the "right" to achievement. She also lacks the belief that her achievements are worthy..." I can address these words back to myself. Since 1965 the art scene has changed tremendously and today nobody speaks about achievements or
values anymore. Many of my works have this "tongue-in-cheek" quality. It occurs because I often have a need to flirt with criteria stripped away from Art and myself as an Artist who doesn't feel "value Motherland" under my feet. I guess that at this point I can redirect myself into the "UNMARKED" category where my moral responsibility, as a sociologist Zygmunt Bauman once said, comes together with the loneliness of moral choice.
NOTES


4. Ibid., p.62.


9. Ibid., p. 117

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Figure 6: Hunchback, detail