

# **Bittersweet Transformation**

Alina Szapocznikow,  
Kateřina Vincourová  
and Camille Henrot

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Space01

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**Bittersweet Transformation**

Alina Szapocznikow, Kateřina  
Vincourová and Camille Henrot

**Kunsthaus Graz**

**Universalmuseum Joanneum**

May 26 until August 28, 2016

The exhibition shows works by three artists spanning almost three generations. They are closely related to one another in their focus on the body as a site of experience and representation. The artists are not connected and have not met. In the sculptural, photographic and film works, it is the body that becomes the basis and image of all existence. The fetish-like and surreal is the anchor point that unites their positions.

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**Alina Szapocznikow** (\* 16th May 1926 in Kalisz, PL, † 2nd March 1973 in Paris, FR) was sculptor, graphic designer and one of the most important artists of her generation during the post-war period. After a dramatic youth marked by the Holocaust, she moved from Poland via the Czech Republic to France, where she studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. She returned regularly to Communist Poland, and as an aspiring and successful sculptor established her main residence there from 1951–1961 with the art critic and later museum director Ryszard Stanisławski. She travelled all over Europe and was well networked with artist friends from César through to Roman Polański (who filmed a French reportage about her in 1957). In 1961 she was invited to the global sculpture symposium at St. Margarethen in Burgenland. Her work *Pulp*—created at the point when her sculptural oeuvre was turning towards the plasticity of the material—still stands unaltered to this day on the slopes near Neusiedlersee. In 1962 she represented Poland at the Biennale of Venice. Around this time, she began to experiment with new

materials such as terrazzo (*Naga*, 1961) and artificial resin (*Fetish series*, 1966–70). Increasingly, her understanding of sculpture was now as a body that can be formed from the inside out. Throughout her working life her passion was for sculpture. This visibly came to concentrate on an investigation of her own body, of which she also made casts as a direct model for her sculptures. Marked by serious illnesses, her body became for her the source of 'of all joy, passion and truth'. Impressions of lips, her own, but also often those of the actress Julie Christie, serve as the starting-point for ornamental, decorative, vegetal and organic illuminated objects: the motionless, sensual lips shine. She produced these in polyurethane or polyester, a material that was then just emerging and becoming increasingly popular in art and commerce. Here we can identify parallels with American developments in Pop Art. Her photosculptures also reveal the joy she took in experimenting and her readiness to try out different techniques. 'Last Saturday, under a blazing sun, tired from having polished for hours my

Rolls-Royce made of pink marble from Portugal, I sat down and began to daydream as I unconsciously chewed my chewing gum. Pulling these odd shapes out of my mouth, I suddenly realised what an extraordinary collection of abstract sculptures was passing through my teeth. It suffices to photograph and enlarge my masticatory discoveries to create the event of a sculptural presence. Keep chewing, look around you. Creation is found between dream and routine,' explains the first print of work she developed as a photographically enlarged series of hanging and flowing sculptures from deep inside her body.

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**Kateřina Vincourová** (\* 1968 in Prague, CZ) was, in 1996, the first woman to receive the highest Czech prize for young artists, the Jindřich Chalupický award, and was successful as a DAAD scholar in Berlin. Her work investigates primal human urges. She examines the role of the female and the meaning of the body, explored in her works between absence and presence, reality and fiction, dream and reality. Right at the

start she called her expansive work *From Inside Out*, using feminine underwear as a casing for her spiderweb-like tensions. The skin-coloured women's lingerie shapes the sculpture. Garters, combs, zips and other materials associated with women form empty shelves and hold together a torso supported by powerful axe handles in a masculine sense. Light transparent fabrics sway over them. Their sides have something surreal about them, forming dream-like, coded images from everyday articles. For the artist they are spatial drawings of the extension of her body, which is absent from her works and yet constantly perceptible in its ambivalence. The everyday materials refer to a consumerism focused on products, which has been advancing in the Czech Republic since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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**Camille Henrot** (\* 1978 in Paris, FR) is the youngest of the three artists in this exhibition. In 2013 she won the Silver Lion at the Biennale in Venice for her film *Grosse Fatigue*. Henrot is interested in the rituals and customs

of European societies and has travelled to India, Japan and Melanesia. She explored how history is written, how museum classifications are undertaken, how people are categorised and how we deal with exoticism. Unlike an ethnologist, however, her approach is highly intuitive, associative and, above all, very visual. She uses images from various contexts, placing them in direct immediacy within and alongside one another, thereby reaching the core of western cultural reception and reflecting it to the outside. Henrot's oeuvre is in this way determined by a complex syncretism, a synthesis of religious ideas and philosophies of a joint, mutually dependent and constantly shifting world view. The title of the film *Le Songe de Poliphile / The Strife of Love in a Dream* can be traced back to a book of the same name, which in historical terms is a famous but largely unread late 15th-century treatise, a dream novel and an artwork. In an incredible flood of images, the film spans a density of information that oscillates between the huge populations of India and the clinical sterility of Europe. The film condenses into a

struggle against fears. On the one hand these are countered with medication, on the other hand with collective agitation. A key symbol is the snake, lending fear a physical presence. Images from art history or from mainstream TV emerge in rapid succession between the two narrative strands. The medication whose highly technological production we observe in the film is *Atarax®*, which is used for the treatment of states of fear and anxiety. An important aspect of the film is Joakim's music, which becomes more and more intense and supports the increasingly rapid edit of images. It is impossible to walk away from the film, you feel hypnotised, the film becomes a nightmare and leaves you abandoned in a state of anxiety. The starting-point of the work *Collections préhistoriques* was a book about Algerian early history, published before Algerian independence from France. It shows objects and stones gathered there by soldiers and priests. The images from the book seem nostalgic. The 1950s view onto a supposedly innocent time was combined with erotic images of naked bodies, and also with

objects that Camille Henrot had collected from eBay. In their direct juxtaposition, the images raise questions of representation and illusion, science and art.

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**A fetish** is an object revered for its supposedly supernatural properties and with which one develops an emotionally and spiritually charged relationship, also haptic in nature. The term was coined for indigenous peoples' barter objects by the Portuguese colonial rulers of Africa and so signifies a fascinating exoticism, something fundamentally different. In Henrot's work, images from erotic magazines are directly combined with archaeological finds, or rectangular image surfaces are acupuncture, so that here her occupation with the fetish implies an examination of cultural practices and arises from a fundamental scepticism towards an anthropological—and also artistic—exoticism. Kateřina Vincourová, on the other hand, uses ephemeral everyday materials and situations to make the basically physical principle of longing for touch into an image of fetish-like union. In a surreal connection with the subconscious,

the masculine and feminine, the everyday and memory become a fleet-footed gesture of shifting dependence, in which a profound striving for redemption is inscribed into everything. Alina Szapocznikow's 'fetishes' are sculptures made of gauze bandages and cloths but also photographs. These are dipped in toxic polyester, which hardens them against their material properties, giving them sculptural positions. They play on the self and sculpture, on statics, on the development of a form and on the tragedy of cancer, which after 1968 distorted and occupied the sculptor's body. Common to all of these positions is that they thematise something profoundly sculptural in a fundamentally feminine softness. As in Julia Kristeva's essay *Women's Time* (1978), they propagate a continuum of a 'physical and mental place of longing' beyond a linear writing of history, where Eros and Thanatos can come together in their ambivalence.

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