

ARTNEWS

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY NOW REPRESENTS THE ESTATE OF ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW

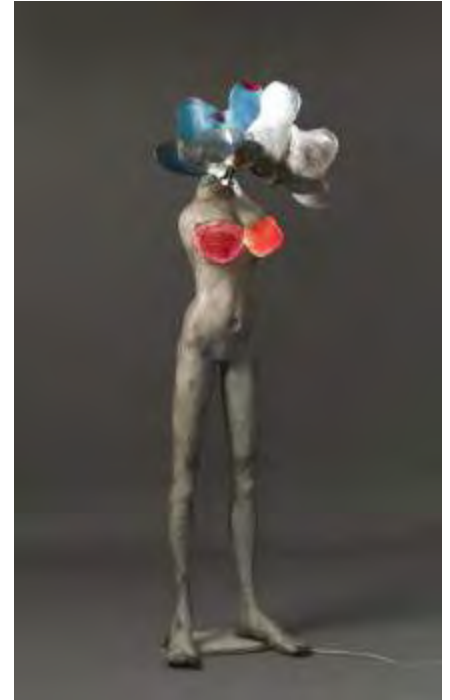
BY [Alex Greenberger](#) POSTED 09/01/15 11:34 AM

New York's Andrea Rosen Gallery announced today that it now represents the estate of Alina Szapocznikow. On October 30, the Chelsea gallery will open its first solo show of the Polish-born artist, who died in 1973 at age 47. Szapocznikow's estate had previously been represented solely by Galerie Loevenbruck, in Paris, making Andrea Rosen Gallery the first to represent Szapocznikow's estate in the U.S.

Though Szapocznikow worked in a variety of media, from drawing to photography, she is perhaps most famous for casts of her body, which she made out of resin and which sometimes feature electric lightbulbs.

Szapocznikow's last solo show in New York was in 2012, when a traveling retrospective came to the Museum of Modern Art. The Rosen show will focus on a group of drawings and sculptures from her "Souvenirs" series, made in the late '60s, for which Szapocznikow photographed her friends and layered their images on semi-translucent polyester forms.

"As minimalism became the default visual language of contemporary art, there was a shift where all things scatological became almost suppressed," Andrea Rosen, the president of the eponymous gallery, said in a statement. "With the help of artists like Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, we now live in a more pluralistic aesthetic time, within which we can again see Szapocznikow's incredible significance."



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New York

Alina Szapocznikow

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

525 West 24th Street

October 31–December 5

While a recent museum retrospective has brought international attention at last to Alina Szapocznikow, this condensed estate show of her figurative sculpture provides a must-see coda. A fascinating artist of the post-WWII avant-garde, Szapocznikow is known for her distressed corporeal forms, but there's a playful aspect to her oeuvre, too, evident in the group of remarkable lamps that fill the gallery's second room.

The lumpy phallic base of *Sculpture-Lampe*, 1970, holds up an enchanting—and unsettling—cobble-together head. A breast with a red nipple forms the back; in front, a mouth and chin are affixed to a single, oversized blue iris (no pupil). Made from tinted polyester resin, the glowing head houses a light bulb. It's capped by a peach umbrella-shape that resembles both the roughly excised skin of a human knee and a mod interpretation of a Tiffany lampshade. *Sculpture-Lampe VI*, from the same year, also features a mouth-breast graft—this one emerges from a curved stem that sprouts from a pair of leaves the shape of Tinker Bell's wings and the color of her dress.



Alina Szapocznikow, *Sculpture-Lampe VI*, 1970, polyester resin, metal, electrical wiring, 22 x 13 x 14".

Though Szapocznikow's work is more expressive and less light-hearted than our stereotypic image of Pop, she was a kind of post-Surrealist Pop artist, using industrial methods and materials (expanding polyurethane foam as well as the aforementioned resin) to reflect and critique the fetishistic tropes of advertising and consumer display. But, as a Polish Jew who survived a childhood in concentration camps working alongside her physician mother, Szapocznikow made work that is as much about mass extermination as it is mass production.

— Johanna Fateman

Mamma mia! Show on motherhood opens in Milan

Massimiliano Gioni's latest exhibition looks at the relationship between women and power in the 20th century

by [HANNAH MCGIVERN](#), [FRANCO FANELLI](#) | 26 August 2015



Works by Alina Szapocznikow, Maria Lassnig and Marlene Dumas in *The Great Mother*.

Do not expect any stereotypical Italian mammas—saintly Madonnas or doting matriarchs—to appear in *The Great Mother*, the latest exhibition that Massimiliano Gioni has organised for the Fondazione Nicola Trussardi. It opens today, 26 August, at the Palazzo Reale in Milan (until 15 November). While the show was conceived as a riff on the city's Expo 2015 theme “feeding the planet, energy for life”, visitors will find in it “few of the comforting aspects of motherhood,” says Gioni, the artistic director of the foundation and the New Museum in New York. It is rather “the story of the battle between emancipation and tradition..., [of] the relationship between women and power in the course of the 20th century”.

Like the Encyclopaedic Palace, Gioni's central exhibition for the 2013 Venice Biennale, *The Great Mother* shines a spotlight on lesser-known and even obscure figures, with works by 127 artists—female and male—that span the past century. The show opens with an archive of “images of universal archetypes” assembled by the spiritualist Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, a friend and follower of Carl Jung (whose *Red Book* was the first exhibit at Gioni's Venice Biennale). These illustrations of Venus figurines from prehistoric art were shown in Fröbe-Kapteyn's 1938 exhibition devoted to the Great Mother, a Jungian theme. Gioni describes the collection as an “archaeology of representations of the mother”.



An image from the archive of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn.



Hannah Höch, Der Vater (the father) (1920).

A major section focuses on the representation of women in three macho Modern art movements: Futurism, Dada and Surrealism. The “bachelor machines” of Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia and Man Ray meet the doll sculptures of Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Hannah Höch. Works by female Surrealists such as Leonora Carrington, Meret Oppenheim and Dorothea Tanning are presented alongside 50 original collages from Max Ernst’s 1929 book *The Hundred Headless Woman*. “There are terrible stories in the exhibition... If being avant-garde in daily life came easy for men, the women were the ones who had to suffer the consequences,” Gioni says.

The second half of the show features artists who laid bare the female body and the tensions of domestic life during the rise of feminism in the 1960s and 70s, including Louise Bourgeois, Lynda Benglis, Judy Chicago, Ana Mendieta, Yoko Ono and Martha Rosler. A room is dedicated to the “extreme” cases of Elaine Sturtevant and Sherrie Levine—the appropriation artists who “dethroned the masters”—and Lee Lozano, who chose to withdraw from the art world altogether.



Works by Louise Bourgeois in *The Great Mother*. Photo: Marco De Scalzi

These attacks on the traditional “paternity” of the author pave the way for an alternative art history “in terms of sisters, aunts and mothers,” Gioni says. “One of the themes of the exhibition is to imagine a post-gender or post-sexual art: in a way, when there are no more categories, there is no more injustice.”

Excerpted from *The Art Newspaper*, available from <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/news/158766/>.



50 Must-See Fall Exhibitions



ARTSY EDITORIAL AUG 25TH, 2015 1:08 PM

With September just around the corner, Artsy scanned fall's brimming show schedule—replete with headlining historical surveys, intriguing rediscoveries, and much-anticipated solos by rising stars. Below, we've selected 50 gallery exhibitions not-to-miss, from Copenhagen to Cape Town, New York to Shanghai.



Alina Szapocznikow at Andrea Rosen Gallery

OCT. 30–DEC. 5, 525 W 24TH STREET

In explorations of bodies and memory, Szapocznikow's challenging, emotional sculptures redefined their medium. The gallery's first solo show of the artist's work since officially beginning to represent her estate last year will feature 16 largely unseen works alongside some of Szapocznikow's major figurative sculptures from the 1960s and '70s, contextualized by her drawings from the same period.

Excerpt from "50 Must-See Fall Exhibitions" by the Artsy Editorial Staff.
<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-50-must-see-fall-gallery-shows-2015>.

Alina Szapocznikow, Illuminowana [Illuminated Woman], 1966–67, courtesy the Estate of Alina Szapocznikow, Piotr Stanislawski, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, and Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris. © The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow

ARTFORUM

"Them"

SCHINKEL PAVILLON

Oberwallstrasse 1, Schinkel Pavillon

June 27–July 26

Before her death in 1973, Polish artist Alina Szapocznikow cast the effects of sickness on her body into sculptures. Bits of synthetic female flesh—lips, breasts, bellies—are severed like limbs, suspended in a performance of pain and its counterpart, pleasure. *The Bachelor's Ashtray I*, 1972, for instance, is a two-faced head sliced open just below the nose, its wound a repository for matches and cigarette butts. This is one of many works by Szapocznikow in "Them," which sets a group of younger artists who have specific associations with post-Internet art into conversation with the feminist concerns of Szapocznikow and Carolee Schneemann, whose seminal performance *Meat Joy*, 1964, featured nearly nude performers convulsing on the ground with raw fish, chicken, and sausages.



View of "Them," 2015.

Yet if the struggle these women's works testifies to is the show's central tenet, then "Them" is a perturbingly slick affair. The exhibition architecture of an MDF yellow ground coalescing around an elegant off-white platform functions much like the display apparatus of a luxury-goods store. Sitting atop, the works masquerade accordingly, their originary friction smoothed into tactile pleasure, though some more readily so than others. Rising to the occasion, Anicka Yi's *235,681K of Digital Spit*, 2010, a transparent Longchamp handbag glinting under a spotlight and containing hacked-up cow intestine in limpid hair gel, slyly reveals its duplicity. But perhaps most mischievous is Sarah Lucas's infamous sculpture *Bunny Gets Snookered #3*, 1997, which copes with dejection and debasement like its feminist predecessors and so absorbs any further compromise. Although one must wonder if popularity's mollifications have triumphed again, deviance still sneaks through, and when it does, it stings.

— Alex Davidson

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THEM at Schinkel Pavillon

July 3rd, 2015



Artists: Alina Szapocznikow, Alisa Baremboym, Aleksandra Domanović, Katja Novitskova, Sarah Lucas, Carolee Schneemann and Anicka Yi

Exhibition title: THEM

Curated by: Nina Pohl

Venue: Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin, Germany

Date: June 13 – July 26, 2015

Photography: Timo Oehler, Fabrice Gousset, images courtesy of the artists and Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin

THEM – that’s them, that’s us. THEM revolves around questions of the self, encompassing the gaze inward and outward, and of representation and self-definition. THEM involves the sensuous, the body and material, desire and rebellion, spaces of intimacy and the abyss, delimitation, technology, the virtual. The group exhibition THEM is an encounter, a revision, a statement. The central reference point of the exhibition is the work of Polish artist Alina Szapocznikow (1926-1973), which has gained international recognition in recent years. Szapocznikow’s works partake in a dialogue with six artists, exclusively female positions, which deal – each one specifically in relation to their generation – with the definition and construction of the body, with gender, with social positioning, and even the prosthetic-ness of the body in the digital era. The exhibits are framed by an architecture specially conceived for the exhibition that in its overall appearance resembles an amoeba, a single cell organism, and which as an independent body carries and encloses the sculptures. It becomes an organically sinuous, walk-through interface, a body that addresses the corporeal.

The juxtaposition of the aesthetic of the surface with the substance of matter is a recurring theme in the sculptural work of Alina Szapocznikow. *Cendrier de célibataire (The Bachelor’s Ashtray I)* (1972) depicts such a dichotomy between the real and the absurd. There is form and the formless, the casting of a head and its surrealistic extension, the immaculate, the pictorial and the moment of transition, a disintegration and dissolution. Existentialism and irony, awareness, and the pleasure of the body. ‘My gesture is addressed to the human body, that “entirely erogenous zone”’, wrote the artist in 1972. “Through casts of the

body I try to fix the fleeting moments of life, its paradoxes and absurdity in transparent polyester.’¹

Alina Szapocznikow’s works play with states of being, with presence, absence and becoming. In her sculptural work she focuses strongly on the partial, on individual parts, on traces of the body, its contours, its disappearance. She created an ‘alphabet of the body’,² giving shape to objectuality through personal references such as casts from her body.

The biographical is essential in Szapocznikow’s work: as a youth she survived the concentration camps of the Third Reich. After her artistic studies in Prague and Paris, she was primarily active in the Paris of the 1960s in the Nouveau Réalisme movement, in which she asserted herself with a feminist attitude. Here she focused on working with new, industrial materials like polyester, polyurethane foam and synthetic resin, from which evolved the greater part of her work of the 1960s and 1970s. The body cast as negative form, doubling, a seriality between production and reproduction become thus also fundamental in her lamps with casts of mouths, buttocks and breasts. Remoulds of sexual organs in bright colors determine a surrealist eroticism like in *Sculpture-Lampe* (1970) that is at the same time furniture, sketching gender roles and containing within it a commodity fetishism in the style of pop art. Modelling through and with the body attains a new level in Szapocznikow’s *Photosculptures* (1971)³, as shown by twenty photographs of chewing gum sculptures, amorphous entities with tooth marks, which the artist photographed on traditional sculptural materials (that she once used as well), like stone. The multiple malleability of material with varying form which Alina Szapocznikow demonstrated with this series can in this way be seen as symbolic of her work and attitude: giving shape to the ephemerality in the moment now, while turning towards what is to come.

The film *Meat Joy* (1964) by Carolee Schneemann (*1939) reflects discourse around the body, sexuality and gender in an erotic ritual, in which flesh becomes material and the body becomes the medium. Four women and four men, clad only in underwear, make contact with each other through performative figures: bodies overlap, interact with each other in erotic poses, and with the meat of chickens, with fish and sausages, with wet paint, with transparent plastic and with paper, on which they leave imprints of their actions. A female voiceover comments on the action, a superimposition of comments

and contemporary soul and pop music resulting in overlapping vocal layers. The film addresses the space between longing and experience, a dissolution of limits and the fluid exchange between affection, wildness, loneliness and ecstasy.

Conceptions of sexual roles are also a recurring theme in the work of Sarah Lucas (*1962). The sculpture *Bunny Gets Snookered #3* (1997) addresses the female body as object in the form of furniture, very similarly to how Szapocznikow did this with her lamps modelled on body parts. Lucas' sculpture – a doll made from nylon stockings, its body physically connected to a desk chair and surrounded by phallus-like sausages – expresses aspects of morality, sexual dominance and submission as well as the ambivalence of sociosexual conventions.

In the younger positions, changeability between material, object and body finds, from a digital perspective, completely new formal configurations: but the ways of handling new technologies are similar to Alina Szapocznikow's form finding process. Comparing the exhibits makes clear how up-to-date Alina Szapocznikow's works are, especially today in the so-called 'post internet' epoch.

The work *Grapeshot* (2015) by Alisa Baremboym (*1982) was recently a part of an installation in the exhibition *Conflict (process)* at 47 Canal in New York City, with the form of this work – ovary-like globes within hybrid support structures – as a recurring motif of the respective elements. "Conflicting materialities are a process of perception, and the process is the site of production", the artist writes on her website. *Conflict*, recognition and power here relate to the female body: how bodies, self-conception and action formulate and position themselves differently by referencing back to (new) materials and chemical-industrial production, is object, statement, and question in Alisa Baremboym's work.

The digital body is a reference point in the work of Aleksandra Domanović (*1981). Her sculpture series *SOHO (Substances of Human Origin)* (2015) references the so-called 'Belgrade hand', a multifunctional, externally powered, cybernetic hand developed in the early 1960s. This prototype is the template for the sculptures presented in *THEM*. Here however, in a reference to organs, tissues and cells for transplantation and assisted reproduction, the prosthetic limbs have mutated and metastasised, taking on an entirely different life. Bodies appear

in Domanović's work as concepts: she emphasizes the corporeal as fragment and prosthesis, as tool and avatar, as image in space, as internet excerpt. Her researches include the significance of women in the development of the internet, cybernetics, virtual reality, and multimedia.

The digital image in space as construction is also the starting point for the work of Katja Novitskova (*1984). The sculpture *Approximation (Snail)* (2014) is part of an ongoing series in which Novitskova places larger than life cut-outs of animal pictures as props within the exhibition space. The display becomes an interface between digital and physical pictorial reality, her *Approximations* serving often as templates for further optically deceptive, photographic stagings of her public – as the reality of simultaneity.⁴ Her work exhibited in THEM implies a feminist gesture: a female hand holds a rearing snail provocatively but yet nonchalantly – like a revolver – into the space it opens up.

The works by Anicka Yi (*1971) mostly relate to smell as a conceptual component and indicator between humans, body and space. With her sculpture *235,681K of Digital Spit* (2010) she addresses the ambiguity of the handbag as a cultural medium: the transparent Longchamp bag is filled with hair gel and a cow intestine. Between representation and repulsion it becomes a phantom of consumption and the beauty industry, a vulgar antagonist of female clichés.

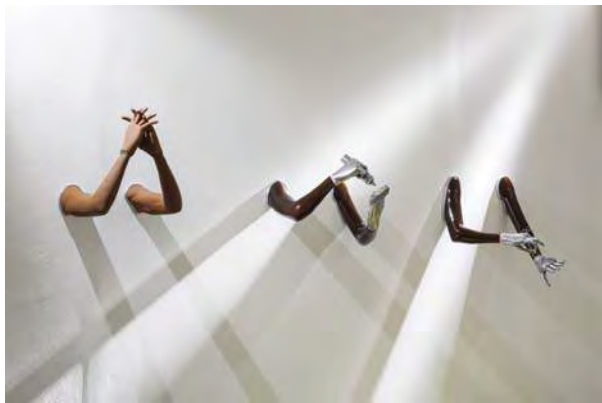
THEM. Christina Irrgang

¹ Alina Szapocznikow, in a draft text from 1972, quoted in: Anke Kempkes: Ready-mades des Körpers – Alina Szapocznikow, in: *Flesh at War with Enigma*, Exh.cat., Kunsthalle Basel 2004, p. 42.

² C.f. Alina Szapocznikow, after Anne Tronche: *The lapsus of bodies*, in: Alina Szapocznikow – *From drawing into sculpture*, Editions Dilecta, Centre Pompidou, Paris 2013, p. 32.

³ Originally accompanied by a text that describes her method – and underlines the conceptual component of the work.

⁴ Katja Novitskova also deals with this in her book "Post Internet Survival Guide", 2010: "As everything is simultaneously realistic and camouflaged, the skill needed to navigate the space meaningfully is to be fluent in image-editing effects."



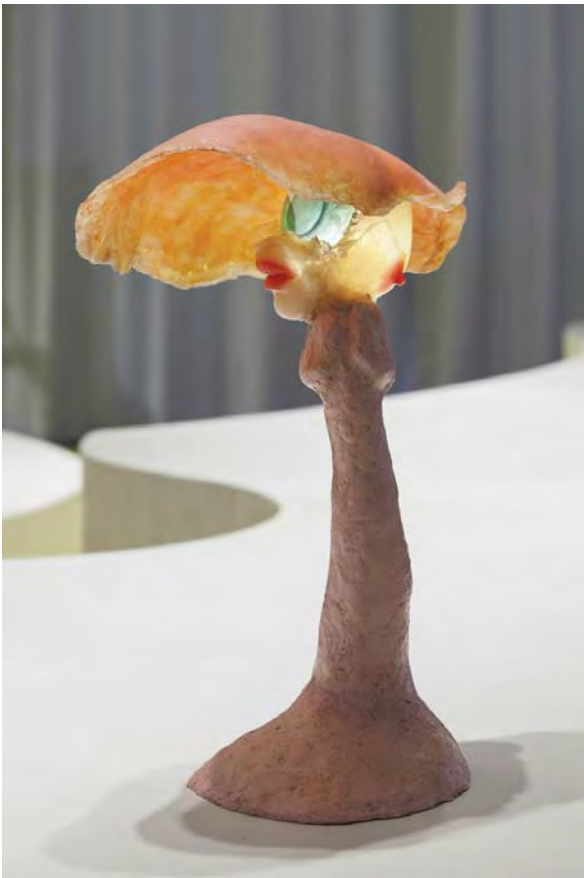
Alexandra Domanovic, *SOHO (Substances of the Human Origin)*, 2015
Courtesy Tanya Leighton Gallery







Sarah Lucas, *Bunny gets snookered #3*, 1970
Courtesy Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary



Alina Szapocznikow, *Sculpture-Lampe*, 1997. Courtesy The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow / Piotr Stanislawski / Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris © ADAGP, Paris



Anicka Yi, *235,681K of Digital Spit*, 2010. Courtesy 47 Canal



Alina Szapocznikow, *Sculpture (Fétiche IV)*, 1971. Courtesy The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow / Piotr Stanislawski / Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris © ADAGP



Alina Szapocznikow, *Cendrier de Célibataire I (The Bachelor's Ashtray)*, 1972. Courtesy The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow / Piotr Stanislawski / Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris © ADAGP



Alina Szapocznikow, *Lampe-bouche (Illuminated lips)*, 1966.
Courtesy The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow / Piotr Stanislawski /
Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris © ADAGP, Paris



Alina Szapocznikow, *Pamiętki (Souvenirs)*, 1967. Courtesy The
Estate of Alina Szapocznikow / Piotr Stanislawski / Galerie
Loevenbruck, Paris © ADAGP, Paris

Categories: Exhibitions | Tags: Aleksandra Domanović, Alina
Szapocznikow, Alisa Baremboym, Anicka Yi, Berlin, Carolee
Schneemann, Germany, Katja Novitskova, Nina Pohl, Sarah
Lucas, Schinkel Pavillon

Despite its apocalyptic title, this year's Yokohama Triennale is anything but an exploration of a depressing endgame for art. Although some of that is there (in, for example, Gregor Schneider's moist and musty basement-style room filled with mud). Nor is it a simple echo of Ray Bradbury's cry against censorship in the celebrated novel from which part of that title is borrowed (despite the rather clunky inclusion of Dora García's *Fahrenheit 451* (1957), 2002, an edition of 2,000 copies of the novel printed as a mirror image). Rather, it embraces forgetting, destruction and failure as essential components of the creative process, and a productive inspiration for the creation of artworks.

Curated by Yasumasa Morimura, who is best known for a particular style of appropriation art in which he blends his own face and body into iconic images from art history and popular culture, the Triennale distinguishes itself for its apparent focus on the art that he simply likes (not least in a section of the Triennale titled 'Monologues by Enfants Terribles', which collects works by Joseph Cornell, Alina Szapocznikow and Andy Warhol, along with the seductive inks and watercolours of Chiyuki Sakagami – about whom this reviewer knows little, but intends to find out a lot more (a feeling that's one of the pleasures of attending these kinds of exhibition) – as well as an ambition to gather a collection of works under an overarching conceptual umbrella. The result might be best termed a productive confusion. While Morimura's construction of the show in 11 'chapters' indicates a strong sense of narrative, within that is an equally strong sense of his arguing that decisions relating to art's value lie as much in an individual as they do in a social consciousness (and unspoken within that are issues relating to market, popular

and ideological values). Indeed, as if to emphasise all this and, in particular, the curator's apparent disdain for the kind of loudmouthed, monomaniacal and evangelistic tone that seems to characterise many biennials and other such art jamborees these days, the opening chapter is titled 'Listening to Silence and Whispers' and features reductive works by the likes of Kazimir Malevich, John Cage, the excellent Stanley Broun and others. As well as the first of what will, as you travel through the exhibition, become a series of bizarrely poetic, yet refreshingly personal and almost antipedagogical introductory wall texts, this one beginning: 'When we see an overwhelmingly beautiful landscape or when an unbearably sad thing happens to us, we lose our words and become speechless...'

It's a bit of a contradiction, then, that the works that take centre stage at the Triennale's two main venues are both brash and almost excessively theatrical. Michael Landy's *Art Bin* (a gigantic transparent tub, originally installed at the South London Gallery in 2010, into which people are invited to climb a staircase and then dramatically dispose of unwanted or unsuccessful artworks) stands at the centre of the first, the Yokohama Museum of Art. While Miwa Yanagi's *Mobile Stage Truck* (2014), a Taiwan-inspired and fabricated, gaudily decorated trailer created as a set for Yanagi's production of her play based on Kenji Nakagami's 1984 roadtrip novel, *Nichirin No Tsubasa* (*Wings of the Sun*), which transforms (not too unlike a Transformer toy) into an even more garishly decorated and illuminated dancefloor and performance stage (complete with bobbing disco ball), provides an attention-hogging counterpoint at the Shinko Pier Exhibition Hall. And although there's an overwhelming

sensation that these works are included to cover the fact that a big show like this one (which contains over 400 artworks) needs to garner an equally large amount of public attention, the works are not entirely off-message. Indeed, perhaps they demonstrate, more than anything else, precisely the kind of contradictory and idiosyncratic selections that give a sense of openness to the Triennale as a whole.

Located between the extremes of Landy's and Yanagi's contributions are works such as Yuko Mohri's *I/O – Chamber of a Musical Composer* (2014), in which the artist takes a band organ bequeathed to her by the late musician Victor C. Searle (who moved to Japan in the 1950s) and reconfigures it into a system that generates a score by detecting the dust particles brought into the gallery by visitors (and is exhibited next to, as much in competition as in sympathy with, three relatively silent paintings of ordinary objects – among them ropes and sacks – by Zhang Enli), as well as the more familiar (at least to a Western visitor) videos of Bas Jan Ader and Jack Goldstein transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary (attempting to fall from a tree branch and banging a table until a stack of coins falls off it, respectively), or a couple of fragments of Danh Vo's *We The People* (2010–13), a copper replica of the Statue of Liberty broken down into around 250 pieces.

Visiting the whole lot in a day can make it seem like something of a blur, and the sheer volume of work shown in some of the exhibition spaces might suggest that this is deliberate, but ultimately you go away with a sense that this exhibition has served to articulate a notion of oblivion as a space of unpredictable (and occasionally utterly random) potential as much as it is a space of overwhelming emptiness.

Mark Rappolt

The Night of the Great Season

Kunsthalle Mulhouse, Centre d'Art Contemporain 19 February – 11 May

For a Polish art historian, seeing Polish Surrealism and neo-Surrealism at a Kunsthalle located in a former foundry in postindustrial Mulhouse, Alsace, might be compared to an exotic accident while on the Grand Tour: a surreal chance encounter of sorts. *The Night of the Great Season* is a bold show, juxtaposing a limited selection of well-known Polish avant-garde and neo-avant-garde artists (Tadeusz Kantor, Erna Rosenstein, Bruno Schulz, Alina Szapocznikow) with three artists of the current generation (Tomasz Kowalski, Agnieszka Polska, Jakub Julian Ziółkowski). The most interesting aspect of the exhibition is that it presents them together for the first time in the context of Surrealism.

The title comes from a short story by one of the most famous Polish-Jewish pre-war writers and artists, Bruno Schulz, part of his masterpiece *The Cinnamon Shops* (*Sklepy Cynamonowe*, 1933–4), a strange modern 'degenerate' text exploring time and the perception of Jewish life in the small town of Drohobycz. Schulz is represented here by drawings related to his prose, though they are closer to *Neue Sachlichkeit* than to Surrealism. Echoes of Schulz were strongly present in Kantor's self-founded theatre, Cricot 2, particularly in his 'Informel Theatre' and later 'Theatre of Death' approaches, represented here by *The Dead Class* (1975), a great documentary showing Kantor's performance by Andrzej Wajda. Interestingly, it was Erna Rosenstein's husband, Artur Sandauer, who rediscovered and reinterpreted Schulz in his

literary essays of the 1970s. Kantor, Rosenstein and Sandauer were all members and cofounders of the second Kraków Group in 1957, which also represented surrealist tendencies in Polish art.

That Rosenstein's works are being exhibited in this part of Europe for the first time since the 1980s deserves special attention. This Polish-Jewish artist, one of the most original among her peers, combined surrealist automatic drawing with a focus on the female body, the feminine and the fetish. She was one of the first to do so in Poland, tackling alienation, abjection and difference. A great example of her painting here, *Become!* (*Stan sie*, 1988), is a fantasy about insemination, mysterious sperm levitating in abstract oceanic space cutting the canvas. In interesting relation to her works are small-scale sculptures by Alina Szapocznikow and large c-prints by Agnieszka Polska. Rosenstein and Szapocznikow shared not only the traumatic past of the Holocaust experience, but also both made fetish and assemblage structures from refuse and remnants. In her collages, Polska makes direct reference to Włodzimierz Borowski's *Artony* series of 'assemblages-beings', translating them into an organic 'fairytale' made of mud and branches (*Arton* series, 2010). On the other hand, other younger artists, the aforementioned Ziółkowski and Kowalski, take formal inspiration from surrealist imagery, creating their own ahistorical language in spectacular paintings and drawings.

The curatorial strategy here was inspired by Jakub Banasiak's book *Tired of Reality* (2009),

and his argument that in turning away from the Polish 'critical art' generation of the 1990s, the younger generation is now evidently 'tired of reality' and embracing alternative approaches – surrealist, among others. The clear minimalist display is in some respects misleading, though. One might think that what is on show constitutes the very few embodiments of surrealist art in Poland, and echoes Kantor's famous statement that 'we didn't have Surrealism in Poland because we had Catholicism' (a stance reflected in Banasiak's book). But Polish Surrealism did exist, albeit marginally, in several artistic and clearly communistic formations in Lvov and Kraków: the pre-war Artes group, the first pre-war Kraków Group, and the second Kraków Group including (among many others) Kantor and Rosenstein. Poland didn't have a figure like André Breton. It had neither the strong circle that he consolidated nor a tradition of surrealist exhibitions. Nevertheless, many artists of different generations did become 'surrealists' and 'neo-surrealists', such as Edward Krasiski, Kazimierz Mikulski, Jerzy Kujawski and Janina Kraupe-Swidorska. Surrealistic tendencies appeared also in Polish film and in experimental cinema – we could mention here early films by Roman Polanski, the filmic oeuvre of Wojciech Jerzy Has or the experimentation of Walerian Borowczyk. This show, then might serve as evidence that research into this broad topic has just begun. Barbara Piwowarska



Alina Szapocznikow, *Autoportrait 11*, 1966, bronze, 21 × 26 × 11 cm, edition 3 of 7.
© the artist. Courtesy the artist, Piotr Stanislawski and Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris

HORS LES MURS

GUCCI MUSEO /

FLORENCE

Texte

Martin Bethenod

Fr L'EXPOSITION AU GUCCI MUSEO DE FLORENCE PRÉSENTE TROIS ARTISTES QUI, AU TOURNANT DES ANNÉES 1960-1970, ONT FAIT DU CORPS FÉMININ UN INSTRUMENT DE CRITIQUE ET DE SUBVERSION. LEE LOZANO, ALINA SZAPOCZNICOW, ET EVELYNE AXELL.

THE EXHIBITION AT FLORENCE'S GUCCI MUSEO PRESENTS THE WORK OF THREE ARTISTS WHO, AT THE TURN OF THE 1970S, USED THE FEMALE BODY AS A CRITICAL, SUBVERSIVE TOOL. LEE LOZANO, ALINA SZAPOCZNICOW AND EVELYNE AXELL. En

FEMMINILITÀ

RADICALE

Fr Corps réel, mis en action lors de performances, par Evelyne Axell, ou de projets conceptuels qui brouillent la limite entre l'art et la vie, par Lee Lozano. Corps morcelé, mis en pièces dans les sculptures d'Alina Szapocznicow, à la frontière entre l'art et l'art décoratif. Corps transposé dans l'abstraction ou confronté à la trivialité violente de l'univers (masculin) des objets par Lee Lozano. Corps mis en jeu dans un rapport critique à l'histoire de l'art par Evelyne Axell. Corps désirant, paré des atouts de la séduction, chez Axell et Szapocznicow. Corps souffrant, menacé par l'exclusion, la maladie, la mort, chez Szapocznicow et Lozano.

C'est la première fois en Europe que sont rassemblées dans une même exposition les œuvres de ces trois artistes (par ailleurs rarement, voire jamais montrées en Italie). La singularité de leurs démarches et la radicalité de leurs positions les ont amenées à connaître chacune la mise à l'écart et l'oubli de ce monde de l'art dont elles rejetaient les règles. Leur redécouverte récente, grâce à d'importantes expositions personnelles (pour Lozano à MoMA PS1 en 2004, pour Szapocznicow au Wiels de Bruxelles en 2011, au MoMA de New York en 2012, au Centre Pompidou en 2013) ou collectives (comme par exemple « Transgressive Women » à Austin en 2003, « Wack, Art and the Feminist Revolution » au MOCA de Los Angeles en 2007, ou « Seductive Subversion, Woman Pop Artists » à Philadelphie et New York en 2010), les remet aujourd'hui au tout premier plan, dans toute leur fraîcheur, toute leur actualité, toute leur puissance.



The body itself is put on display by Evelyne Axelle in her performances; Lee Lozano's conceptual projects blur the boundary between art and life; the body is broken up, ripped to pieces, by Alina Szapocznicow in works at the border between art and decorative arts. In Lee Lozano's objects, abstracted bodies are confronted with the violent triviality of the (masculine) universe. Evelyne Axell positions the body in a critical relation to the history of art. Axell and Szapocznicow depict the desiring, seductive body; Szapocznicow and Lozano, the suffering body, threatened by exclusion, sickness and death.

These three artists are brought together in a European exhibition for the first time. Because of the individuality of their approaches and the radicalism of their positions, Axell, Lozano and Szapocznicow were largely neglected and forgotten by the art institutions whose rules they rejected. Their recent rediscovery, through important solo exhibits (for Lozano, at MoMA PS1, New York, in 2004; for Szapocznicow at Wiels, Brussels in 2011, and MoMA, New York, in 2012, as well as at the Centre Pompidou in 2013) or collective shows (such as "Transgressive Women" in Austin in 2003, "Wack, Art and the Feminist Revolution" at MOCA Los Angeles, in 2007, or "Seductive Subversion, Women Pop Artists" in Philadelphia and New York in 2010), has established their position in the art world and reaffirmed the freshness, modernity and power of their work.

La jeunesse d'Alina Szapocznikow (Polonaise, 1926-1973) est marquée par l'expérience tragique du ghetto, puis des camps de concentration nazis. Sa carrière commence dans les années 1950 en Pologne, qu'elle représente à la Biennale de Venise de 1962, avant d'arriver à Paris. À travers le dessin et surtout la sculpture, où elle fait l'expérience de matériaux très divers (résines polyester, polyuréthanes, souvent associés à des objets trouvés), elle fait de son corps le sujet privilégié de son œuvre : corps mis en pièces, corps souffrant, corps en proie à la maladie qui finira par l'emporter, mais aussi corps désirant, empreint de séduction ambiguë, voire d'onirisme quasi surréaliste.

ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW

In her youth, Alina Szapocznikow (Polish, 1926-1973) survived the horrors of the ghetto and Nazi concentration camps. Her artistic career began in the 1950s in Poland – she later represented her home country at the 1962 Venice Biennale – then developed in Paris after the end of the Second World War. She made her body the subject of drawings and sculptures using very diverse materials (polyester resin, polyurethane, often found objects): the body torn to pieces, the suffering body, stricken by the disease that would eventually lead to her death – but also the desiring body, ambiguously seductive and almost surrealist.



L'œuvre de Lee Lozano (Américaine, 1930-1999) est d'abord caractérisée par un style expressionniste assez cru, où la représentation d'outils (clous, vis, marteaux...) se mêle à des évocations explicitement sexuelles, avant de s'orienter vers une esthétique plus minimale, qui explore les propriétés physiques de la lumière. En 1969, elle commence une série de projets conceptuels radicaux, qui remettent en cause, avec une très grande violence, la société capitaliste patriarcale contemporaine, comme en 1971 l'action intitulée « Decide to Boycott Women », par laquelle elle renonce pendant plus de 20 ans à tout contact avec quelque femme que ce soit.

LEE LOZANO

The early work of Lee Lozano (American, 1930-1999) was characterized by a raw, Expressionist style: in her hands, the depiction of tools (nails, screws, hammers) became sexually charged. In her later work, in a more Minimalist vein, she explored the physical properties of light. In 1969, she began a series of radical conceptual projects that violently criticized the capitalist, patriarchal society in which she lived, the most famous of which is the 1971 action "Decide to Boycott Women," for which she refused to have any contact with women for over 20 years.

Alina SZAPOCZNIKOW Lee LOZANO
Lampe-bouche, *No Title, 1964*
 1966-1968 Dessin
 Résine de polyester 36,5 x 36 x 3 cm
 colorée, fil électrique,
 métal
 46,5 x 13 x 11 cm

Alina SZAPOCZNIKOW Lee LOZANO
Lampe-bouche, *No Title, 1964*
 1966-1968 Graphite on paper
 Colored polyester resin,
 electrical wire, metal
 46.5 x 13 x 11 cm

Evelyne AXELL
Le Viol d'Ingres par Axell,
 1968
 Huile sur toile, Formica,
 émail, polyester
 132 x 200 cm

Evelyne AXELL
Le Viol d'Ingres par Axell,
 1968
 Oil on canvas, Formica,
 enamel, polyester
 132 x 200 cm



Evelyne Axell (Belge, 1935-1972) se consacre à la peinture à partir de 1963, et devient alors une figure importante du Pop Art en Belgique. Au moyen de la peinture, du collage, du dessin, de l'objet détourné, de la performance (lors d'un happening resté fameux, elle mêle au public de la Foncke Galerie de Gand une femme nue vêtue d'un seul casque de cosmonaute), elle explore les thèmes de l'érotisme, de la féminité, du culte de l'automobile, du voyage dans l'espace,... dans une subtile combinaison de séduction et de provocation.

EVELYNE AXELL

Evelyne Axell (Belgian, 1935-1972) began painting in 1963 and quickly became an important figure in Pop Art in Belgium. In her paintings, collages, drawings and performances (in a still-famous happening from 1969, a woman wearing nothing but an astronaut's helmet mingled with the crowd during the opening of her exhibition at the Foncke Galerie in Gand), she explores eroticism, femininity, the cult of the automobile, of space travel, and more, approaching her subjects with a subtle combination of seduction and provocation.

Counter Forms

Andrea Rosen Gallery

For 'Counter Forms', curator Elena Filipovic brought together the work of Tetsumi Kudo, Alina Szapocznikow, Paul Thek and Hannah Wilke. This deeply researched selection rehabilitated the significance of a group of somewhat under-theorized artists, suggesting that the manner in which they engaged with the body has had profound implications for contemporary art practice. Each artist has attracted institutional re-examination in recent years, on the heels of which Filipovic accepted the invitation to bring together several works never before seen in the US. While Kudo, Szapocznikow, Thek and Wilke never worked together, and may only have had a passing familiarity with each other's practices, they share formal approaches and ideological relationships to the chaos and destruction of the mid-20th-century.

It is tempting to read these works through each artist's biography. Kudo's dismembered, haunted terrariums as post-Hiroshima provocations about radioactivity and impotence; Thek's morbid enclosures of flesh might be read (anachronistically) along with his diagnosis with AIDS; Wilke's latex and terracotta forms have a vocabulary of vulnerability (the artist succumbed to a well-documented battle with lymphoma in 1993). Szapocznikow's biography – life in Nazi-occupied Poland, tuberculosis and terminal breast cancer – has likewise heavily influenced much commentary on her work. Filipovic measured such interpretations carefully, opting for a revised reading that counters perceived wisdom about the period.

Kudo rose out of the young Japanese Neo-Dada Organizers whose milieu was the burned detritus of the war-torn city. His striking models and psychedelic colours were a key influence on Mike Kelley, who once described the work as resembling 'movie props from lurid science fiction scenes'. Likewise, in other writings, Kelley cited Thek as being among the first to show him the potential of large-scale environments constructed through recycled, heterogeneous materials. The chilling presentation at Andrea Rosen connected Kudo's view of humanity with Thek's objectification of the carnal – both

About this review

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By *Michael Pepi*



'Counter Forms' installation view, 2013

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are obsessed with scientism gone awry. The former's themes of radioactive-induced-impotence, garish neons and impossible biologies interact with Thek's 'Technological Reliquaries' (1964–67), meat sculptures and laboratory-like sections of human forms. Kudo's for nostalgic purposes, for your living-room, souvenir 'la mue' (1965–66), takes direct aim at the US: a tall signpost, labelled 'For Your Living Room', supports cages containing dismembered human forms. The work represents Kudo's response to the overextension of American scientific and military advancements. The most pronounced counters to minimalism are found in the objects from Wilke. Her painted terracotta sculptures make simple, near-accidental forms carry provocative messages. Wilke began working with gum, which she viewed as a metaphor for women's role in society – 'chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece'.

Szapocznikow's haunting *Foot [Fetish V]* (1971) was made in France after her diagnosis with cancer. Anchored by a cast of the artist's foot, a dried blue nylon stocking emerges, resembling the tibia and fibula with considerable anatomical veracity. Newspaper and polyester resin moulds join a flesh-coloured cast of the artist's breast. It provides the balancing support for a disfigured human leg lying desolate, abandoned from the body. In an adjacent room were several of Szapocznikow's *Petite Tumeurs*, polyester resin and gauze sculptures that she began making shortly after her diagnosis in 1969. Hanging nearby was Kudo's *You are metamorphosing* (1967), a green biomorphic form that mimicked the process of two organs duplicating.

What was most striking about 'Counter Forms' was the way in which these works' appeals to the abject seemed wholly contemporary, while the industrial sheen and conceptual gestures of their better-known peers remains pegged to its historical period. The abject is still a theme of great interest to so many of our strongest voices. One thinks of artists such as Robert Gober, Paul McCarthy, David Altmejd and the late Kelley, whose work deals in personal reflections on memory, fascinations with a latent human form, or nightmarish technological situations. The subtext in 'Counter Forms' might have been how these artists embraced Susan Sontag's famous call for an 'erotics of art'. Their work relies on a direct, sensuous connection with what is almost always a human subject, be it memory, fear, disease or inhuman manipulation. Historians searching for a clean post-conceptual lineage of what we mean when we speak of contemporary art will find this show troubling.

Michael Pepi

Annette Messenger & Alina Szapocznikow

Galerie Isabella Czarnowska

Alina Szapocznikow and Annette Messenger were born almost 20 years apart, in Poland and France, respectively. During the 1960s, however, both lived in the district of Malakoff in Paris and, in the words of gallerist Isabella Czarnowska, 'This show is about their friendship.' 'North of the Future' brought together sculpture and drawing by the two artists, dating from 1955 to the present day. Curated by Messenger, the exhibition comprised three rooms that established a loose formal dialogue between the artists' works. The corporeal sculptural language employed by the two artists is disparate: Szapocznikow's oscillation between abstraction and figuration is rooted in Modernism, while Messenger's work engages with the later framework of Conceptualism. But both artists challenge reductive perceptions of gender and, more specifically, womanhood, through an exploration of the body.

The image of the phallus as a counter-symbol to female subjectivity book-ended the show, which opened with Szapocznikow's *Fiancée folle blanche* (Crazy White Bride, 1971) and ended with Messenger's *Fetischism* (2013). Crafted using resin and netting, the former recalls Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* (1647–52) in its smooth, white perfection. Body arched and head thrown back, the line between pleasure and pain is uncertain as the woman's face appears to have dissolved in its proximity to a dominant pink phallus. A comparable, albeit less subtle, fetishization is suggested by Messenger's flesh-coloured latex dildo, violently protruding from a black stiletto heel, presenting a relationship between aggressively erect symbols of male and female sexuality.

Inscribed upon the wall in the first room, Messenger's *Hotel / Fiction* (2010) oscillated between sculpture and drawing, symbiotically connecting the two; the words are delineated using black netting, and seem to be dripping or bleeding. Her proximate drawing, *Chance* (2012), appears to violently haemorrhage. The body's suffering and vulnerability is conveyed, which perhaps suggests the viewer's own misery when confronted with the stark, painful reality of our inevitable physical impermanence. For me, these drawings

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By Louisa Elderton



Foreground: Alina Szapocznikow, *Fiancée folle blanche* (Crazy White Bride), 1971, resin, 46 × 26 × 22 cm
Background: Annette Messenger, *Hotel / Fiction*, 2010, metal and nets, dimensions variable

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recall Szapocznikow's intimate letters to Messenger, written while she was in hospital in 1972, which Messenger reproduced in the catalogue for the 2010 exhibition 'Alina Szapocznikow' at Kunstparterre, Munich. In this correspondence, Szapocznikow described her physical trauma resulting from breast cancer, painting a picture between word and image: 'The woman 50 cm to my left [...] is now spitting blood [...] + she has her period + she vomits.' These letters were unfortunately absent from this exhibition, leaving viewers to search for their own connections.

The symbolism of the fragmented corpus was explored in the exhibition's second room. A major element in Szapocznikow's *oeuvre* was the casting of her own body, and in *Untitled (Prototype)* (1966) her lips appear as a severed, organic form. Duplicated mouths fuse, resting back to back, their plump sensuality and seductive lightness accentuated in candy-coloured pink. More violent in its intent, Messenger's *Trois Fusils* (Three Guns, 2007), is studded with constellations of black and white badges depicting body parts (toes, tongues, teeth), while *6 Dissections* (1997) sees toy animals flayed and pinned to the wall, their entrails removed. Brutal and disturbing, the work is cruel yet darkly humorous. Messenger utilizes media that suggest childhood and, by proxy, motherhood – tainted objects that signify a nostalgic space coloured by psychological unease and empty, disfigured memories.

Messenger dedicated the third room solely to Szapocznikow, highlighting her exploration of material, balance and mass within the context of body politics. Sculptures ranged from early works like *Ponytail (Portrait of a Mexican Woman)* (1955–6) – for which Szapocznikow produced heads and busts as part of a Social Realist doctrine, and even made a monument to Stalin – to later sculptures depicting anthropomorphic forms in flux. During the 1960s, Szapocznikow radically pushed the boundaries of artistic media. While recalling the traditional medium of bronze, *La Ronde* (The Round, 1968), for example, utilizes polyurethane, with ambiguous folds of asexual human flesh mercurially floating in an amorphous pool in which the body is either emerging or dissolving.

Art historians have repeatedly assessed Szapocznikow's practice through her biography; as a Holocaust survivor who died from a cancer that physically deformed her, there are clear connections to explore. Likewise, theorist Julia Kristeva has described how Messenger 'travels her *self* through her work, conceptually moulding and merging a sense of her own time, memory, mind and body. 'North of the Future' subverted this tendency to reduce women artists to their biographies, and instead considered thematic overlaps,

attempting to let the works speak for themselves. This created the potential for the oeuvres of these artists to shed a formal light upon one another. However, at times their work felt incompatible – Messenger’s playful forms made certain pieces by Szapocznikow seem tame. Unfortunately, very little of real pertinence was conveyed regarding these women’s intriguing friendship. But then, when it comes to relationships, perhaps we can never really know what goes on behind closed doors.

Louisa Elderton

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ARTS & CULTURE

Source of All Joy: On Alina Szapocznikow

January 17, 2013 | by [Yevgeniya Traps](#)



Alina Szapocznikow. *Petit Dessert I* (Small Dessert I). 1970–71. Colored polyester resin and glass, 3 3/16 x 4 5/16 x 5 1/8" (8 x 11 x 13 cm). Kravis Collection. © The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow/Piotr Stanisławski/ADAGP, Paris. Photo by Thomas Mueller, courtesy Broadway 1602, New York; and Galerie Gisela Capitain GmbH, Cologne

The Polish sculptor Alina Szapocznikow made a career of disassembling the body, of exposing its weaknesses, its many vulnerabilities, whether through **the uses and abuses it's been put to in the abattoir of twentieth-century** history or at the mercy of the more mundane, if no less fatal, everyday mortality. If that sounds like a bit of a downer, worry not: Szapocznikow managed to keep a sly tongue firmly in cheek, and her work, for all its startling beauty, its nearly

unbearable intimacy, its sublime evocation of pain and disease and suffering, is witty, even funny.

Her sculptures—on display, through January 28, at the Museum of Modern **Art, where they are presented as part of a retrospective entitled “Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone, 1955–1972”**—indulge in the darkest shade of black humor, extracting their punch lines from abysmal pockets of human experience. Take, for example, her *Lampe-bouche (Illuminated Lips)* (1966), a series of resin casts of a female mouth set atop metal stands and wired to work as lamps. These resonate as blazoned bits of romantic poetry, the celebration **of the mistress’s body through its reduction to component parts, but also as** morbid enactment of the apocryphal human-skin lampshades made by the Nazis. Here is the human body, desecrated and unmade, and it is glorious to look at, an illuminated, illuminating display of power and its subversion. Something similar is at work in *Petit Dessert I (Small Dessert I)* (1970–1971), **the lower half of a woman’s face, done up in colored polyester** resin, sumptuously melting beyond a glass saucer, like an over-scooped sundae breaching the borders of moderation. And there is *Cendrier de Célibataire (The Bachelor’s Ashtray)* (1972), which transforms the female visage into a vessel for cigarette butts.

That Szapocznikow was a Holocaust survivor helps contextualize her concern with abjection, with how easy it is to destroy other bodies, how difficult to **control and maintain the integrity of one’s own. Born in Kalisz, a small city in** central Poland, the daughter of two Jewish doctors, she was a teenager when the Germans invaded. She spent time in the Lodz Ghetto, and, in 1942, when the ghetto was liquidated, she was sent to a series of concentration camps: Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Theresienstadt. After the war, she trained as a sculptor, studying in Paris, absorbing the influence of seminal abstract artists like Jean Arp and Alberto Giacometti and Ossip Zadkine. To their abstractions of the human form, she brought an unabashedly feminine sensibility, coupled with a hard-won contempt for traditional pieties, the vision of one who has witnessed the dismantling of the world and improbably lived to tell of it.

Like Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Szapocznikow's response to the atrocities she had lived through seems to have been "So it goes." For, like Vonnegut, who witnessed the firebombing of Dresden and who concluded that writing an antiwar novel would be not unlike writing a book against glaciers, she seems to have realized that, even without wars, without human cruelty, "there would still be plain old death." Such knowledge was, as it tends to be, hard won: Szapocznikow was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1951, and she died, at the age of forty-seven, from breast cancer.

The tuberculosis perhaps helps explain the artist's apparent obsession with the consumption of bodies, as does the cancer. One of Szapocznikow's most striking pieces is *Tumeurs Personnifiées (Tumors Personified)*, made in 1971, using polyester resin, fiberglass, paper, and gauze: a series of faces laid out on the gallery floor, suggesting decapitated heads, washed up on some seashore like small dead creatures. Cruel and crude, they are as brutal as they are banal, fatal and funny all at once.

Tumeurs also speaks to other exemplars of Szapocznikow's work, especially *Souvenir I* (1971), a piece done in polyester resin, glass, wool, and photograph. Reminiscent of a tombstone, *Souvenir* is a study in the subjugation of the body to forces beyond its control, beyond, even, its imagination. The MoMA catalog for the show includes a collage made by the artist in preparation for *Souvenir*: a photograph of Szapocznikow as a young girl juxtaposed with a dead concentration-camp inmate. The final work itself is nowhere near this explicit; it merely hints at its own history. We do not know, cannot know, it taunts, what will happen to us, save of course the inevitable end, and all we have to show for the process are the souvenirs we amass along the way, the inchoate scars, mementoes of innocence and of woe.

Szapocznikow's gift lay in her ability to take her more-than-fair-share of suffering and transform it into something ambiguous, something lovely and nightmarish, which is really a roundabout way of saying she took history and disease and made them art. Working in nontraditional materials—polyuetherine, polyester resin, cement, and gauze—she produced visions of the body at once defeated and triumphant, insisting on corporality, on solidity,

even as the body disintegrated. The world *may* be cruel, Szapocznikow's works say, and I *may* be vulnerable to its predations, but I'm having a fine time anyway.

Szapocznikow's sensibility is clearly aligned with surrealism and with Pop, but her madcap creations are also a kind of confession. Like the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois, whose oeuvre her own suggests, Szapocznikow's works are revelatory narratives with autobiographical intimations, deconstructed bits of personal history that, at their best, become universal. (Like Bourgeois, Szapocznikow is also interested in gender, in the ways its entrenched and the ways in which it undoes itself. Her *Goldfinger* [1965], a cement-and-car-part assemblage painted gold, anticipates Bourgeois's *Janus Fleuri* [1968], a sexually ambiguous form cast in bronze.) Many of Szapocznikow's pieces had been cast from her own body, and there is a faintly pornographic thrill in seeing forms so intimately connected to the artist. But it is a demanding sort of voyeurism, this confrontation with the war without and the war within, this—to quote Vonnegut quoting Céline—duty dance with death.

Oh, but how sensual it is! “Through casts of the body,” Szapocznikow wrote in a 1972 artist statement, “I try to fix the fleeting moments of life, its paradoxes and absurdity ...” Acknowledging that her “work is difficult,” that “everything is all mixed up, the situation ... ambiguous,” she also maintained that “of all the manifestations of the ephemeral the human body is the most vulnerable, **the only source of all joy, all suffering and all truth.**” In telling the truth about all that suffering, she achieved a measure of joy, of grace and redemption, an undoing that became the making of a scarily beautiful world as seen by an unflappably amused artist.

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The New York Times

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

Body and Soul, From the Surrealistic to the Fetishistic

Alina Szapocznikow's Sculptures at MoMA

By **KAREN ROSENBERG** OCT. 11, 2012



“Tumors Personified,” part of the survey show of Alina Szapocznikow’s work at MoMA.

Photograph from the Estate of Alina Szapocznikow/Piotr Stanislawski/ADAGP, Paris, Zachta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, and Agencja Medium Sp. Z.O.O.

The small but intense survey of Alina Szapocznikow at the Museum of Modern Art is in some ways the story of postwar sculpture. Classical bronzes give way to puddles of poured resin; the figure walks down off the pedestal and comes back in pieces.

“Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone, 1955-1972” is the museum’s second show of an Eastern European female artist in less than a year, following the Conceptual performance and photography of “Sanja Ivekovic: Sweet Violence.” For many Americans it will be a first look at Ms. Szapocznikow’s precocious Pop-Surrealist sculpture, much of which parallels work made on these shores by Lynda Benglis, Eva Hesse and Hannah Wilke.

Like Ms. Hesse and Ms. Wilke, Ms. Szapocznikow (pronounced shuh-POTCH-ni-koff) had a short but exceptionally productive career. Born in Poland to a Jewish family in 1926, she survived Bergen-Belsen as a teenager but succumbed to breast cancer in 1973, at 47. In between, she worked furiously and moved quickly from the Socialist Realism endorsed by the Polish government to the Pop-influenced New Realism of the Paris avant-garde.



Alina Szapocznikow's "Illuminated Woman."

Photograph from the Estate of Alina Szapocznikow/Piotr Stanislawski, via Adagp, Paris; Fabrice Gousset, Paris, via Galerie Gisela Capitain GmbH, Cologne

In a short interview broadcast on French television in 1969 and now playing at MoMA, she comes off as mischievous (despite her ingénue looks) and impatient, fielding questions about her war experience and the treatment of women in Poland, but clearly more eager to talk about the sculptures that surround her in the studio.

This traveling exhibition largely emphasizes material experimentation over biography, and artistic affiliations over national ones. But it must also contend with the art Ms. Szapocznikow made when she was ill: the metastasizing resin-coated lumps she called **“Tumors.”** (The show is organized jointly by the **WIELS Contemporary Art Center** in Brussels and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and supervised in New York by **MoMA’s chief drawings curator, Cornelia Butler.**)

It begins with a haunting corridor of Expressionist works from the late 1950s, some of them **memorials, like the sculpture of a deformed hand subtitled “Monument to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto.”**

By the mid-’60s, however, her art took a post-Surrealist, proto-feminist turn. It had Pop credibility, too, thanks to industrial materials like polyurethane and polyester resin. In **“Goldfinger,”** made a year after the Bond film of the same title, female legs cast in gold-patinated cement pinwheel around an automotive shock absorber.

A few works even cross over into clever product design: a set of “Belly-Cushions” made by casting a woman’s midsection in polyurethane, a group of long-stemmed lamps capped by female lips and breasts. The lamps, which occupy a separate gallery and are illuminated in 20-minute intervals, look vaguely Art Nouveau but are very much in the tradition of the **Surrealist “objet”;** there is a whiff of functional eroticism about them, as with Duchamp’s **“Female Fig Leaf.”**

Had Ms. Szapocznikow stopped here, around 1966, we might think of her primarily as a Pop artist. But as later works make clear, she was continually drawn to pliable materials and lumpy, raw-looking forms that had more to do with Body and Process Art. Her interest even extended to chewing gum, which she molded in her mouth and then photographed in close-up.

By this point she was living in Paris, where she had the enthusiastic support of the critic and New Realism ringleader Pierre Restany. She was also experiencing the first signs of illness; the diagnosis came in 1969. Although she continued to make works that looked fetishistic, with disembodied resin breasts wrapped in her clothing, they surely had a new and scary **meaning for her, one that becomes impossible to ignore in the series “Tumors.”**

These wrinkled clumps of polyester resin, fiberglass, paper and gauze, some with Ms. **Szapocznikow’s face on them, are alarming but gratifying for the viewer; they show Ms.** Szapocznikow using art to define her illness so that it would not, in the end, define her. (Ms. Wilke, suffering from lymphoma two decades later, would do the same.) All along, Ms. **Szapocznikow’s sculptures had evoked bodily disintegration and deterioration; the tumor** was a logical enough form for this phase of her work.

What might Ms. Szapocznikow have done next? MoMA offers a hint in the form of a small **model for an unrealized sculpture, “Rolls Royce II.”** It was to have been a pink marble version of that luxury car, at a twice the normal size and with a modified, phallic hood ornament, and it was intended for the 1972 Documenta 5 exhibition, but Ms. Szapocznikow could not find financing for the project.

The text accompanying the model reads: “This work or object will be very expensive, completely useless, and a reflection of the god of supreme luxury.”

It continues, “If there exists such a fantastic snob as who would order this work to be made and put it right on his private lawn to greet his guests and invite them for drinks on the marble seats, then my American dream will be accomplished.” It’s a pointed bit of Pop, and it implies that Ms. Szapocznikow, had she lived, might have put her wry, feminist spin on today’s macho trophy art.

“Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone, 1955-1972” continues through Jan. 28 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, moma.org.

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Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone, 1955–1972 – review

The Polish Holocaust survivor is finally receiving the broader attention she deserves with a retrospective in New York

Jason Farago

Tuesday 9 October 2012 07.32 EDT



Pukka ... Alina Szapocznikow's *Petit Dessert I* (1970), part of *Sculpture Undone, 1955-1972* at MoMA in New York. Photograph: Roland Schmid

She stands like a totem: a spindly humanoid, elongated like one of Giacometti's women, and wrapped in clinging plastic foil. But her oversized breasts are discolored and protruding, and besides there are another four mammary glands collected at her feet. And she has eight lots of lips growing out of her plaster head, which itself contains multiple noses and mouths.

This strange form, monstrous but also ecstatic, is *Bouquet II* (1966), by Alina Szapocznikow – an icon of Polish modern art who is finally receiving the broader attention

she deserves. She's made appearances in a few major group shows, such as Paris: Capital of the Arts at London's Royal Academy and Documenta 12 in Kassel. But this is the first full-dress retrospective outside Poland for her fragile, erotic and always disarming sculptures and drawings, and it's a chance to rethink the story of postwar European art behind the iron curtain.

Szapocznikow (pronounced shuh-POTCH-ni-koff) was born in 1926 to a family of non-practising **Jews and as a teenager was interned in the ghetto of Łódź, then briefly sent to** Auschwitz before spending nearly a year in Bergen-Belsen. Separated from her family, she made her way to Prague after the war – and was shocked to discover that her mother had also survived. After studies in Prague and Paris, she was recalled to the new People's Republic of Poland and began making sculptures in a socialist realist style, several of which are on show here.

It doesn't take long, though, before her figures start to deform. Limbs are elongated, and strange biomorphic shapes appear in her sketches, such as eyeballs contained in what look like oyster shells. As the forms of the body grow less lifelike, they also grow more independent. A plaster cast of Szapocznikow's leg, from 1962, hints at what's to come: limbs, organs, and later faces get detached from their sources, growing into new things and mutating for new circumstances.

In the mid-60s, back in Paris, Szapocznikow began to experiment with materials that had no established place in the studio, such as polyurethane and polyester resin. And instead of relying on moulds, as Eva Hesse would do in the United States a few years later, Szapocznikow used these industrial materials on human bodies, mostly her own. Disembodied lips cast in resin – red, flesh-coloured, or hypothermically blue – recur constantly, snuggled in a nest or lit from within by lamps. Or else there are casts of breasts, sometimes enveloped in puddles of black polyurethane, sometimes served up on a platter like bonbons.

She was diagnosed with cancer in 1969, and her late work exhibits a painful recognition of an early death. *Tumors Personified* (1971) comprises more than a dozen resin casts of her own face scrunched up into malignant little balls – both a representation of her illness and an index of her suffering body. And her final series, in which she crushes her cast face into two dimensions, is almost too raw to contemplate.

Forty years on, Szapocznikow's brittle sculptures, which oscillate between joy and abjection, remain difficult to unpack. The forms are loaded with meanings we can never quite grasp, and the trials she endured, from the camps to her last illness, inform her work but never fully explain it. There's a temptation to call her the Louise Bourgeois of the east. But there's no longer any need, this late in the game, to validate art from the communist bloc with western analogues. Szapocznikow's work shows an inventiveness and a volatility that makes all comparisons seem moot.

Alina Szapocznikow

wiels

'Sculpture Undone. 1955–1972', one of the first large surveys of Alina Szapocznikow's oeuvre outside her native Poland, boldly intends to establish the artist's position in art history. The modest attention Szapocznikow's work has received in recent years has often been overshadowed by her biography, which was scarred by experiences of war, concentration camps, poor health and an untimely death from cancer. As a consequence, her work has sometimes been narrowly interpreted through this lens, a condition that is diagnosed sensitively by the curators of the show at WIELS, which shifts attention towards the artist's practice and the experimental dimension of her work.

The open plan of the exhibition's first floor is thoughtfully designed to let the viewer capture the complexity of Szapocznikow's practice in a single view. The youthful, nonchalant beauty of a classical female nude (*Trudny wiek, Difficult Age*, 1956) is juxtaposed with the disintegrated body of *Ekshumowany* (*Exhumed*, 1955), swaying at the verge of becoming a shapeless lump. A hybrid of human and machine parts, *Goldfinger* (1965) marks the artist's interest in pop culture (its title was derived from the James Bond film of the previous year) and illustrates her art's parallels with *Nouveau Réalisme*. The alluring *Femme illuminée* (*Illuminated Woman*, 1966–7), a cement silhouette with red breasts glowing seductively with electrical light, serves as a bridge to a second section of the show, in which sensual female figures emerge from the darkened space while the illuminated, biomorphic form of *Caprice – Monstre* (*Caprice – Monster*, 1967) blooms with eroticism. Nearby, playfully sexy lamps made of casts of lips and conceived as models for serial production reinforce Szapocznikow's reflection on the female body but also on the work of art as a commodity.

If the somewhat orgiastic mood of this room might divert attention away from what is really at stake here – namely, the unorthodox character of Szapocznikow's creative process – the next floor clearly articulates her use of innovative

About this review

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By *Kasia Redzisz*



Alina Szapocznikow, *Petit Dessert I* (Small Dessert I), 1970–71, Coloured polyster and glass bowl

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methods and materials, including casting in synthetic resin. The most experimental sculptures, made in poured polyurethane foam (a material reserved for industrial use at the time) stand in sharp contrast to more traditional bronze figures in a corresponding space on the lower level. Ostensibly abstract, dark forms embedded with cast body parts are shaped by a combination of the artist's gesture and the chance inscribed in the unpredictable nature of the material. Gravity was an influential factor in the process of working with polyurethane, which is perhaps why the viewer's gaze has to slide to the floor to see sculptures like the apocalyptic landscape of *Grande Plage* (Large Beach) or the uncanny *Stela* (Stele, both 1968) with a pale face and pair of knees peering out of a black substance. Hanging on the wall, the disturbing *L'Enterrement d'Alina* (Alina's Funeral, 1970) combines bits of clothing and photographs of the artist and her friends encrusted under layers of resin formed in tumor-like shapes. In a subsequent gallery, located just above the sensual darkened room, a bright, almost laboratory-like light illuminates 'Fetishes' (1970–71), a collection of decomposing personal items frozen in resin and scattered on a flat surface like leftovers on a table.

Szapocznikow constantly returned to the body as a sculptural term, both as an object of restless pleasure and consumption, and as decomposed and abject, reminding us of its fragility and evanescent nature. The artist's own body is almost always present in the exhibition: as a creative force, in self-portraits, or as fragments in a persistent process of remaking. But it disappears in the poignant work *Piotr* (1972), a figure of the artist's son made shortly before her death. The piece resembles a traditional *pietà*, yet it lacks support – the mother's body is missing. Szapocznikow reappears briefly in a documentary projected in a corridor leading to a room containing personal archival material, separated deliberately from the rest of the show. In the film, a journalist remarks to the artist: 'You say nothing about yourself, but you expose yourself.'

'Sculpture Undone' successfully illustrates Szapocznikow's persistent preoccupation with the sculptural medium. The act of 'undoing' of the show's title is gradually revealed as the artist's prolonged exploration of forms and materials, and is demonstrated through works that show her rigorous process. Elaborate drawings and prints displayed alongside the sculptures prove Szapocznikow's meticulously academic approach and extraordinary attachment to craft; objects are preceded by precise studies; each shape results from a conscious decision. Commenting on her works in 1967, Pierre

Restany wrote: 'It will still take a long time for Alina to rip apart the anguish-ridden sails of her inner world. But the trigger has been pulled, and nothing will ever hinder this process.' With 'Sculpture Undone', which tours to three American venues including New York's Museum of Modern Art, a place for Szapocznikow within the canon of art history is firmly being made. The trigger has been pulled.

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Touching from a Distance

ADAM SZYMCZYK ON THE ART OF ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW



Alina Szapocznikow working on *Le Voyage (Journey)*, 1967, in her studio in Paris, 1967

IT WAS THE MID-1980S, a bleak, depressed era in post-martial-law Poland, when I first saw Alina Szapocznikow's 1967 sculpture *Le Voyage (Journey)* at Muzeum Sztuki in Lodz. Strolling pretty much alone through the museum's galleries, I came upon it suddenly: a slender waxy-white nude that seemed to recline in the air. Perched on a tiny metal plinth and leaning back at a steep angle, improbably balanced between standing and falling, it denied gravity with the

ease of a specter. Rounded pads of blue-green polyester covered the figure's eyes like the lenses of oversize sunglasses, conveying hippie-era modishness but also evoking blindness, a state of perceptual impairment that is the opposite of the awareness connoted by *hip*. The mouth and nipples were bright red. The hair, articulated as two petal-like solid extensions, encircled the face, while the top of the head opened up slightly into a bizarre, vaguely sexual cleavage. With hands outstretched and fingers delicately maneuvering the nonexistent steering wheel of a car that wasn't there, the figure was oblivious to its own precarious position. Defying gravity and emanating a sense of lightness, it also seemed strangely aglow, half opaque but translucent enough to absorb and reflect the ambient light. It was an unforgettable apparition, the more so because of its oddly quiet presence, which set it apart from other pieces by Polish and international artists displayed nearby. Roughly contemporaneous with *Journey*, these other works invoked popular iconography, serial reproduction, technology, sex, household objects—a repertoire of the late-'60s and early-'70s international style in which bodies and signs melded into a predictable unity.

In 1967, the Polish-born Szapocznikow, then forty-one, had been living in Paris for four years. She had found a champion in art critic and curator Pierre Restany; her friends included Christian Boltanski and Annette Messager, as well as members of the determinedly Dionysian art collective *Panique* (with which her second husband, graphic designer Roman Cieślewicz, was associated). Established in 1962, this late-Surrealist circle of eccentrics included poet Fernando Arrabal, filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, and artist and writer Roland Topor. The anarchic spirit of the *Panique* antimovement went decidedly against the main currents of contemporary art discourse in France at the time. For Szapocznikow, the group provided an alternative to a number of practices that were informed by Conceptualism and that were soon to occupy an important position on the French art scene, as well to the *Nouveau Réalisme* espoused by Restany.

Yet critics and historians have often emphasized the extent to which Szapocznikow's work is informed by *Nouveau Réalisme* and *Pop*, with their chilly eroticism and their fascination with the sleek facture of mass production. Affinities are indeed manifest, however ambivalently, in such works as the gold-patinated cement sculpture *Goldfinger*, 1965—two truncated cast-cement thighs, upside down, locked together by a car's shock absorber. We see these movements' echoes, too, in lamps of the late '60s—electrified pseudopods with feminine mouths—and in her early-'70s "desserts," cast polyester-resin breasts in Day-Glo colors, arrayed like sorbets on serving dishes. She also toyed with the idea of conflating art and industry in her "belly cushions," which were intended to be prototypes for mass production (but were never realized as such).

Journey might seem at first to have much in common with such works, but in fact the commonalities are rather superficial. Augmented by the title, the figure's pose—a body thrust back as if by the acceleration of a speeding car—suggests a machine-induced high. The artist's preliminary drawings, in fact, show a figure seated in a car. Yet however Szapocznikow may have initially conceived it, the final work is an allegory of a transcendental journey, and the movement it suggests is that of floating, perhaps of ascending. In another sculpture from the same year, *L'Apesanteur (Homage à Komarov)* (*Weightlessness [Homage to Komarov]*), the artist was explicit in her association of death and ecstasy with a release from gravity. Vladimir Komarov was a cosmonaut killed when his Soyuz module crashed due to a parachute failure on April 24, 1967. The sculpture is a slim, seven-and-a-half-foot-tall human form wrapped in layers of gauzy plastic. The huge feet are fused together into a base, while long legs support a muscular, armless torso. Instead of a head, an almost flat, spoonlike shape protrudes from the cocooned body; the face is a photograph of Komarov mounted on an oval support, covered with semitransparent plastic. A series of photographs taken in Szapocznikow's presence, and obviously at her direction, shows the sculpture placed on the ground in a forest clearing. Shot at exaggerated angles, the enshrouded, mummylike cosmonaut sways in the landscape, embodying the wish, shared by sculptors and space travelers, to overcome the pull of earthly mass. Particularly when considered alongside *Weightlessness*, there is no doubt that what *Journey* shows us is not the unidirectional progress of a vehicle

carrying a passive, immobilized passenger. The sculpture is a space oddity, floating in the most peculiar way in a vacuum that knows no directions. The body itself is the vehicle.



Alina Szapocznikow, *Madonna of Kruźlowa (Motherhood)*, 1969, pigmented polyester resin, photographs, gauze, 16 1/2 x 20 1/2 x 7".

In March 1972, exactly one year before her death, Szapocznikow penned her most oft-quoted assessment of her own practice. "I have been conquered by the hero-miracle of our age, the machine," she wrote. "To it belong beauty, revelations, testimonies, the recording of history. To it belong, in the end, truthful dreams and public demand. As for me, I produce awkward objects. This absurd and convulsive mania proves the existence of an unknown, secret gland, necessary for life." This is the fundamental proposition of her work. "Conquered" or not by the postindustrial machine, she produced work that manifested a corporeality that for her was "necessary for life." For Szapocznikow, the body provided the vessel for those aspects of experience that both lurk below and reach beyond the modernist paradigms of technology and cognition itself. In her work, the body is blinded, like the figure in *Journey*. Touch—not sight, the "highest" perceptual faculty—is the sense through which it chiefly apprehends the world. Privileging the tactile over the visual is much more than a gesture of insouciant commodity critique or wry commentary on the sexism inherent to the history of male sculptural practice. As the artist succinctly put it in the text quoted above, "My gesture is addressed to the human body, 'that complete erogenous zone.' . . .

I am convinced that of all the manifestations of the ephemeral the human body is the most vulnerable, the only source of all joy, all suffering and all truth." When Szapocznikow died, of breast cancer, she left behind a fragile, variegated, and ambiguous body of work that cannot be efficiently categorized in terms of formal or stylistic affiliations and evades

inscription in the existing orders of reading. A better avenue by which to approach her art is through a consideration of her modest yet significant statements, which, in various ways, all point to an idea of undoing sculpture.

FIGURATIVE SCULPTURE IS THE DISCIPLINE in which Szapocznikow was trained at the Academy of Applied Arts in Prague, where she had fled from her native Poland as a displaced person after the war. But after a brief period of probing into realism, making works that included both portraits of friends and a full-figure sculpture of Stalin, she rejected the depiction of the human form as a solid whole. In the decade following Stalin's death in 1953, Szapocznikow's sculptural oeuvre responds to the tradition of not only classical but also modern sculpture, from Auguste Rodin and Medardo Rosso to Jean Fautrier, Germaine Richier, and Ossip Zadkine. In the mid-'50s—by which point Szapocznikow had returned to Poland after a stint in Paris and become one of the nation's most celebrated young artists—the integrity of the body was already severely compromised in her work. *Ekshumowany* (Exhumed), 1955, made of bronze, is the anonymous, mutilated torso of a man with an imprint of a blindfold across the face, reminiscent of the charred bodies found at Pompeii. (Quite possibly, this was a conscious allusion. The reference to the creative and destructive capacity of volcanoes was to reverberate in a group of later works such as *Stèle* (Stela), 1968, in which truncated body parts made of white polyester are immersed in lavalike black polyurethane foam, and in her unrealized project for a skating rink in the crater of Vesuvius, proposed for Restany's project "*Operazione Vesuvio*" in 1972.) Gradually, Szapocznikow began narrowing her focus. In her work of the late '60s, keen knowledge of contemporary art and acute powers of observation are complemented by introspection, and a unique awareness of the human body's vulnerable condition comes to the fore. The locus of attention shifts from the body of sculpture to the sculpting body.

In 1962, Szapocznikow was chosen as one of three artists to represent Poland at the Venice Biennale, and shortly after that, she decamped for Paris, this time for good. There her mature work began. Her technique of choice was casting, and her materials were often substances that could be molded onto legs, arms, or thighs or mounded, stretched, pushed, and pulled. She did use wood and metal, but mostly to build supporting structures. Sometimes she executed in granite or bronze works that had originated as plaster casts. But ultimately she turned to polyester resin, viscous and fleshy, and to the black polyurethane foam with which she made some of her most powerful sculptures, such as *Stèle*. This dark matter expands before it solidifies, and could be spongy and bulbous or sludgy and oozing.

This was the kind of vaguely menacing artificial material whose sculptural use Szapocznikow, along with Eva Hesse and others, pioneered. Alien-smelling and acrid, capable of generating strange new textures—and, as we now know, sometimes carcinogenic—these plastics and polymers were where technology met the abject. Szapocznikow knew from a young age that "beauty" and "revelations" are not the only things that belong to the hero-miracle of the machine. As a Polish Jew born in 1926, she had witnessed how Taylorized, bureaucratized industrialism can abet the most grotesque violence. Before she was out of her teens she had lived in the ghettos of the town of Pabianice and of Lodz, with their forced labor and epidemics, and had been interned in concentration camps, including a brief term in Auschwitz and a long spell in Bergen-Belsen. There, as a child-nurse helping her pediatrician mother, she laid her hands on afflicted and emaciated bodies, just as she would later lay hands on herself or others in making the casts she used in her sculptures. The visual turns haptic; the figure becomes the body. The hollow cast becomes a "true image" of the tormented and ecstatic body, often fragmented, often prone or floating, at once freed and imperiled, and always threatening to deliquesce into undifferentiated matter.



Alina Szapocznikow, *Herbier XIII (Herbarium XIII)*, 1972,
polyester resin and polychrome
wood, 43 3/8 x 31 1/2".

Szapocznikow took her first cast in 1962, in plaster; it became the work *Noga* (Leg), which in 1967 she also cast in bronze and placed on a granite base. Numerous casts of bodies, or of parts of bodies, including her own, followed: torsos, breasts, limbs, and lips. She routinely urged photographers to take pictures of her posing next to her works in the studio, and in these images the casts often function as props, substitute body parts. In the most striking photographs, she actually “wears” them (anticipating the *Passtücke* [Adaptives] that Franz West began producing in 1974). Other works of the period, such as Bruce Nauman’s *From Hand to Mouth* and Paul Thek’s *The Tomb* (both 1967), also investigate the uncanny relationship between cast, sculpture, and living subject. But Szapocznikow, focusing on the concrete, emotionally charged body, did so with a unique intimacy and intensity—as is evident in her 1972 work *Piotr* and the extraordinary series of photographs that document its making. These show the artist in her Paris studio, producing molds directly from the body of her adopted son Piotr (then twenty) for what was to become a full-scale portrait sculpture. In these images, the artist stages a travesty of Pygmalion’s workshop, a performative inversion of that venerable scene, the (male) sculptor in his atelier with his (female) model. We see a mother and son unperturbed by the practical difficulties of the molding procedure or by its erotic undertones, even amused as they immerse themselves in what might be considered the making of a very special kind of pietà. The resulting sculpture is the artist’s final word on weightlessness. Without the mother to hold her dead child, the polyester shell of Piotr’s naked body hovers suspended above the ground, gently slanted backward, toes poised just above the floor as if in the moment before the ascent—or the fall. The head rests on the bed of hair and leans gently to one side; Piotr’s face is relaxed, his eyes closed and lips open slightly, as if in a deep sleep. The portrait is halfway between death and reawakening.

Following her 1969 diagnosis with breast cancer, Szapocznikow entered a period of frenetic productivity. We see her confronting her illness in numerous ways—most directly in a number of sculptures that seek to embody, perhaps exorcise, the horrors of the disease. The “tumors” are misshapen agglomerations of polyester, fiberglass, paper, and gauze that magnify the physical manifestation of cancer. A group of *Tumeurs personnifiées* (Tumors Personified), 1971, conversely, literally gives metastasis a face—Szapocznikow’s own visage has been cast several times and used as a material for variably shaped lumps, strewn on the ground. In the “*Fétiche*” (Fetish) works of 1970 and ’71, she created relics from her own personal effects—stockings, underwear, and other garments, all coated in stiffened cauls of resin—while in *L’Enterrement d’Alina* (Alina’s Interment), 1970, more resin-coated clothes and photographs become a kind of still life or tableau against a coffinlike wooden support. This work, in particular, demonstrates the consistency of her exploration of death’s twilight zone, which began with *Exhumed*. But the unease it elicits pales beside the primal dread that may be felt by viewers of her “*Herbier*” (Herbarium) cycle of 1971–72, direct casts of her own and her son’s body that are among her most daring and disturbing experiments. There, the faces and body parts register as volumetric forms that have been flattened out. Veiny swaths of polyester resin rest on wooden backings, their texture by turns gelidly smooth or ulcerous, suggesting human hides or irregular spills of melting fat.

Perhaps it was through the crucible of these frightening works that Szapocznikow arrived at the possibility of transcendence hinted at, however tentatively, in *Piotr*. This complex and profoundly personal sculpture is an attempt to step over the threshold separating life and death and to look back from the vantage point described in the opening lines of Sylvia Plath’s poem “Edge”: “The woman is perfected / Her dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment.” The empty space upholding Piotr anticipates, in a truly nonrepresentational way, the absence of his mother’s body. The sculpture is conceived as a concrete fragment of an imaginable whole—an image that directs the viewer to conjure a presence that isn’t there. In a way, it is Szapocznikow’s ultimate self-portrait, in absentia.

EVEN BEFORE SHE BECAME ILL, photography seems to have functioned for Szapocznikow, in an intricate way, as both a recorder of and a bulwark against absence, invisibility, and evanescence. Her use of photography as a material component in her sculptures, visible in *Weightlessness* and *Alina’s Funeral*, began with *Photomaton* (Photo Booth), 1966, a vaguely anthropomorphic polyester construction plastered with small photographs of faces, and proliferated. In the *Tumeurs* and in the series “*Souvenirs*,” photographs are embedded in the lumpen polyester sculptures, which become concrete memorials to family members, friends (e.g., Boltanski), celebrities (Twiggy), or works of art (a late-Gothic Madonna). The most striking image used in this way is an archival photograph of a female corpse, a concentration-camp victim, collaged together with a childhood photo of the artist and her father, whose face has been excised. This juxtaposition appears in the centerpiece of the sculptural ensemble *Souvenir de la table de noce d’une femme heureuse* (A Souvenir from the Wedding Table of a Happy Woman), 1971.



**View of “Alina Szapocznikow:
Sculpture Undone, 1955–1972,”**

2011, Wiels Contemporary Art Center, Brussels. Foreground: *Sein en chiffon vert (Fétiche II)* (Breast in Green Cloth [Fetish II]), 1970–71. Middle ground, from left: *Sculpture (Fétiche IV)*, 1971; *Sans Titre (Fétiche VII)* (Untitled [Fetish VII]), 1971. Background: *Sans Titre (Fétiche I)* (Untitled [Fetish 1]), 1970. In box: *Bouche en marche (Fétiche III)* (Marching Lips [Fetish III]), 1970. Photo: Filip Vanzielegem.

That year, Szapocznikow produced her *Fotorzezby* (Photosculptures), a series of enlarged black-and-white photographs of gnawed-on chewing gum, misbegotten and pocked with teeth marks, as disturbing in its way as anything she'd done with polyester or polyurethane. In this series, she proposed that sculpture might exist as no more than a photograph of a fleeting presence. There are striking and instructive analogies between these works and early black-and-white photographs by Swiss artist Hannah Villiger. Taken between 1975 and 1979, before Villiger began shooting her better-known close-up images of her own body, these pictures record small-scale ephemeral adventures, such as a palm leaf set afire or a jet of water arcing through the air. Villiger called her entire, almost exclusively photographic oeuvre “*Skulptural*.” The rhetorical maneuver performed by both artists—photography termed sculpture—indicates a desire to free sculpture from the “ballast” of materials and tools, effectively rendering it immaterial. Szapocznikow was certainly not being coy when she described herself in her 1972 statement as “a sculptor who has experienced the failure of a thwarted vocation.” Rather, she was expressing profound existential doubts, which ultimately led to her most extreme manifestation of anti-sculpture, *Cendrier de Célibataire III* (Bachelor's Ashtray III), 1972. Evoking the bachelor machine, the work is a photograph of cigarette ends extinguished on a stick of butter. The ashtray, an accessory of existentialists, literati, and other idle thinkers—Conceptual artists included—literally puts an end to sculpture.

What might have followed this ending in Szapocznikow's work? We are left to speculate. What is clear as we look at her works now, however, is that it is necessary to tell part of art history anew. Szapocznikow speaks to us along with many near-forgotten or chronically ignored and excluded female artists, many of them from the Eastern-bloc countries—recent “discoveries” such as Geta Brătescu and Běla Kolářová are cases in point. This critical revision of art history is being implemented by only a very few museums and art institutions, among them the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, which, under director Joanna Mytkowska, has made much of Szapocznikow's archive available on its website.

In 2009, the museum mounted an exhibition, “Awkward Objects,” curated by Agata Jakubowska and Mytkowska, that put Szapocznikow's sculptures in a constellation with works by Maria Bartusová, Pauline Boty, Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, and Paulina Ołowska. The major survey “Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone, 1955–1972,” curated by

Elena Filipovic and Mytkowska—currently on view at the Wiels Contemporary Art Center in Brussels—is in part a result of such initiatives and the attention they have brought to Szapocznikow's oeuvre.

Considering Szapocznikow's art reminds us of the stakes of such direct institutional advocacy. Szapocznikow went beyond the conventional idea of sculpture as a process of adding or taking away, and even beyond the rigorous formal analysis of sculpture's relation to site that helped to expand the field in the 1960s. Instead, she questioned her métier and, step by step, set off to undo the work's fixed material and stylistic parameters, learning by doing, working with rare determination through her own origins as a classical sculptor with an academic background. Toward the end of her life, this work of loosening up and debasing sculpture ran parallel to her grave illness and—as if in response to a life that had been, in many ways, in a permanent state of emergency—ultimately seemed to point to the possible transgression of death itself, a step beyond the threshold of the corporeal. When the body of sculpture was perfected and abandoned, a space opened up.

"Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone, 1955–1972" is on view at Wiels Contemporary Art Center, Brussels, through January 8, 2012; travels to the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, Feb. 5–Aug. 5; the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH, May 19–Aug. 5; Museum of Modern Art, New York, Oct. 7–Jan. 28, 2013.
Adam Szymczyk is Director and Chief Curator of the Kunsthalle Basel.

From Sculptures to Awkward Objects: A Short History of the Changing Reception of the Work of Alina Szapocznikow

Joanna Mytkowska

In Poland, where she was born on May 16, 1926, Alina Szapocznikow is above all a legend—highly regarded and one of few twentieth-century Polish women artists whose work enjoys significant renown. However, in writing a catalogue essay for what will be the first major presentation of her oeuvre outside Poland, I am faced with introducing Szapocznikow to an audience that, for the most part, is encountering her for the first time. This predicament reflects the history of the artist's reception both during her lifetime and since her death in 1973 and is perhaps also related to the demanding and risk-taking nature of her work, which evades easy definition. Although exhibited widely in Poland and in certain places quite revered, her work remained known and unknown, available and unavailable, simultaneously concealing and revealing meaning. After Szapocznikow's death in 1973, her work disappeared from view, present only within the history of Polish art despite the fact that the artist had spent most of her last decade in Paris, where she was in contact with many important art-world figures and was conversant with key international trends.

Szapocznikow's elusive status also resulted in a general lack of understanding about her position and her work; much of the interpretation was misguided or reductive. Moreover, a legend grew up around her, fuelled by the dramatic facts of her life, which ossified the reception of her work. I have, therefore, decided to use this space to survey her oeuvre through the filter of its reception, to trace the history of misunderstandings and omissions, traps and clichés, reductions and evasions that have accompanied its interpretation—that is, until the recent awakening of international interest. In this way I hope to disarm the legend that has obscured Szapocznikow's artistic legacy and to reveal what this legend may have concealed of her multifaceted work.

Certain artists' lives are indelibly marked by history. However, though it may be problematic to interpret an artist's work through a biographical lens, in some cases we simply cannot separate the work from the life and the life from the history—this is exactly the case with Szapocznikow. Due to the wealth of documentary photographs in her archive, a first encounter with the sculptor's work is often accompanied by images of a beautiful vivacious woman, whose life was nonetheless marked by several profound tragedies ^[ill. 1].

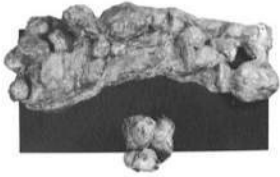


1. The artist at home in Malakoff, near Paris, 1967.

Three major events must be taken into consideration when discussing Szapocznikow's work. Most powerfully we should reflect on what the artist herself called "the baptism of despair": between 1939 and 1945 she survived incarceration in two ghettos in Pabianice and Łódź and in a series of concentration camps including Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, and Terezín.¹ Szapocznikow very rarely mentioned these experiences²; yet, even if she did not often address her experiences of the Holocaust explicitly, she did join the public memorialization by participating in the competition for the monument to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto [ill. 2, plate 145] and was part of a team entering the competition for the monument in Auschwitz, submitting *Kobieta w chuście* (*Woman in a Head Scarf*, 1949). Later she used a photograph from the Holocaust in works such as *Grande Tumeur I* (*Big Tumor I*, 1969) [plate 60] and *Souvenir I* (1971) [plate 57], possibly as an act of individual remembering. Only recently has a serious analysis of her Holocaust experience been used as a central element in interpreting her work, allowing for a different reading of her entire oeuvre.



2.



3.

The second crucial aspect of her biography is her experience of illness. In 1949–50, Szapocznikow almost died from peritoneal tuberculosis; though she was cured through the experimental use of antibiotics, the treatment resulted in loss of fertility. In January 1969, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, ultimately succumbing to it in 1973. While these experiences are the obvious interpretive foundation for some of her later works—especially the *Tumeurs* (Tumors) series of 1969 [plate 60] and *L'Enterrement d'Alina* (*Alina's Funeral*, 1970) [ill. 3, plate 66]—a consideration of her history of illnesses prompts us to reexamine all of her works, even earlier ones, bearing in mind her repeated confrontations with death [ill. 4].

The third biographical aspect is her position as Other—as a Jew, an outsider, and a woman. Though she suffered as a Jew during the Holocaust, she also had to negotiate being Jewish in postwar Communist Poland. She was an outsider in Prague and Paris but also in Warsaw, where she arrived for the first time as a mature artist in 1951 [ill. 5]. Any sense of alienation arising from these two factors would have only been compounded by the fact of being a woman artist in Paris during the 1960s [ill. 6]. But if this lack of belonging meant she was a stranger everywhere, she was also potentially at home everywhere, easily abandoning one place or position for another and demonstrating a cosmopolitan talent for adaptation. Numerous critics have praised her for her defiance of convention, her courage and independence, and the resulting uniqueness of her work.

Photographs have played an important role in the formation of Szapocznikow's public image. Numerous portraits were created throughout her life—she liked to be photographed and often appears laughing or charming the camera, with or without her sculptures, in her studio, at work, at exhibitions, in private and public situations. These pictures, encountered alongside her work, convey the image of an intriguing artist, vibrant and successful but at the same time mysteriously unfulfilled. They have blended with the reception of her work, influencing its interpretation. Thus apocryphal stories—occasionally the recollections of friends and acquaintances—circulate about her impetuosity, her *joie de vivre*, and her lively temperament, as well as her affairs and flirtations. These anecdotes reinforce the image of a seductive woman whose eroticism seems so evident in her works of the 1960s; yet this characterization stands in contrast to the darker aspects of her Holocaust experiences and her battles with disease. A paradoxical coupling of life and death thus emerges as a factor in the study of her work.

Let me take a closer look at the public reception of Szapocznikow's work from her emergence as an artist in the late 1940s. Relatively little documentation exists from the period between 1948 and 1951, when she first left Prague (where she trained) and was studying and participating in artistic life in Paris. Through Polish artists—emigrants and those visiting on fellowships—she was introduced to the Polish community in Paris and met Ryszard Stanisławski, her first husband, who later became a preeminent art historian and museum director. In 1951, she returned to Poland and accepted numerous commissions from the government—among them one for the prestigious sculpture decorating the main entrance to the Palace of Culture and Science, called *Pomnik Przyjaźni Polsko-Radzieckiej* (*Monument to Polish-Soviet Friendship*, 1954)³—quickly gaining recognition as a public artist. Although the character of Szapocznikow's work changed around 1955 in response to the



4. The artist in her studio in Malakoff, near Paris, 1971.



5. Szapocznikow, 1950s.



6. The artist with her work *Naga (Naked)*, 1961.



7.

so-called Polish thaw following the death of Stalin in 1953,⁴ which allowed for the public display of individual artistic expression, interest in her work and artistic career remained consistent, and her artistic activity during the Stalinist/Socialist Realist period did not negatively impact her career. This phase is, however, usually ignored in the literature on her work.

Most regard Szapocznikow's mature period as beginning in 1955. For the next several years, she had shows in major Polish galleries—including a joint exhibition with Jerzy Tchórzewski at Warsaw's most prestigious gallery for modern art, Zachęta, in 1957 and a solo exhibition there in 1967. After meeting her in Poland in 1960, French critic Pierre Restany described her as "rightly recognized in her country, Poland, where she stands as a national celebrity figure."⁵ In 1963, however, Szapocznikow immigrated to Paris with Roman Cieślewicz, who in 1967 became her second husband. There she became immersed in new concepts and movements such as *Nouveau Réalisme*, which is often considered the French version of Pop art but in fact was often critical of its American counterpart. Works such as *Goldfinger* (1965) [ill. 7, plate 101], whose title was taken from the James Bond movie (released in 1964), were the product of these encounters. Her social circle included members of *Panique*, a group created by Roland Topor, among others, whose focus was black humor and the grotesque. During this period, she began to use new industrial materials such as polyester to make body casts of lips, breasts, and abdomens, which were then made into objects and sculptures sometimes illuminated by electric light. Her highly individual interpretation of Pop art through various personal motifs kept her on the fringes of the movement—engagement with popular and commodity culture was of limited importance to her. As Restany described her relationship to *Nouveau Réalisme*:

The artist seemed to escape the long torment of her life, the horror of her past of war and camps: she slowly woke up to a new objective consciousness of the world. [...] It will still take a long time for Alina to rip apart the anguish-ridden sails of her inner world. But the trigger has been pulled, and nothing will ever hinder this process.⁶

During the latter part of the 1960s—a period critical to the recent interpretation of her oeuvre—numerous works related to memory begin to emerge. Using poured polyurethane foam, she embedded fragmented body casts into sculptures as if sunk in asphalt. The process of their creation, and consequently the processual character of Szapocznikow's work, was emphasized in the catalogue designed by Cieślewicz for her 1968 exhibition in Cogeime Gallery, Brussels, organized by Restany and Giuseppe Marchiori. Formally, her sculptures became more and more fragmentary, like remnants, with the body casts assuming the quality of fetishes. During these intensely active years, Szapocznikow took part in many exhibitions in private galleries, the most important of which was "Instants et Choses" (1971) at the Aurora Gallery, Geneva, where she displayed a large group of works that appeared as a veritable manifesto on the disintegration of the coherent sculptural body. However, it does not seem as if her statement—so out of tune with the minimalist and conceptual trends of the time—was truly recognized. Although he did not fully appreciate Szapocznikow's position on the artistic scene, Restany invited her to participate in two shows: "Art Concepts from Europe" (1970) at Bonino Gallery, New York, and "Operazione Vesuvio" (1972) in Galleria Il Centro, Naples, and Centro Domus, Milan. These exhibitions gave

Szapocznikow an opportunity for exposure within an art community other than Paris and for experimentation with a conceptual mode that she appears to have embraced with her typical wit and dark humor. For these two projects, Szapocznikow produced two interesting works-cum-concepts. In a text titled “My American Dream” (1971), she proposed carving a double-life-sized Rolls Royce in pink marble as a commentary on useless luxury and consumption, and for the Italian project she proposed building a skating rink inside the crater of Vesuvius, near Pompeii, leading to the possible transformation of skaters into lava-encased mummies should the volcano erupt again.

Szapocznikow died on March 2, 1973, and in May of that year, Restany organized an exhibition called “Alina Szapocznikow. Tumeurs, herbier” (Alina Szapocznikow. Tumors, Herbarium) at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and designed the installation in collaboration with Cieśliewicz, then a well-known graphic artist working for the Centre Pompidou, *Elle*, and *Opus International*. Unlike the suggestive arrangement at the Aurora Gallery, this show tended to classicize Szapocznikow’s work, essentially missing the spirit of the times and failing to address the Paris art community whose recognition she might have hoped to win. The show was hardly noticed.⁷ In 1975, a retrospective was organized in Poland by Szapocznikow’s first husband, Stanisławski, then-director of the renowned Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź. “Alina Szapocznikow. 1926–1973” was presented in nine cities in Poland and Sweden. Quite comprehensive, with works from all periods of her career, the exhibition consolidated her reputation in Poland as an important figure in postwar European sculpture. From that moment on, her work was part of every important survey of national art and many thematic shows in Poland. Yet, even as her work remained visible, its interpretation grew stale, calcified. She became immobilized by adulation as “the great artist.” Appearing in anthologies and museum collections and on the covers of art publications, she existed more in the collective unconscious—her work neither provoking controversy nor inspiring reflection.

A 1998 exhibition (with the same title as that from 1975, “Alina Szapocznikow. 1926–1973”) was organized by Anda Rottenberg for Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the artist’s death. With this show came a breakthrough in Szapocznikow’s reception. The understanding of art history had undergone a radical revision in Poland after 1989,⁸ when the corrupt official institutionalized language was rejected and the search began for a more authentic one. New modes of analysis were critically deployed, and it became clear in retrospect that her work, especially that from the 1960s, could be fruitfully addressed through feminist analyses of gender and the body.⁹ Rottenberg’s exhibition drew attention to the significance of certain key biographical aspects in reading the later work. The arrangement in the gallery’s largest room—presenting the last period of the artist’s life through works such as *Desserts* [ill. 8, plates 20–22], *Fétiches (Fetishes)* [ills. 9–11, plates 29–34], and *Fiancée folle blanche (Mad white fiancée)* [ill. 12, plates 9–10]—remains unforgettable for those who saw the installation. For division and elevation, Rottenberg used white hospital screens and metal furniture, specifically connecting these works to Szapocznikow’s long and ultimately hopeless struggle against cancer [ill. 14].

At the time, this presentation caused very strong emotional reactions and incited much controversy. However, I believe I understand the intentions of Rottenberg, who above all wanted to raise the temperature around Szapocznikow’s work, to confront



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the legend of the artist's intensely lived but recurrently troubled life and to overcome the anodyne reiteration of biographical details without any real understanding of those events. In her essay "Personalizations," written many years later, Rottenberg attempted to redefine the interpenetration of Szapocznikow's life and work using contemporary theoretical terms such as "embodiment," "incorporation," and "personalization." Writing about *Tumeurs personnifiées* (*Tumors Personified*, 1971) [ill. 13 (detail), plate 64], Rottenberg observed:

[T]he parallel of life and creation, previously seen in terms of disintegration, changed in this last phase into a process of concentration, the absorption of one by the other, unification. A process of personalization of art took place, in which the artistic subject "I" was converted into its object: her "self."¹⁰

This deep personal engagement, as well as the occasional tendency to identify with the artist, is a hallmark of Szapocznikow's posthumous curators and pioneering commentators, whose role has been to use new perspectives to reanimate the understanding and appreciation of this complex and powerful body of work. (Notably, the artist's two husbands were involved in organizing the first retrospectives after her death.) Rottenberg in particular has demonstrated a personal commitment to the task of restoring the "real" Szapocznikow for the benefit of her audience, revealing her own private reasons for her shocking frankness about illness and death in preparing the exhibition.¹¹ In addition, Jola Gola has been the most diligent scholar of Szapocznikow's career. For almost twenty years she has painstakingly reconstructed it, building up a massive amount of factual information on the artist. The deep commitment the work has inspired in those who study it suggests that its particular entanglement with the artist's life seems to demand personal investment by its most attentive scholars. The author of the only monographic study on Szapocznikow (still only available in Polish), Agata Jakubowska, theorized this stance in the light of feminist theories of situated knowledge and critical reflexivity:

Szapocznikow's art is most often read as a confession, but I read it as a challenge. And I understand the encounter with the living presence of the face—or, to generalize, with a work—as an experience in which I accept the challenge and stand face-to-face with art. Such an interpretation is an activity in which the privileged position of the art historian, acquired through the use of the authority of objective knowledge, is revealed as inadequate. An attempt to understand her work is a process of dialogue in which not only the artist, but also the critic is revealed as an embodied and situated subject.¹²

Rottenberg's exhibition at Zachęta National Gallery of Art toured to almost all the large Polish museums, if in a more conventional form, and initiated a dramatic growth in new research and reinterpretation of Szapocznikow's work. Various studies were crowned with the publication of a catalogue raisonné of both sculpture and drawing, compiled by Gola.¹³ The only disappointment was the continuing lack of interest outside Poland and the artist's persistent marginalization in the West, not only as a woman but also as one associated with the former Eastern Europe. Her exclusion from the mainstream of Western art history at that time was the fate of a number of other women artists, including Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, who were both recognized late; however, that in combination with her exclusion on the basis of nationality is worthy of examination. Szapocznikow's case is complex. In Communist Poland, gender was not really an obstacle to one's artistic career; it was only after she went to



14. Installation view of the exhibition "Alma Szapocznikow. 1926-1973" at Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 1998, showing works from the Herbarium series, 1971-72.



15. Installation view of the exhibition "Flesh at War with Enigma" at Kunsthalle Basel, 2004, showing *Dessert II*, 1970-71, and *Dessert III*, 1971.



16. Installation view of the exhibition "Awkward Objects. Alma Szapocznikow, Maria Bartuszo, Pauline Boty, Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse and Paulina Olowska" at the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, 2009. At front, Szapocznikow's *Goldfinger*, 1965.

Paris that she experienced marginalization based on gender. Hence, she continued to be recognized in Poland and unknown in the West. Since 1989, the challenge of introducing her into Western art discourse has been taken up by a few. I focus here on the history of her reception—by necessity, mostly Polish—to demonstrate the ways in which her complex and unique work has been repeatedly forcing her critics to re-evaluate it, using the latest interpretative tools.

Significant changes in the reception of Szapocznikow's work came with its recontextualization in the realm of contemporary art. Two shows—"PRYM" at the BWA (Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych) in Zielona Góra, Poland, and "Flesh at War with Enigma" at the Kunsthalle Basel^[ill. 15] (both 2004)¹⁴—juxtaposed Szapocznikow's works with those of contemporary artists, thus regaining for them an autonomous power of expression outside their immediate historical context. This triggered the interest of the art market¹⁵ and led to museum purchases, the first of which was made in 2007 by the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, which acquired one of her most experimental works, *Fotorzeźby* (*Photosculptures*, 1971)^[plates 36–55]. Simultaneously, her work was shown at Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany, an ambitious exhibition aiming to rewrite art history and to expand its geography, particularly in the realms of conceptual and experimental art.

A couple of years later, after I assumed directorship of the newly established Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, I assembled a team that included Jakubowska as guest curator and was committed to recapitulating Szapocznikow's recent reception and broadening the understanding of her work. In 2009 we began preparations for another major exhibition with the intention of sidestepping direct references to her biography. We decided to read her work comparatively, juxtaposing it with other artists' work of the same period in order to provide an international context^[ills. 16, 17]. Since personal details so often threatened to undermine more nuanced or objective readings of Szapocznikow's work, we decided on a risky tactic: we would exhibit her work beside that of artists with whom she had no personal contact, nor experienced any type of artistic exchange. This inspired a discussion of various issues independent of her biography, placing emphasis on the work itself and indicating new lines of interpretation.¹⁶

The title of the exhibition, "Awkward Objects," was a quotation from the artist's most important programmatic text from 1972,¹⁷ in which she expressed her conscious decision to be guided by intuition, rather than tradition or trends. This required her to adhere to the truth of lived experience. The most productive way to achieve that was by registering the complexity of the human body through radical experimentation, even if it meant destroying the structure of the sculptural object. We decided to focus on the Paris period only (1963 to 1973) and to begin with the first body casts, with their fragmentation of the body and their new materials. Juxtaposing these with drawings by Hesse showed that a struggle with the post-Bellmerian concept of the body-as-machine might lie at the foundation of many of Szapocznikow's formal experiments. A comparison with sculptures by Bourgeois highlighted the aspect of the *informe*, revealing Szapocznikow's proclivity for incompleteness, as well as her openness to material and processual accident. Peter Moore's photographic documentation of Bourgeois's performance *A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts* (1978) elicited discussion of artists' fetishization of women's body parts, intended to scandalize and liberate the body from unambiguous meaning.



17. Installation view of the exhibition "Awkward Objects." At front, Louise Bourgeois's *Avenza Revisited II*, 1968–69, and *Unconscious Landscape*, 1967–68; at the back, Szapocznikow's *Grands Ventres (Big Bellies)*, 1968.



18. Szapocznikow, *Souvenir de la table de nocce d'une femme heureuse* (Souvenir from the Wedding Table of a Happy Woman), 1971, on view in the exhibition "Instantants et Choses" at Aurora Gallery, Geneva, 1971.



19. The exhibition "Instantants et Choses" at Aurora Gallery, Geneva, 1971. From left to right, works by Szapocznikow: *Sous la coupole* (Under the Cupola), 1970; *Les capuchons, Jambes noyées* (Drips, Embedded Legs), 1968; and *Stèle* (Stele), 1968.



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Szapocznikow's strategy of multiplication, in which she turned sculptures into gadgets—her *Lampe-bouche* (*Illuminated Lips*, 1966) ^[ill. 20, plate 17] is a case in point—demonstrated her intentional degradation of sculpture. She deployed degradation as a conceptual strategy aimed at establishing the ambiguous status of the erotic object (in this case, lips), destabilizing the objective value of the art object, and highlighting the problematic presence of the fetish. Work by Pauline Boty, a British artist active in the London Pop art scene, prompted comparison with Szapocznikow's reexamination of images of women's bodies, while the work of a young artist, Paulina Ołowska, who often alludes to Szapocznikow, was a reminder of her continued relevance and the liberating effect of placing her in a contemporary art context. *Grands Ventres* (*Big Bellies*, 1968) suggested the variety of scales she worked with, while lending the whole exhibition an aura of surreality and the grotesque, qualities much appreciated by Szapocznikow. Works such as *Souvenir I* (1971) ^[ill. 21, plate 57] also brought to the surface the question of memory, which we reinforced by reproducing the historical arrangement of *Souvenir I* and other works from the Aurora Gallery exhibition ^[ill. 19], including *Souvenir de la table de noce d'une femme heureuse* (*Souvenir from the Wedding Table of a Happy Woman*, 1971), a work that may be read as a remembrance of sculpture as an autonomous object ^[ill. 18]. The Fetishes, intimate items of clothing sunk in polyester, emphasized the proto-feminist character of Szapocznikow's work particularly effectively. In addition to devoting significant space to ephemeral projects and documents, the exhibition was dominated by the body casts, contextualized in relation to Georges Didi-Huberman's theory of the imprint—involving both the indexicality of the body in its imprint ^[ill. 22] and the function of the imprint as testimony to the body's disappearance.

On the one hand, "Awkward Objects" aimed to make Szapocznikow more accessible by establishing connections between her experimental works and the discourses and tropes that were shared between several of the most radical women artists of that decade whose work centered around the body, found images, and/or new materials. On the other hand, we wished to emphasize the pioneering character of her work, especially as it was undertaken outside of New York or London, as well as to highlight her capacity to take artistic risks that led her to solutions entirely in accord with her contemporaries. The exhibition followed the transformation of an artist who began by using the classical language of sculpture into an artist who was apparently willing to destroy her own medium for the sake of finding an individual vocabulary of forms, materials, and processes that were at once entirely contemporary and suited to her particular aims.

This overview is intended neither to arrive at the most effective formula for interpretation nor to define the best method for exhibiting the work; for neither exist. Instead our intention has been to plot out the process that led to the deconstruction of dominant and limiting representations of Szapocznikow and her oeuvre. The initial difficulties her work presented to critics and its posthumous marginalization, despite achieving almost heroic status in Poland, now seems comprehensible in light of what we now appreciate as the artist's daring departure into the unknown, which took her beyond familiar forms, definitions, and artistic positions. Tracing the reception of her work teaches us that a strategy so individual and so distinct merits a different kind of attention, so as not to resolve contradictions that she actively sought to create and not to produce a false construct in an effort to have her conform to what is already known.



22. The artist with a body cast, 1966. Inscription on the photograph: "Thank you for the armature."

Perhaps ironically, during the conference accompanying "Awkward Objects" the biographical trope, transformed by more rigorous theorization, proved to be among the most effective.¹⁸ Griselda Pollock's careful reading of Szapocznikow's oeuvre through the prism of trauma—the recollection of which led to the gradual entropy of sculptural forms—is one of the boldest and most admirable efforts at a total interpretation of the artist's work.¹⁹ In no way contradicting the thesis of the exhibition, which argued that the deconstruction or degradation of sculpture was necessary in order to approach contemporary reality, Pollock merely emphasized a different aspect, saw different reasons for the same process. The multiplicity of possible interpretations generated through the conference brought back life and fullness to Szapocznikow's work and promoted interest internationally in articulating her position within art history.

The field of interpretation for Szapocznikow's work has broadened over time as its contradictions have emerged and as we have consented both to its absurdity and uneasy fit with dominant narratives and to its continual transformation. A long

and convoluted process of reception is understandable (and common) for pioneering work, founded as it is on the imperative to express existential contradictions and a commitment to the work's continued relevance. Therefore analyses and interpretations of her works can be expected to stratify and complement each other, illuminating matters from different perspectives and offering various routes for approaching an understanding of her oeuvre.

Translated from the Polish by Krystyna Mazur.

Notes

1. Szapocznikow's presence at Terezín is not confirmed by camp documents and therefore remains uncertain. See Tomáš Pospíšyl, "Alina Szapocznikow in Prague," in Agata Jakubowska, ed., *Alina Szapocznikow. Awkward Objects* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 235.
2. We know only two fragments of letters in which Szapocznikow refers to her war experiences—and then only in passing. In a letter to Ryszard Stanisławski from January 1949, she wrote:

It is simply that you still look at some things in such a nice, polite, gracious manner, perhaps they way one should, and maybe I'm even sometimes jealous of that. But the difference is that in the process of your formation in the last 10 years you have not gone through that baptism of despair, all these things, everything didn't end for you irretrievably several times, as it did for me in the ghettos and the camps. I'm sorry, Rys, I'm embarrassed. You know how much I hate, how ashamed I am for those people who go on or "brag" about the years of torment they have lived through. But you have to understand me. I've told you before, maybe I will be able to tell you everything about those times, and in our case that is very important. Because you experienced a lot in those times, you lived, for better or worse, you loved and married, wanted to have a family (or not). But your terms have not changed radically as they did for me, so that now what remains for me of "nice, polite, gracious" is "beautiful, human, real to the bone." Maybe we can talk some time.

In a letter to Stanisławski, from Paul-Brousse Hospital, Villejuif, in November 1949, she wrote:

But I want to live so much! I never knew it is so hard to die. In the camp people perished like flies. They didn't have the time for long dying. A woman from the opposite end of this room struggled all night to die. In fact it probably wasn't really her any more, because the terrible sounds and howls became inhuman and in the darkness awoke all my (it seemed forgotten) worst nightmares of the camps and of inhuman war misery. And around me these women, strangers (how inhumanly strange) indifferent (!) spoke about her with complete indifference, in a completely ordinary manner. They coughed, complained of the colic, threw up, and complained that they can't sleep because of the noise. Out of the horror-filled darkness came broken words of live people, but there was no one human soul. But in the camp, there were human souls who allowed you to survive and have faith.

Both letters were translated by Krystyna Mazur and are contained in the archives at the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw. Alternative translations are available in "Fragments of Alina Szapocznikow's Correspondence with Ryszard Stanisławski (1948–1959)," in *Alina Szapocznikow*, trans. Marzena Beata Guzowska, (Warsaw: Institute for the Promotion of Art Foundation and Galeria Zachęta, 1998), 143–44.
3. Agata Jakubowska discusses the circumstances of Szapocznikow's political commitment; her membership in the Communist Party in Prague; the idealized perception of Communism she acquired in Paris during the late 1940s; her dedication and desire to do large public projects in Poland; and finally the disenchantment with the limitations of dogmatic Socialist Realism. See "Zaangażowana" (Engaged), in *Portret wielokrotny dzieła Aliny Szapocznikow* (Poznań, Poland: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2008). Ewa Toniak talks about the ambiguous position of women artists declaring women's emancipation in the Communist state in *Olbrzymki: kobiety i socrealizm* (Kraków, Poland: Korporacja Ha!art, 2008).
4. "The thaw" is a common term for the liberalization of the absolutist regime in the United Soviet Socialist Republic after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953 and the related changes, especially after Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" (1956) on "The Cult of the Individual" report was made public, in which Khrushchev revealed Stalin's crimes. The thaw spread to other Communist states: in Poland, the change in domestic politics, combined with the replacement of the top authorities and the liberalization of the political system, began in mid-1956 and culminated in the events of October that year.
5. Pierre Restany, *Alina Szapocznikow* (Paris: Galerie Florence Houston Brown, 1967). Quoted in English in Anke Kempkes, "Black Drips and

- Dark Matter – The Luxury Gap – Concept *individuel* – Quarry Desert. The Incommensurable Contemporaneity of Alina Szapocznikow,” in *Alina Szapocznikow. Awkward Objects*, 163.
6. Restany, *ibid.*
 7. According to accounts by Anka Ptaszewska, a gallerist and art critic living in Paris at the time.
 8. In Poland, a change in the political system happened in 1989 as a result of the agreement of the so-called “Round Table” (a discussion of the authorities with representatives of the political opposition, Solidarity, and the Church, which took place during the first half of 1989) and of the first free parliamentary elections since 1945 (which took place June 4, 1989). For the rest of the so-called Eastern block, the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 marked the beginning of such transformations.
 9. At the conference accompanying the exhibition, as many as three papers interpreted Szapocznikow’s works using the tools of feminist theory, including papers delivered by Jakubowska, Izabela Kowalczyk, and Magdalena Ujma. The catalogue from the exhibition contained a new comprehensive interpretation of Szapocznikow’s work by Urszula Czartoryska. See “Okrutna Jasność” (Cruel Brightness), in *Alina Szapocznikow, 1926–1973* (Warsaw: Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Zachęta, 1998), 12–23.
 10. Anda Rottenberg, “Personalizations,” in *Alina Szapocznikow. Awkward Objects*, 103–04.
 11. “I was putting together a narrative for the exhibition which, in its hidden, entirely private layer was my way of saying goodbye to my friend Irena [Kolaty-Ways]. In 1975 Irena organized the first posthumous exhibition of Alina Szapocznikow in the Łódź Museum and Hanka [Włodarczyk], my other friend, made a film based on it [called *Ślad (Trace)*]. Less than twenty years later Irena threw herself from the balcony of her eighth-floor Łódź apartment... Working on the exhibition about one sick woman I could not keep myself from remembering the other.” Rottenberg, *Proszę bardzo* (Warsaw: W.A.B., 2009), 297.
 12. Jakubowska, *Portret wielokrotny dzieła Aliny Szapocznikow*, 8. Translated by Krystyna Mazur.
 13. Jola Gola, *Katalog rzeźb Aliny Szapocznikow* (Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, 2001).
 14. For additional information, see Gola, “Chronology of Alina Szapocznikow’s Life and Work,” elsewhere in this volume.
 15. Solo exhibitions were organized by Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, Germany (2007), and BROADWAY 1602, New York (2007/08 and 2010).
 16. The exhibition owes many of its interpretive clues to Jakubowska’s *Portret wielokrotny dzieła Aliny Szapocznikow*.
 17. Szapocznikow, statement, March 1972, “Mon oeuvre puise ses racines...,” signed typescript. See page 28, elsewhere in this volume.
 18. “Alina Szapocznikow. Dokumenty. Prace. Interpretacje.” (Alina Szapocznikow. Documents. Works. Interpretations.), an international conference at Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, May 15–16, 2009. Transcribed texts are published in *Alina Szapocznikow. Awkward Objects*.
 19. Griselda Pollock, “Too Early and Too Late: Melting Solids and Traumatic Encryption in the Sculptural Dissolutions of Alina Szapocznikow,” in *Alina Szapocznikow. Awkward Objects*, 71–101.

The New York Times

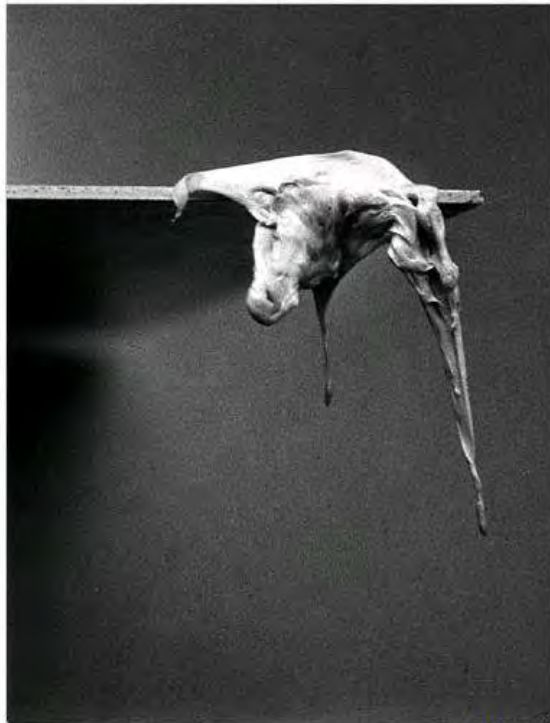
ART REVIEW | ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW

Chewing Gum, Plaster Bellies and Other Sculptural Byways

By ROBERTA SMITH
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Correction Appended

The history of art is always growing, but this year has brought some especially outstanding expansions. New York has been the beneficiary of two large exhibitions of Latin American modernism, a revelatory presentation of early Modernist photography from Central Europe and a survey of the paintings of Richard Pousette-Dart, an artist previously lost in the gap between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism.



Broadway 1602

One of the 20 images of chewing gum in "Photosculptures," a 1971 portfolio by the Polish artist Alina Szapocznikow.

photographs from 1971. Each showed a wad of used chewing gum set on a tiny shelf after being stretched this way or that to form a little abstract sculpture. The pictures instantly earned Ms. Szapocznikow a place in the history of postmodern photography.

Los Angeles did more than its bit with **"WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution,"** arriving at P.S. 1 on Feb. 17. (And the Brooklyn Museum chimed in with **"Global Feminisms."**)

And then there was the revisionist sensation of **"Documenta 12,"** the latest version of the immersive international exhibition staged every five years in Kassel, Germany. Packed with startling juxtapositions and unfamiliar artists whose work stretched back to the 1950s and beyond, this thrilling show opened all sorts of new doors to the past and, thus, to the future.

Through one of the doors awaited a tantalizing glimpse of a little-known Polish artist named Alina Szapocznikow (1926-1973) in the form of **"Photosculptures,"** 20 grainy black-and-white

Now the venturesome New York art gallery Broadway 1602, established a few years ago by Anke Kempkes, a former museum curator from Germany, is offering a wider, if far from **comprehensive, view of Ms. Szapocznikow's work. It includes the chewing gum photographs, about 30 drawings from the late 1940s to 1973, and a handful of sculptures in cast polyester resin and polyurethane from the late 1960s and early '70s. Also on hand is a detailed catalog of an exhibition in Poland in 2004.**

Together, the art and the book outline a career that seems to have functioned as a kind of synopsis of postwar European sculpture styles: academic, Social Realist, Expressionist, biomorphic abstraction, found-object, Nouveau Realist/Pop, much of it with an implicit **feminist undercurrent. The only previous New York appearance of Ms. Szapocznikow's work was in "Art Concept From Europe," a group show at Galeria Bonino in 1970.**

Her career, just over two decades long, seems to have been driven by a surfeit of talent and ambition, regardless of the circumstances. In Warsaw in the 1950s Ms. Szapocznikow submitted work to competitions, including one for a statue of Stalin, and realized a public **commission for a work titled "Monument to Polish-Soviet Friendship." In Paris in the mid-'60s she was an early experimenter with polyester-resin body casts and the use of photography in sculpture.**

Her life was similarly full of twists and turns. She was born to a family of Jewish doctors in Kalisz, Poland, in 1926. (Her artistic generation includes Marisol, Niki de Saint Phalle, Nancy Spero, Lee Lozano, Yayoi Kusama and Magdalena Abakanowicz.) During World War II she endured the horror of incarceration in two ghettos created by the Germans in occupied Poland and three concentration camps, mostly with her mother, a pediatrician, who also survived. In 1946, at 20, she began studying art, first in Prague and then in Paris, where she met her first husband, a Polish art historian, and endured a bout of tuberculosis.

Back in Poland in 1951, she and her husband adopted a son, and she continued her studies, apparently excelling in all sculptural mediums: clay and plaster, stone carving and bronze casting. In 1962 she had a solo show in the Polish pavilion at the Venice Biennale. By 1963 she was living again in Paris, where she became friends with the art critic Pierre Restany, who introduced her to many artists. Told she had breast cancer in 1968, she began making **her "Tumors" sculptures, using resin, gauze, crumpled newspapers and photographs. She died in 1973, at 46.**

Somehow it is not surprising that photographs of Ms. Szapocznikow show a beautiful, dark-haired woman only slightly plainer than Ava Gardner. She exudes, almost unfailingly, what can only be called a strong life force.

The work at Broadway 1602 moves around a lot, making it hard to differentiate originality **from susceptibility. But the mix is utterly fascinating. One minute you're looking at tinted polyester-resin casts of female lips on wire stems or a plate piled with similar casts of breasts. Art Nouveau and Allen Jones's naughty sculptures of garter-wearing women** from the 1960s come to mind. Yet there are drawings that suggest the anguished forms and distorted figures of Reuben Nakian or Louise Bourgeois.

Then there are small polyester-resin doll-like figures, and some drawings for a work from **1965, now lost, titled "Goldfinger I," which angrily combined part of a weapon with casts of female body parts. Near these is a pile of polyurethane casts of a woman's belly that were intended for mass production as pillows. They're from 1968, the year Ms. Szapocznikow also** carved a giant version of that same belly, doubled, in marble. And finally there is a series of small, crude drawings of a woman writhing on a hospital bed or standing before us, kouroslike, revealing a long mastectomy scar.

The show begins with the chewing gum photographs from the Documenta show. There is no mistaking what they are, or the way they poke fun at artistic pretentiousness while also being artful and abstractly inventive. They are particularly intriguing given the similarly **playful and modest setup photography that was prevalent in the late 1970s and early '80s. James Welling's suggestive black-and-white images of crumpled aluminum foil, for example, come to mind.**

Did Ms. Szapocznikow intend her stretched and contorted bits of gum to satirize the angst often found in postwar European sculpture, including some of her own? Probably not. In a **collaged text that is part of the "Photosculptures" portfolio, she tells of taking a break from the tiring task of polishing a marble sculpture of a Rolls-Royce, and suddenly focusing on the gum she was chewing.**

At first her statement struck me as pure poetic fantasy, similar to the definition of Surrealism as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella. Not so. In addition to everything else she was up to, Ms. Szapocznikow carved miniature Rolls-Royces in pink Portuguese and white Carrara marble in 1970.

This show introduces a career that should be sorted out as soon as possible.

“Alina Szapocznikow” continues through Jan. 12 at 1602 Broadway, 1182 Broadway, Suite 1602, at 28th Street, Chelsea, (212) 481-0362.

Correction: January 14, 2008

An art review in Weekend on Dec. 28 about an exhibition of work by Alina Szapocznikow at the Broadway 1602 gallery referred imprecisely to the ghettos in which she was incarcerated in World War II. They were ghettos created by the Germans in occupied Poland, not Polish ghettos.