



Fragmented Pleasure – Aneta Grzeszykowska: Holes

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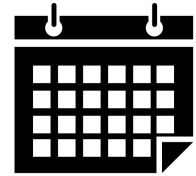
ARTICLES: POLAND



The aesthetic ideal of the complete, finished form has dominated the visual representation of the female body for centuries. The tradition of the female nude has emphasized the exterior of the female body while covering up "the terrifying secret that is hidden within the idealized exterior."^[1] „A fragmented representation of female body parts reveals this rejected interior and deconstructs the fetishized surface of the body. It challenges the dominant patriarchal mode of representation which has tended to present the female body according to the rhetoric of the pose. The destruction of the wholeness of the women's body destabilizes the relation between the traditionally male viewing subject and the female body as a viewing object.

Aneta Grzeszykowska's 2011 work, *Holes* (*Dziury*) shows body parts (ears, breasts, eyes, hair, fingers, mouths, breasts, a nose and a vagina) peeping out through holes in a white abstract surface. Eventually they all start to move, to pulsate as if they all had a life on their own. Hands reach in from outside the frame to apply make up to selected body parts, combing the hair and accessorizing the ears but leaving the vulva and the breasts untouched. Soon we see many eyes floating through the surface which are soon replaced by a half dozen mouths articulating something rather incomprehensible. After a few brief moments showing a throbbing vulva between two stripped ears and a stream of floating breasts Grzeszykowska returns to the initial composition. Once again we witness hands approaching the individual body parts but this time they initiate a different kind of contact. The (artist's) fingers engage into an erotic play: they touch each and every body part, caress the breasts, the lips, the vagina, stroke the hair and pet the nose. Eventually the intimate play between the mouth and the fingers overtake the screen, every now and then with the vulva replacing the lips. The erotically charged imagery is accentuated by the ephemeral music and sensual moaning sounds.

In this undoubtedly "self-erotic" play Grzeszykowska goes beyond speaking up against the traditional patriarchal representation of the female nude. By taking full control of her own body, she refuses the role of object of the judging and scrutinizing gaze and rethinks the practice of voyeuristic pleasure. She questions the cultural distinctions between pure and motivated pleasure, art and pornography. Through vaginal imagery she articulates the right to represent her own body and works against the traditional display of the nude that denied women's sexual desires, but at the same time she refers to the ambiguities concerning the use of this specific iconology. By presenting her body in fragments she distances herself from the ideal of the united, finished form and through the destruction of the complete female body she reclaims it from its patriarchal textualization. Grzeszykowska does not aim to hide the ambiguities and even contradictions her mode of representation implies, on the contrary she seems to rather stimulate theoretical contemplation.



FILMS

BROWSE FILMS

SEARCH BY YEAR

1920S

1930S

1940S

1950S

1960S

1970S

1980S

1990S

2000S

2010S

ARTISTS

BROWSE ARTISTS

IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER



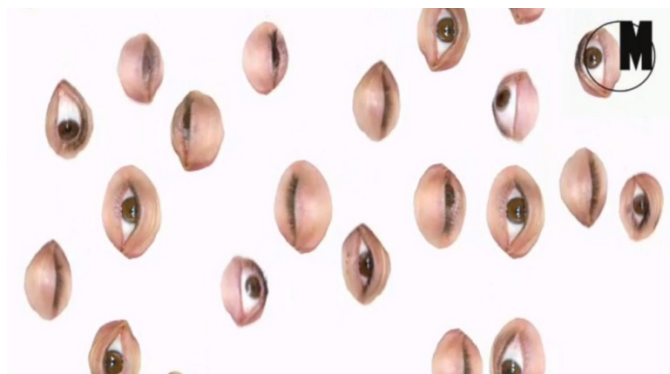
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Considering the feminist politics of the body, fragmentation as a mode of representation is indeed a double edge sword. Given that the image of fragmentation always corresponds to and presupposes its opposite: the image of wholeness^[2], the fragmented female body inevitably entails the gratification of the fantasy of reparation. According to British art critic Peter Fuller the fascination of Western audiences with the broken image of the female form lies in the (male) spectator's need to complete the form, to unite the fragments into an imagined whole.^[3] Even though it is presented in an unconventional manner, the image of the fragmented female body grants the male viewer an active role as it invites him to and "finish" the work. At the same time the female body is forced to remain passive and bear the controlling act of the male spectator.

But fragmentation can also be so strong that the male viewer cannot carry out this role, breaking the controlling link between viewer and viewed and reframing the character of the female body. Alina Szapocznikow, who has been a great influence on Grzeszykowska's work, is known for her thematic exploration of the body fragments. Even though she did not pursue a feminist critique of the male gaze in her oeuvre, she did make a significant contribution to the discussion.^[4] Iconic art historian Piotr Piotrowski argues that this somewhat "apolitical" position was partly responsible for her work becoming so significant in her time. As he explains: "precisely because she did not reject aesthetics, defending herself against the 'materiality' of representation and veristic exhibitionism that would become such an important element of the body art in the next decades, her art acquired a great expressive power contained within the tension between the experienced biology and the perceived form."^[5] Szapocznikow does not deny the body fragments the chance to be united again as a whole. By re-joining them she returns the body to the aesthetic sphere. In her work, which is tied to the Modernist aesthetic tradition, the spectator is confronted with the tension between unification and fragmentation. Here the disintegrated female body refuses the passive role of the pose and the typified female beauty represented by incomplete Roman statues. Since Szapocznikow's fragments transmit a very personal experience, her battle with breast cancer, the desire for bodily integrity shifts the power from the (male) spectator back to the (female) artist. It is she, Szapocznikow, who has full control over the exhibited body, whether it is the act of deconstruction or the motivation for unification.

Following in the footsteps of radical female artist of the 70s, Grzeszykowska uses fragmentation combined with vaginal imagery to achieve a sexual identity completely independent of men. In her work fragmentation enacts a deliberate deconstruction of the past, meaning breaking down of former dominant representational forms of the female body. She goes against the tradition of representing the female (naked) body as a closed entity denying its natural bodily functions. Here fragmentation could easily mean rediscovery. The spectator doesn't just see a female body in an unexpected form but witnesses the fragments gaining self-awareness and recognizing their power over the course of the film. In this sense *Holes* is a deliberately deceptive film, in which Grzeszykowska first pretends to accept the control of the viewer but eventually confronts him with the fact that he is being played.

Dolled up and used, in the beginning of the film the body parts seem to be victims of the spectators gaze. But as the film progresses the fragmented body actually starts to enjoy the interaction. The slow movements, the quiet panting, the sensual lip licking suggest required attraction. When the stream of the floating eyes appear, the spectator who has so far enjoyed the safe position of the voyeur might experience a subtle shift in power. His invisibility is being corrupted as he sees eyes looking at him. The spectator is now being watched, or more precisely he is being examined. Even though they are usually erotically charged, in this context the painted lips bordered on two sides by the accessorized ears trigger rather ambiguous emotions. The hushing and moaning and the lip licking seem to work to seduce the viewer but when the the ears, stripped of their jewelry, appear, the expected course of the encounter is disrupted. With the comic appearance of the vulva between the ears, the relation between viewing subject and object becomes unstable. By the time the fingers start pleasuring the body parts the spectator finds himself excluded from the image. His unwanted position is revealed and his voyeuristic gaze denied.



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What seemed to be yet another portrayal of the sensuousness of the female body ended up as an illustration of a woman taking control of her own body and identity. This film is a depiction of the feminist awakening, the recognition of the oppressive male gaze and the systematic deconstruction of its power. Even though it looks as if the individual body parts were dressed up to please the spectator, the body was preparing to please itself. This is a demonstration of the female's own erotic fantasy world and of the awareness of her own sexual self-sufficiency. The seductive images emphasize the impact of the realization that the spectator is forced out of the erotic game, none of the images are for his amusement.

Being aware of the drawbacks of using vaginal imagery to represent a woman's own identity, in *Holes Grzeszykowska* seems to embrace the ambiguities of her work and invite future debates. Even though in this specific context fragmentation suggests the denial of the traditionally passive pose of the woman, her representational method does not necessarily ensure a strong feminist standpoint. Without knowing the intention of the artist or when being acquainted with the piece in a contrary context, the work could easily imply a completely different perception. *Grzeszykowska* disintegrates her body and puts the selected parts in play to provide us with a new look of something personal becoming inevitably political. Despite giving a few hints of a possibly definitive interpretation of the piece, *Grzeszykowska's Holes* does not commit itself to a single reading. Instead it triggers various kinds of reflexions, depending of the viewer's involvement with the represented issue. Besides referring to the male gaze as a persistent issue of feminist philosophy, it contributes to an understanding of body fragmentation as a metaphor for a revolution in the depiction of the female nude, and also recalls general criticism of the first wave of feminist art as expressing an essentialist view of femininity.

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View film online at **Filmoteka Muzeum**

[1] Nead, Lynda (1992) *The Female Nude. Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*. London, New York: Routledge, p. 66.

[2] Guldin referring to Wenner in Guldin, Rainer (2002) "The dis-membered body: bodily fragmentation as a metaphor for political renewal" *Physis*, Rio de Janeiro, vol. 12, no. 2, p. 223.

[3] Fuller, Peter (1980) "The Venus and Internal Objects", in. *Art and Psychoanalysis*. London: Writers and Readers, pp. 71.129.

[4] Piotrowski, Piotr (2009) *In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*. London: Reaktion Books, p. 344.

[5] Piotrowski, p. 345.

body

eroticism

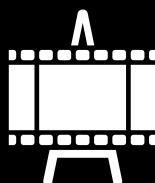
feminism

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