

UNTITLED. CONVERSATION WITH ANETA GRZESZYKOWSKA


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Witek Orski: You decided to entitle your series of photographs currently on show in the Raster gallery *Selfie* – a reference to the popular phenomenon of auto portraits in the internet. Is the series meant to be a commentary on it?

Aneta Grzeszykowska : The title illustrates an auto-creation mechanism which has seized control over us. In this sense it is a commentary to the 'selfie' as a phenomenon. I do not relate it to the context of the Internet, however. If I were to limit myself to that, I would prepare an online project rather than an exhibition in an art gallery. I consider the Internet as a medium of that mechanism. The very mechanism is part of human nature. Man was always eager to hide behind his representation. The image of self, the façade he builds, was always needed.

The image of self becomes doubled in *Selfie*. You present the photographic facade which hides a second one: a self-portrait/sculpture made from pig's skin...

That's right. I don't simply show sculptures, but photographs of them. Their photographic representations. That move results from the experience with my previous works. You know, I also make dolls. It's very important for me how they are photographed. For documentation needs I myself take photographs of them according to a set of rules - black on white background, white on black background and so on. I really dislike it, when somebody takes photos of my dolls standing in the gallery and shows them somewhere else. It gets on my nerve...

Why?

Because they are sewn from a very difficult material to work with, namely wool. I put great attention to the lighting which creates their spaciousness. Somebody, who doesn't know about that will simply take a flash photo and spoil all of my hard work. I get annoyed easily. And then at one point the irritation becomes something interesting, something so... contemporary. I understood, that I want to control not only my own image, but also the image of what I create. I have to admit that it was that feeling which made me think about "Selfie". I decided not to show the audience the sculptures on their own, but only that what I'd like them to see. In a way I created objects only to photograph them later.

A sign of total control over your own image?

Yes. It's interesting, that this cycle was "under construction" over a very long period of time. The first photograph in the exhibition – showing a hand holding a finger – was taken a few years ago. Afterwards, I was thinking where should I take all of this. I considered making a film, which would enable me to show the process of how these works deteriorate. That idea was completely pointless, too obvious. And then it came to me, that they have to be photographs which pin the objects right there, where they are most perfect. When I became aware of that, the concept of *Selfie* crystallized itself.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, "Selfie # 8", 2014



Aneta Grzeszykowska, "Selfie # 6", 2014

It goes well together with the classical concept according to which photography –contrary to film - never shows passing away as it always shows death...

Yes, and I think that this work radicalizes this concept even more. Passing away becomes condensed because of the fact, that the photographed sculptures are made from already dead matter. They are a fascinating final one-time stage of physical existence in their form we observe. Additionally, I wanted to underline it by creating compositions made entirely out of skin. The colorful background on which the objects are photographed is also skin and my hands, of course. It means a lot to me, that nothing else can be seen apart from the matter in three different states: the object, the dead and the living body. Skinplastics, that's how I call it. I find it fascinating how senses actually trick the mind by differentiating.

The objects in *Selfie* combine the concept of the body as a dead matter with the logic of a self-portrait, which results in a paradoxical post-mortem self-portrait. They remind me of Alina Szapocznikow's sculptures.

The reference to Szapocznikow means a lot to me. What fascinated me was the fact, that my objects from pig's skin began resembling her wax figures after a few days. Szapocznikow's works are really dead, starting from the choice of material – the wax contains their death. While working on *Selfie*, I have experienced the fast changing of dying matter. I had to rush. I still keep those objects in my studio. They do not rot, however. They become dry and turn into something like plastic. Everything changes

into plastic.

Ok, but if we look at them not as objects, but as self-portraits then this trace becomes somewhat macabre... How did you feel when working on your own face?

I was focused only on the concept. I always want the concept to be a crystallized, simple idea. I eliminate unnecessary elements. Later on, during the making of the sculptures, a lot of randomness entered the project. I acted spontaneously and it felt really good. I chose characteristic features of my face and I was strangely happy with the fact that the sculpture actually looks like me.

Have you experienced identifying with the absolutely dead image of you? As I imagine, it was a very strong existential experience.

Everything in *Selfie* refers to me, but there is a certain dose of shyness and ease. Sometimes I thought that it would be better to cut off your own finger and watch it rot. I think that the feeling of the body's integrity is incredibly strong and destroying it is something awful. As you know, in my works I keep cutting, bending, and chunking, but that happens on a theoretical level which refers to the future and also to memory and identity. I'm watching it from the safe perspective of being an artist. It's the possibility to enter the state of a metaphor which is parallel to reality. This work is a narcissistic theory of my own death by using the real death of animals which lies hidden here, taken away from them, because the human body is made from their flesh.



Aneta Grzeszykowska "Selfie # 11", 2014



Aneta Grzeszykowska, "Selfie # 12", 2014

Did the identifying have different stages? Did you identify stronger with the works at different points in time?

It was interesting. The feeling of identifying arose when I found my photograph that resembled the leather images of me. It's a paradox in the context of the *Selfie* idea. It made me aware of the fact how much parted I "am" from my body to the benefit of the image.

Are you interested in the strain between the image of self and identity?

I simply think that they are the same in a way. You know, I work a lot on identity and, in general, I believe that there is no such thing. Man is rather a process, his past is a collection of used, unnecessary incarnations. I think that the true need of saving identity arises only in the moment of our death.

And yet portrait photography in its everyday use, in particular in various institutions, serves to construct and confirm identity. I have the impression that you focus on consequently deconstructing the identity function in your works. Is negating identity something that has connected your photographic projects throughout the years – from *Untitled* to *Selfie*?

These photographic works turn into one concept. I place them in one line: *Album*, *Untitled Film Stills*, *Negative Book* and *Selfie*. The process of losing yourself becomes divided into several stages. In the *Album*, I have just erased my image. In *Untitled Film Stills* I am trying to be somebody else. In *Negative Book*, I'm trying to be myself and in *Selfie* something else is trying to be me. I wanted Cindy Sherman to play me – that would be a logical ending of the entire process.

How does the project created prior to *Selfie*, the *Negative Book*, fit into this philosophy?

I would compare *Negative Book* to *Album* and *Untitled Film Stills* – this cycle is span just between them. As in the case of repeating UFS, I'm trying to reenact a person, although this time it's not Cindy Sherman, but me. If I'm impersonating me it means, that I started off with the thesis that I'm not on the photographs. Unlike the *Album*, *Negative Book* contains no surrounding, its "identity" is also denied. It's the process of recalling oneself split into particular photographs, which leads the denying the whole world.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, "Negative Book # 47", 2012/13



Aneta Grzeszykowska, "Negative Book # 55", 2012/13

Do you think that apart from the logic of leaving identity behind, your workshop also influences the thematic consistency of your works? Does it mean that you work on various cycles of photographs, films and sculptures simultaneously?

Certainly, it has great influence. I work with different media and the image is formally different... I always knew that my interests are so... I don't know... monothematic. Depending on which medium I choose, it gets illustrated differently. I focus strongly on the features of the medium I am currently using. And so films like *Bolimorfia* or *Headache* were made more or less at the same time as *Untitled Film Stills*, *Album*, or *Lovebook*. However, film is a narrative, it relies on time and I have to catch the viewer's attention. In photographic works, the concept is at the forefront and it becomes illustrated with the image later on.

How important is the element of performance, present in the majority of your works?

It's all about performance for me. Frankly speaking, I believe all of my works to be performances. Take *Album*, for example. You can see the effect – a photograph, but the entire work is crucial to it, the act of erasing images of your own self. That is what I focus on – the work, the process. An exhibition or a publication is the final stage, somewhat in opposition to the act. The process of creating is most vital to me, even if it doesn't get shown. *Untitled Film Stills* – it's a real performance. *Lovebook* – the same. There I draw my approach to visual traces, which are left after the performance. All artists whose images were used in *Lovebook*, were reused by me later. I literally used their bodies, they were hired as actresses – they act in my performance. They perform it together with me, although unconsciously.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, still from movie "Headache", 2008

What about *Negative Book*? Did the material aspect of these photographs mean anything to you? For me those works are great as standalone visual objects, in a way independent from the process preceding them. Is negation or denial, which results from using an image in the negative, part of the meaning of *Negative Book* as performance?

Negative Book is a cycle of photographs, but it's obvious for me that it is a performance as well. What can be seen in the gallery is a result of that performance. Some people said that, if you get to know "how it's done", it will lose its magic. For me the sense of the work lies in the clash between the absurd act and the final effect. My work are tragedies and comedies at the same time. To

illustrate that I've recently done a film also entitled *Negative Process*. It shows how the "photos" were done. It even reveals that the "photo" was taken before – when I painted myself black and that what happened later on was just... reproduction. In this sense *Negative Book* relates to the same photography medium which is strongly connected to light. My photographs are pitch black, light is only painted on them. In my next exhibition, I'm going to show both works: the photo series and the film. This is the moment when the weight shifts from the final image to the performance, which is crucial for me. I think it's fascinating when the viewer knows how it's done.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, still from movie "Negative process", 2014

When comparing the film with the photograph an interesting problem arises. I'd like to ask you about the artistic role of photography in the face of performance. I think one could differentiate between the record of a performance and the situation when you alone operate and act with the camera which you later photograph. It's rather a trace than a record. The trace of a performance understood as the bloody sign of the wall left by Ana Mendieta...

Yes, I think that the photographs are more of a trace than a record of the performance. The process of creating *Negative Book* is shown in the film. It was very technical for me – I wanted to develop my idea through performance, but in this case it probably means restricting the viewer's access to the idea.

What do you mean by it?

It's a situation without the viewer. He has access only to that trace. The problem lies within the consciousness of the performance process and how much it influences the perception of that trace. I don't want that trace to be monochromatic, dramatic and beautiful. I want to reveal the performance that led to the creation of that trace.

How important is the work in your studio? How important is the time you spend on creating and the effort to prepare and create a work of art?

It's the absolute foundation for me. It's the most important aspect and it's what makes me work on it at all, it's the process when my works are born. I find it inspiring. I don't like to know, I prefer searching – that is why I work with so many different media. What fascinates me in the very creation are the metaphors hidden in technical and the creation process. Things such as bad makeup or the places where images meet in *Love Book* are the source of new meanings. All errors or flaws are equally important as creation, even though everything has to be firmly rooted in a crystallized concept.

Translation by Mateusz Kaczyński