

The Body of the Image

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Material Abstraction

Were one to attempt possibly the simplest description of Magdalena Moskwa's work, one would most probably be forced to conclude that she submits the relationship between the surface and whatever can be found on its other side to analysis – and in the most detailed form imaginable. In her research, she reveals the vastly complex topology of relations between whatever is *on* the surface as well as *beneath* it, *behind* it, and *within* it. It is a study in permeating to the surface, emerging from it and appearing on it – in breaking through to it, even.

Painting is the tool she applies in her research. Yet, contrary to all appearances, this is no symptomatology examining the symptom-cause relation; nor is it any form of phenomenology examining the phenomenon-essence relation; nor is it psychology, even, attempting an examination of the relationship between expression and inner conditions. This is something of a paradox, as Moskwa's painting hints at all of these, to a certain extent. A sorceress of the perennial art of appearances, she makes her art morph into an appearance of symptomatology, phenomenology, and psychology.

Her work shows images of bodies – often as not fragmented, of plants – often as not rampant, of human flesh – usually in close-ups, of outlandish clothing. In her early paintings, we can also encounter images of strange spaces, objects of daily use and visionary figures. In terms of style, her art weaves between surrealist deformation, brute verism, and semi-graphic imitation. This is depicting art. No wonder it may seem to have adopted the look of art of representation bordering on symptomatology, phenomenology and psychology.

It hints at all these things – yet what can it be contrary to all appearances? Before offering any in-depth clarification, let us assume that what we are dealing with is *reversed anatomy* of sorts which creates bodies rather than dismembering them, while

applying (in selected and therefore – probably the most fascinating cases) the rule of *reversed autopsy* which creates organs existent *within, beneath, and behind* the surface – or rather the images of these organs, to be precise. Imagery and embodiment are but tricks of artistic appearance, which conceals (albeit visibly) a materialistic analysis of what remains *within, behind, and beneath*. Such analysis serves to reveal and create something absolutely paradoxical, if not impossible, with measures of traditional painting applied. The matter of abstraction, or – to be more specific – the material abstract of a relationship between the surface and what remains *beneath, within, and behind* it.

Imagery and Embodiment

The most deceitful appearance with which Moskwa's art deludes us consists in the fact that she shows us images of bodies. The effect of the illusion is magnified in the verism of early portraits – and in the graphic materiality of the flesh in later works. The masterful grasp of classic techniques is applied to create that very illusion – the illusion that the image becomes the body, and the body becomes the image – that the surface morphs into the object's carnal shell.

All this makes Moskwa's art the counterpoint and counterargument for a certain powerful anthropology. In phrasing it, Hans Belting embarks on an assumption that “[in] the area of visual activity comprising their life principle, people tend to carve out the symbolic unit we refer to as ‘the image’”. He further emphasises that “the image is something much more than a simple figment of perception. It transpires as a result of personal or collective symbolisation. According to that principle, anything appearing within the field of vision or before the inner eye may be constituted as or changed into an image – which is why the concept of an image, if approached seriously, can exist as an

anthropological concept only. We live in images and comprehend the world through images". This, on the other hand, he sets out a specific relationship between the image and the human – or, to be more specific, the human body. "In the anthropological perspective, man does not transpire as 'the lord and master' of his images, but – which is a different concept altogether – as the 'location of images' occupying his body: he becomes the victim of images he himself created, even if continuously attempting to control them"⁰¹.

Thus it may be concluded that when Belting considers man as a place of images, he chiefly has the human body in mind. Images, these symbolic units, find their place within and originate from the body. Belting specifies man's role as a "living space for images"⁰², to highlight that it is only thanks to such rooting within the body can they remain alive. Images can remain alive insofar as they find their space within the body. Yet what happens when the body becomes an image?

The issue of the human body itself not being subject to reflection, its concept remaining unconsidered, is a point which serves to weaken the power of Belting's anthropology. Were that to be contemplated, the author would have to confront the aporia that Magdalena Moskwa has met head-on. The naïve use of the term "body" allows the user to avoid wandering through pathless and unmapped territory⁰³.

Belting's projection is relatively simple – anyone's perceptions may morph into images in a process of symbolisation

01. Hans Belting, *Antropologia obrazu. Szkice do nauki o obrazie* [An Anthropology of Images. Picture, Medium, Body], trans. Mariusz Bryl, Universitas, Kraków 2007, pp. 12-13.

02. Belting, p. 109.

03. Belting writes, "Albeit I have acknowledged how problematic the concept is the body [footnote by J.L.] in contemporary science, I am applying it here according to a somewhat global principle". Belting, p. 72.

(socialisation), the process itself taking place through their externalisation via a specific carrier. Thanks to this they are received by others and internalised in the living bodies of spectators. Belting concludes, "To express the concept differently, internal images are endogenous or body-related – whereas an external image always requires the technical body of an image to appear before our eyes"⁰⁴. It may well be said that according to Belting, images remain within a living body or assume the form of a technical (non-living) body. They remain within space tantamount to a living body, or take up space as a technical (non-living) body. They are incarnations or embodiments. Created within, they are externalised only to become internalised again. Born within the body, they are deposited in an (external) body to then be used as a channel of return to the body's interior. They do not exist outside the body. Hence the question – how do images differ from the body? To be more specific, is such differentiation at all possible? This in turn, leads to the question whether any other differentiations Belting's anthropology bases on are at all possible: the interior vs. the exterior, the living body vs. the technical one.

Differentiations seem clear as long as they are approached with a certain *naïveté* (which Belting does purposely): any attempt to enhance related reflections turns into confrontation with *aporia*. In contrast to Belting, Moskwa accepts confrontation.

Moskwa chooses to face *aporia*, the face-related metaphor justified for at least two reasons: first, because portraits form the majority of Moskwa's works; second, because *psyche* is the actual character featured in these images. As highlighted and shown to us by Moskwa herself, the *aporia* of indistinguishability actually concerns the *psyche*.

04. Belting, p. 26.

The Exposure

A simple and relatively obvious statement seems to be the appropriate point of entry for all deliberations. The human body itself is a pliable image. In Moskwa's art, the attire and costumes she designed remain the most convincing expression of that statement. They would all offer a specific form and shape to any body wearing them, while managing to avoid deformity as seen from the vantage point of body-related canons. The purpose of clothing and costumes was to transform human bodies into images. To reveal the body of the image, we have to remove any attire it conceals.

Once clothes are removed, a naked body is revealed – as in case of the only male portrait she ever painted (excepting two paintings showing male-like silhouettes of angels with their backs to the audience). *Untitled [Portrait of the Father, 2003, oil on canvas]* shows the upper half of a nude male body. Skin lesions have blotched the face red; age-related hormonal imbalance has given the body an androgynous look. This could well be the portrait of an elderly man – or of an elderly woman. The body of the painting serves to reveal the indistinguishability of the sexes. While the title suggests that we are looking at a male, the appearance created by the artist offers no unambiguous confirmation such a conclusion.

Other paintings from the same period show female figures, faces set and attired fancifully. Although depicted fully-clothed, they remain in a sense naked (though in a somewhat perverse reference to Kenneth Clark's division between the naked and the nude, the works are not nudes). These paintings reveal symptoms of inner emotion – mostly rage and aggression. Such expression of the interior cannot stand for anything but appearance, as none of these works shows a specific person. Thus, this is no series of paintings showing people going through some internalised experience or other, as seen by the artist. This is rather a gallery of emotions personified by figures which she invented.

What we see are emotions and experiences, albeit their actual denomination remains a mystery.

Thus, the image remains a veil or curtain, an obvious and classic art motif. It appears in Pliny's famous parable on artistic careers. In this he tells, "[Parrhasius] entered a competition with Zeuxis, who produced a picture of grapes so successfully represented that birds flew up to the stage-buildings; whereupon Parrhasius himself produced such a realistic picture of a curtain that Zeuxis, proud of the verdict of the birds, requested that the curtain should now be drawn and the picture displayed; and when he realised his mistake, with a modesty that did him honour he yielded up the prize, saying that whereas he had deceived birds Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist!"⁰⁵. Victory in the contest was awarded on the basis of a conviction (which, incidentally, remains fundamental to all anthropologies) that human perception deserves more merit than avian perception.

In considering that parable, Jacques Lacan remarked that representations of grapes (or of other fruit or meat), while fascinating to humans and deceptive to their vision in pretence of reality, have never triggered the interest of animals. In Pliny's tale, the grapes attracted the birds, arousing their interest – and then their appetite.

The reference to what Lacan has dubbed the lure (*le leurre*) is of key importance. According to Lacan, the lure assumes the function of a mask, or – more broadly – of an image. This is a self-image generated by the subject when surrendering to the perception of others. While such self-image is generated in response to the desire of others, suggesting a promise of satisfaction, that promise is not kept. Lacan declares, "Generally speaking, the connection between what we see and what we want to see outlines

05. Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, trans. Irena and Tadeusz Zawadzki, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław-Kraków 1961, p. 395, [online], www.iep.utm.edu [access: 10.08.2015].

our relationship with the lure. The subject presents itself differently to what it truly is – whatever is rendered unto its perception is not what he/she would want to see”⁰⁶. Therefore, the lure is the rendering of its presentation as something else. The lure is an effective image. It shows itself as something capable of satisfying a desire and as a symbol of such satisfaction; it arouses visual appetite and what Lacan referred to as the voracity (*voracité*) of the eye.

According to Lacan, the grapes painted by Zeuxis became the lure enticing the birds and making them hungry, whereas Parhassius' painting serves no function beyond a *trompe-l'œil*. And thus it is a game of deception with visual awareness, an optical illusion, a play of appearances. In contrast to images equipped with a lure function, *trompe-l'œil* effect images evoke questions of what remains beyond the screen they became rather than direct action.

In Moskwa's art, images balance between the lure and curtain effect, kindling a desire to act as well as an interest in whatever has been concealed behind the screen of the image. In some paintings, the two functions collide – the carnal lure is exposed once the screen of the image is incised.

The Cut

The severed surface continuity effect has evidently transpired in Moskwa's art as a result of her observations of skin imperfections-cracks, abrasions, redness. These nicks reveal things hiding *within* the skin, or *behind* it, or *beneath* it. They are what the

06. *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan : Livre XI : Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1973, p. 96.

artist emphasises in an attempt to reach the interior of what she portrays. In her early works of the years 2000–2003, we see female faces, frequently including her own. Yet none of these portraits aims at showing the model verbatim, or even at delving into her inner life. Moskwa shows more interest in analysing the *psyche* as such, in creating its own separate portrait. She is not concerned with studying the mask of the face (such studies can be found in her earlier paintings), but rather in revealing the world behind and beneath.

The artist begins with an incision, to then reach the stage of cutting through the image in a vivisection which serves the purpose of revealing the interior. To be precise, she creates the artistic effects of incisions or cuts.

Lyotard opens one of his most mysterious books, the *Économie libidinale*, with an image of a radical incision. “Open the so-called body and spread out all its surfaces: not only the skin with each of its folds, wrinkles, scars, with its great velvety planes, and contiguous to that, the scalp and its mane of hair, the tender pubic fur, nipples, nails, hard transparent skin under the heel, the light frills of the eyelids, set with lashes – but open and spread, expose the labia maiora, so also the labia minora with their blue network bathed in mucus, dilate the diaphragm of the anal sphincter, longitudinally cut and flatten out the black conduit of the rectum, then the colon, then the caecum, now a ribbon with its surface all striated and polluted with shit; as though your dressmaker’s scissors were opening the leg of an old pair of trousers, go on, expose the small intestine’s alleged interior, the jejunum, the ileum, the duodenum, or else, at the other end, undo the mouth at its corners, pull out the tongue at its most distant roots and split it, spread out the bats’ wings of the palate and its damp basements, open the trachea and make it the skeleton of a boat under construction; armed with scalpels and tweezers, dismantle and lay out the bundles and bodies of the encephalon; and then the whole network of veins and arteries, intact, on an immense mattress, and then the lymphatic network, and the

fine body pieces of the wrist, the ankle, take them apart and put them end to end with all the layers of nerve tissue which surround the aqueous humours and the cavernous body of the penis, and extract the great muscles, the great dorsal nets, spread them out like smooth sleeping dolphins"⁰⁷. This single long sentence is preceded with the title of the subchapter's title *Opening the Libidinal Surface*. Lyotard puts his extraordinary syntax to use in a wish to convey the anatomy of the body, the arrangement of organs, the mysterious topic of the bodily interior with its trove of most secret desires. He brings them to the surface, using the primeval continuity of the ecto- and endoderm as a foundation. The sentence itself is a phantasm of high-precision vivisection, slightly akin to disembowelment by some unknown Jack the Ripper. The impulse leads to reaching the interior with libidinal drives and desires emerging. Cutting the body open and spreading its planes allows Lyotard to discover a different topic altogether.

In her equally detailed autopsies, Magdalena Moskwa is driven by similar aspirations to discover new topics of the body and image – yet she uses material appearances rather than Lyotard's phantasms. Incision effects seem to be taking on momentum as time passes. First, the frame of the image is shifted from the typical portrait bust to the lower half of the body (2003). Hands or shoes, even, become carriers of features of the object portrayed; footwear ornaments appear as the artist applies thick layers of paint, suggesting a relief. Later, the frame ceases to be the only incision tool – paintings begin mostly to show cut-off hands.

The image of a hand appears next to an image of a partial figure in a 2003 painting. The index fingernail is scratching at the surface of the painting. The edges of the wound seem to be covered in blood. The surface morphs into skin, a wounded body peeping from underneath the cut in the image. By 2004, the frame

07. Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1993, p. 3.

becomes more radical, with a close-up of folded hands. Fingernails are no longer painted – nail tips have been glued on. Artistic materialism has been replaced with graphic imitation. The artist has moulded the picture frame into a carnal organ, with thick subcutaneous veins and a navel in its upper quarters. The play of appearances changes the painting into an eerie organ setup. An incision attempt – or its effect, actually – appears in one corner of the frame, showing a cut in the immediate vicinity of the work. A temporary solution, this was not an incision to the image itself. Many paintings were created during the period 2003–2005, a hand severed from the body becoming the component enabling a description of the object portrayed. Hands begin appearing next to torsos, forming separate arrangements with each other or with other body parts. Fingers are frequently crowned with artificial nail tips rather than painted fingernails – as if these prosthetic components could enhance the strength of scratching and breaking through to the other side of the surface.

Moskwa speaks of the body as of a reliquary, filled with all that is *beyond* that body⁰⁸. Here is when the meaning of the reverse anatomy mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this paper is revealed, the anatomy played on two planes: of the appearance and of that appearance's materiality. Moskwa performs an autopsy of the human body to break through to the other side and find whatever it is that can identify that space as its own, albeit unlocked. The autopsy is reversed, as it involves an appointment, a re-enactment of a fragmentary body of the painting rather than the dismemberment of a corpse. Incisions to the surface of such body reveal what lies *beneath*, *within*, and *behind* it. The exposure of artistic materiality allows such revelation.

08. Lena Wicherkiewicz, *Moje malarstwo jest próbą zaklania ciała... Rozmowa z Magdaleną Moskwą [My Art Is an Attempt At Conjuring the Body... a Conversation with Magdalena Moskwa]*, [online], <http://www.magdamoskwa.art.pl/pdf/tekst12.pdf> [access: 28.04. 2015].

The Extension

In her subsequent works, Moskwa travels into the depths of the surface, the depths of artistic appearances. She breaks through to the other side of the painting in the literal sense of the phrase, holes appearing in the outer plane of the work. Scratches, abrasions, and discolouring give way to wounds, abscesses, deep cuts with no hope of healing.

One such painting [*Untitled, No. 64*, 2011, wooden board, chalk tempera relief, oil, hair] seems to be an eerie collection of twelve skin and surface perforations. The body of the painting, its skin, the flesh of its tissues seem to have been broken twelve times. A remarkable paradox is encountered: perforation reaches the back of the painting, the wall it has been hung upon, or the table upon which it has been placed. Thus, Moskwa decides to reach whatever lies beneath or behind the surface, and simultaneously, within it. She analyses the depth of the surface. The painting becomes an object; the hole [*Untitled, No. 78*, 2013, wooden board, chalk tempera relief, oil, hair, glass] is fitted with a magnifying glass enabling detailed observation. The deep reveals painted matter of the flesh – mock tissue, an illusion of the peculiar and mysterious meat of the *psyche*.

Embarking on the road of surrealist portrait and dabbling in verist portraits, Magda Moskwa entered the path of persistent analysis of the relations between the surface and what lies *beneath*, *behind*, and *within* it – reaching discoveries which seem to astonishingly coincide with Freud's conclusions and encapsulated in a single sentence: "Psyche is extended; it knows nothing of it"⁰⁹. This statement by Freud tormented Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida, most probably because extended substance was traditionally set in contrast to thinking substance. In traditional

09. Quoting Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Małgorzata Kwietniewska, *słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2002, p. 52, in: *Collected Papers*, Basic Books 1959, trans. Joan Riviere.

teaching, any thinking matter had to be free of extension. Freud's statement, on the other hand, proves that such conviction had to stem from a shortage of *psyche's* self-knowledge.

One's own spaciousness remains the deeply concealed feature of any *psyche*. By perforating the image's curtain, Magdalena Moskwa reveals the extension of the *psyche*. She creates a material image by using the perennial art of appearances.

One of her paintings [*Untitled, No. 81, 2014, chalk tempera, oil, slag aluminium*] is a unique study. An irregular, cylindrical, elongated block, at first glance resembling a sculpture rather than a painting, it was made of chalk tempera and most of its surface was covered with slag aluminium. The artist had used such a primer and coating before, for example in paintings where parts of the body – usually hands, – offered the fullest measure of mocking a reliquary. Here, however, the block truly is a reliquary, concealing a valuable component within and exposing it to a certain extent. Once perforated, it opens, exposing its interior – a well-nigh perfect illusion of the interior of a human body. The external surface, smooth, metallic, and shiny, parts in two places, somewhat abashed, exposing inner flesh – the extension of the interior, the intimate mystery.

In its very form, the image resembles the Klein bottle, its outer surface tantamount to the inner one. The surface itself is thus concealed *within, behind, or beneath* the surface; the *psyche*, which is the outer carnal surface, and concealed beneath it. The body of the image is most accurate at conveying such a tautology of the *psyche* (or soul) and the body, Magdalena Moskwa shows us that body's anatomy in her reverse artistic autopsy.

At the Fingers' Ends

Until now, we have been focusing on the artistic image in its *trompe l'œil* function, neglecting the lure effect to a certain extent. Artificial nail tips, precious stones, imitation guts and/or other organs, hair, pieces of plants – they have all been serving as the lure. The lure, which leads into temptation, kindling fascination and revulsion alike, continuously leads to one thing and one thing only, the touch.

Moskwa's works are actual bodies; they crave touch, and can most definitely reciprocate. It may well be concluded that in provoking touch, they want to force the *psyche* of every viewer to externalise. They strive for contact with that which is deepest, with that which – as long as it remains within – non-extendable and untouchable at the same time. Michel Serres spoke of the sense of soul which resides in the fingers' ends¹⁰. Touching the paintings would release an orgy of sensuality, providing for a truly internalised feast.

While Moskwa's fingernails or artificial tips serve the purpose of severing the surface of the painting or the screen of appearance, they enable cognition nonetheless. It may well be said that at the end of the day, they allow the *psyche* to gain knowledge of its own extension – fingertips are all about sensual pleasure.

As emphasised before, hands are the body parts the artist uses to portray the *psyche* – everything concealed *within*, *behind*, and *beneath* the surface of the painting. Yet hands and fingertips are also a tool allowing paintings and their bodies to be created. In a tedious and lengthy process, on a path of toil intertwined with sensual caress, the artist applies one layer of

10. Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin*, Reaktion Books, London 2004, p. 30.

paint after another, smoothens surfaces and paints, all to create a body which enables the revelation of an image (an image of things concealed within that body).

While touch creates the body of the image, it remains its greatest adversary. Touch can cause damage to or destruction of the body of the image – and yet without touch that body could not be born, could not exist. Such a contradictory function of touch is rooted in the aporia Aristotle discovered and defined. “Is touch a single sense or a group of senses? It is also a problem what is the organ of touch. It is the body [in receiving sensory impulses] or not? May it be that it is merely a ‘medium’, while something else [within the organism] is the primary sensual organ”¹¹. While Derrida discusses the aporia extensively, he offers a conclusion without resolving the matter ultimately: “while touch may exist without other senses, Aristotle emphasised that no other sense could exist without it”¹². Once it is agreed that every sense is conditioned with touch, then touch and caress may also be expressed as intense or less intense viewing, a form much safer for the body of images. If the body is truly a medium only, touch is received beneath or behind its surface. It may well be concluded that in caress and persistent work, Magdalena Moskwa reached the depths of the body of the image (or painting) through touch. A fundamental question arises: is her method one of anatomy or vivisection? Is the living body of the image her object?

11. Aristotle, *O duszy [On the Soul]*, trans. Paweł Siwek, in: Aristotle, *Dzieła wszystkie [Collected Works]*, t. 3, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2003, p. 103, [online], www.iep.utm.edu [access: 10.08.2015].

12. Jacques Derrida, *On Touching Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2005, p. 24.

The Life of a Nonorganic Body

We continued discussing the body, persistently avoiding the fundamental question: is the body of the image actually alive? Manuel DeLanda offered a concept of non-organic life¹³, which concept seems to coincide beautifully with Moskwa's diagnosis. "A painting is truly alive: it breathes and it sweats. The canvas base, the paper, the board, the temper, they all react to external conditions, shrinking and expanding. Colours change in response to light; when drying, oil paint changes its volume; the painting undergoes constant chemical change. Paintings age and die just like people do; and just like people, they have physicians – conservators who work in well-nigh hospital or laboratory conditions, often as not use medical equipment, and perform complex surgery on artwork bodies"¹⁴.

Nonetheless, were we to follow DeLanda and his non-organic life concept – one according to which physical processes involve mechanisms analogous to those occurring in organic matter one would be forced to take a somewhat different look at the life of the body of a painting. One could rather suspect that conservation practices applied in museums tend to suspend vital functions; that artwork conservation hinders the process of becoming (of becoming something else, a non-image and of falling apart); that the painting's non-organic life morphs into a zombie, the undead, something that cannot die and thus cannot fully live. Conservation works puts brakes on the vital functions of the painting's nonorganic body, shielding it from ageing, disintegration, and wear.

In order to be referred to as life, non-organic life would have to be fundamentally subject to the drive of death, that is to the

13. Manuel DeLanda, *Nonorganic Life*, in: *Zone 6: Incorporations*, ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, Urzone, New York 1992.

14. Wicherkiewicz, op.cit.

process of striving to re-achieve its original birth condition¹⁵. This is when the most profound of all secrets concealed *within, beneath, or behind* the surface of the painting – in the carnal depths of the *psyche* portrayed – comes to light. It is the lust for destruction, its only material form being that of a desire to be touched – a desire to be touched in the most sensitive of all places, in the tear or parting of the surface of the image's body. This would allow contact between externalised *psyche* with the soul of the toucher at his or her fingertips. It is touch, after all, which allows a connection between what is *beneath, or behind* the surface and the medium of the body. Even if life is at stake.

15. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Poza zasadą rozkoszy* [*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*], in: Sigmund Freud, *Psychologia nieświadomości* [*The Unconscious Mind*], trans. Robert Reszke, Warszawa 2007.