

Hair Snarl: the Aesthetic Body in the Order of Things

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Read at the Rail (<http://www.thebrooklynrail.org/film/march04/hairsnarl.html>)

A traveling program curated by Warsaw-based Lukasz Ronduda of short works from the Archive of Polish Experimental Film, “Polish Women Artists Films of the 1970s and ’80s” was first presented in April 2003 at The Kitchen, and subsequently in October at Hallwalls in Buffalo. The program will screen again in summer 2004 at the Tate Modern. But rather than surveying “Polish Women Artists Films of the ’70s and ’80s” as a whole, I want to look closely at how the films of three of the artist-filmmakers, Zofia Kulik, Ewa Partum, and Teresa Tyszkiewicz, offer particular insight into an international dialogue about the possibilities of the body in art during these two decades. Personally influenced in my own creative practice by such vanguard artists as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Valie Export, Eva Hesse, Adrian Piper, and Carolee Schneemann, it is with great enthusiasm that I come to know the Polish artists whose work in many ways resonates with theirs. The vital output of these women artists from twenty, thirty, or more years ago regarding the investigation into how the body marked by sexual difference produces and deconstructs meaning and language systems comprises art historical turf wars largely responsible for the—in some cases—thriving careers and—in others—tenacity despite obscurity of contemporary artists addressing similar concerns.

Open Form (Forma Otwarta, 1971) is a multi-part film by Zofia Kulik in collaboration with Przemyslaw Kwiek, Jan Stanislaw Wojciechowski, and Pawel Kwiek. In the fragment “The Revealing of Complex Form,” Kulik directs the actress Ewa Lemanska in site-specific actions intervening Warsaw’s urbanscape. Wearing a form-fitting black vinyl coat belted at the waist, Lemanska streams a long textile as she dodges first people, then traffic, her “scarf” almost catching in a wheel (Isidora Duncan). With her gesticulating arms and erratic lunging, she seems an insane asylum escapee or a transplant off the set of a German Expressionist film.

The performer stands on a wall before a mass scale ‘CENTRUM’ sign, which, as the panning camera reveals an urban riot of horizontal and vertical axes, becomes the towering and symbolically charged Palace of Culture (“a gift to the people of Poland” from Moscow). Lemanska—the low camera angle already implying ascension—flaps open and shut the square of white cloth she is wrapped in. The gesture is curious not so much in its mimicry of animal flight as in its expression of yearning for additions to the body that would make it possible to move through space as only birds can. Not only nostalgic, the action comments on today’s fascination with the cyborg.

To the extent that the performer places her-self/body in the urban public context with the intent to disrupt how it is conceptualized, she is relatively independent of the (male) gaze (the “to-be-looked-at-ness of woman” as canonized by Laura Mulvey). She is on full view, but her image—because the spectator has to wrestle so determinedly with its meaning—resists simple consumption. However, there are exceptions, such as the smoke sequence, which—from the fetishistic image-units: black-leather-gloved hand, match aflame, cig on lips, to the montage’s fixation with the ritual moment—is rife with visual

pleasure; the spectator is lulled into looking without examining. Not surprisingly, this interlude recalls the French New Wave, and its obsession with surfaces of femininity.

Visual pleasure peaks in the ethereal eight seconds, shot on color stock in a brightly lit interior, that follow the urban interventions. Zooming out from the performer's back, the camera is the string that excites her into the frenzy of a spinning top, the red cloth in her hands transformed from an entity defined greatly by shape (in the earlier b&w footage) into a fireball of color and motion—providing at once a barrier around her body and a bridge between the camera (and spectator) and the subject at the flame's center. The film now exquisitely embodies the radical tension between control and disorder. Out of the calm of self-possession, the performer wreaks havoc in many ways, but most exceptionally on the spectator's capacity to define her looking relations to the film.

Left is the question of the possibility of expressing such upheavals of interiority and exteriority in the beyond-control urbanscape rather than in the privacy and controllability of the inside space. In retrospect, the outdoor actions appear as sketches in preparation of this single interior shot. Or, is it rather that the comparatively safe setting has somehow released the camera and the entire cinematic apparatus?

A still shot of stacked letters opens Ewa Partum's grainy b&w *Tautological Cinema: Poem by Ewa* (1973). Resisting interpretation, the letters instead focus attention on language itself as a material and critical entity. The photographic inference of the picture—its fixed nature—is soon belied by dancing grit and a quivering frame, in other words by essential properties of the film medium. Insofar as the initial image implies the disembodiment of conceptual art, the transition into the next complicates such interpretation. In addition to holding together the two shots, the splicing tape also secures a hair snarl to their juncture; this unruly edit is, in its 1/24th of a second presence, fleeting and, in its reappearance ad infinitum upon each re-screening of the film, forever. With this self-revealing splice, the viewer becomes acutely aware of the hands—the fingers—the touch of the maker.

In the countryside on a ridge, Partum disperses said letters into the air, the camera catching their fluttering descent. Instead of trapping hair, the maker's hands now spring vowels and consonants, which subsequently take on chance patterns atop brush, grass and rocks. Swiveling her arms and alphabet-laden hands one moment and revealing empty palms the next, the artist-magician shows how the instantiation of a thing presupposes the thing's non-being, how appearance is predicated on disappearance. This lo-fi and embodied aleatory language experiment captivates where random text generation by computers bores.

In the action documentation *Self-identification* (1980), Partum stands on the sidewalk in the vicinity of a wedding party. Not only does the artist not throw rice as do the others, but she also fails to follow the occasion's social mores regarding attire. Partum, wearing only black pumps, stands in stark contrast to the group—and especially to the bride. Even more unsettling than the sheer juxtaposition of the naked individual and the clothed collective is the invisible wall between them proscribing any direct interaction.

Presumably, the newlyweds (who are preoccupied by picking grains of rice off the ground) are the artist's friends and have consented to her action; yet, because the intervention evokes such an uncanny feel, the possibility of its "illegality" (in the sense of being renegade, uncharted, etc.) remains open.

The wedding party and the film spectator know the objective presence in the scene of the naked woman, but the divide between Partum and the group acts to also situate her within the symbolic realm. In this regard, the artist seems the bride's doppelganger or altar ego. Partum's action brings into relief how marriage has traditionally meant proprietary rights to the female body by the husband. Modern marriages are premised not so much on the 'truth' of tradition as on adaptations, which often leave the institution's questionable origins unexamined. Partum's public nakedness previews and also counterbalances the bride's private transformation into woman in the flesh for the eyes of one man only.

Because of the absence of additional cues such as overt facial expressions or dramatic movements (which would underscore the subjectivity of she who(se body) signs), the action privileges the performer's body as idea (or image) of the body in meaning-making, while simultaneously relating the body's inexpressibility.

Tautological Cinema: Film by Ewa (1973) investigates the body's potentialities to sign (in a pun on actual sign language) through (instead of inter-) intra-body juxtapositions: gestures, the shifting of the body against itself. In a series of highly composed shots, Partum seals her lips with a finger, plugs each ear with a finger, shields her eyes with her hands, and hides behind her long hair (an anxious image because it is hard to tell whether her face or her skull lies beneath). She wears a blindfold with the word 'TOUCH,' and in another image a white tape 'X' locks her lips. Through these positionings, Partum, concerned with the self's subjective interface with the world, calls attention to passages linking external and internal space, and to how these openings can readily become closures. Punctuating her inquiry into the gendered body and signification, the film concludes with the handwritten text, 'MY TOUCH IS A TOUCH OF A WOMAN,' and the imprint of a kiss.

Teresa Tyszkiewicz's *Grain* (Ziarno, 1980) also stars the director-artist and experiments with applications of one's own female body to unlikely conditions. Abstraction and illogic are put forth in order to contemplate the specificities of language of the body. Whereas the previous directors do not shy from the sensual body, Tyszkiewicz is distinct in carving out a formerly unknown space of autoeroticism. The image of woman indulging in bodily self-pleasure is often co-opted—or produced in the first place—for the gratification of the male gaze, making the understanding of the film's resistant feminine enunciation all the more political. (The sci-fi-ish sound mix of bells, wind and string instruments, synthesized music, moans, and scratching noises affords another layer to this voice).

An ocean of grain surrounds Tyszkiewicz. Like the sea's surface, there is constant motion; the montage leaps from swells of grain, to the artist half submerged, to eel-shapes, which actually are panty hose fattening as they shadow Tyszkiewicz's shiny red

nails in and out of the swells. Like being buoyed by salt water and surrounded by sea rhythm, the film conveys a perceptual experience of floating and of forgoing limits of the body in obeisance to intoxicating environs.

At times the grain is replaced by root vegetables (beets and parsnips) around which, in what could be a riff on surrealist sexual excavations, the artist streams her long and sea-anemone-like hair. Because it is easy enough to distinguish between Tyszkiewicz and the vegetable matter, these scenes are far less unsettling than those of the stuffed stockings. In the latter, the fetish value is deeper—the hose substituting for legs (and woman) in how they look like them, but more disturbingly, in how they are ordinarily occupied by actual feminine bodies, how they contain bodies. Eerie is the sense of the absent—or missing—or annihilated body.

Additionally, in the nylons scenes, there is little distinction of origins; the spectator first wonders whether the non- or extra- human parts are going into or coming out of the body, and only secondly, rationalizes that in actuality nothing enters nor exits the performer. In the sense that the female body is all consuming (or, continuous with external forces), the monstrous-feminine (à la Barbara Creed) is at play—and the inter-species/stellar (octopus, space alien) fucks such invokes.

The scenes' vicarious pleasures are not to be underestimated. Because *Grain* overall is inviting of the female spectator, thereby establishing her trust, the woman in the audience is able to abandon herself to its passions.

As the artist, now in a brilliant red hat and dress, responds to her new surroundings of a nest of white feathers with rising ecstasy, she frees herself of her coverings, in what, under other circumstances, would seem a humorous parody of mainstream sex scenes in which couples frantically strip while practically climaxing. (*Grain* comes closest to camp in intermittent views of the director in white polyester and big sunglasses).

That *Grain's* ero-aesthetics remain radical twenty-some years after the fact betrays how much easier it is to change fashion than sexual politics. Yet, just as styles repeat, maybe we should all be on the lookout for recent work gritting up quotidian sexualities. Meanwhile, as thrifting is different from seeking new fashions modeled after old, there is something exciting about the revival of (film and art) histories that have brought us—missteps notwithstanding—to where we are now.

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Stills

Teresa Tyszkiewicz: *Grain* (Ziarno, 1980), performer: Teresa Tyszkiewicz

Ewa Partum: *Tautological Cinema: Poem by Ewa* (1973), performer: Ewa Partum;
Tautological Cinema: Film by Ewa (1973)

Zofia Kulik: *Open Form (Forma Otwarta)*, 1971, performer: Ewa Lemanska.