

kunsthalle wien



Darker, Lighter,  
Puffy, Flat

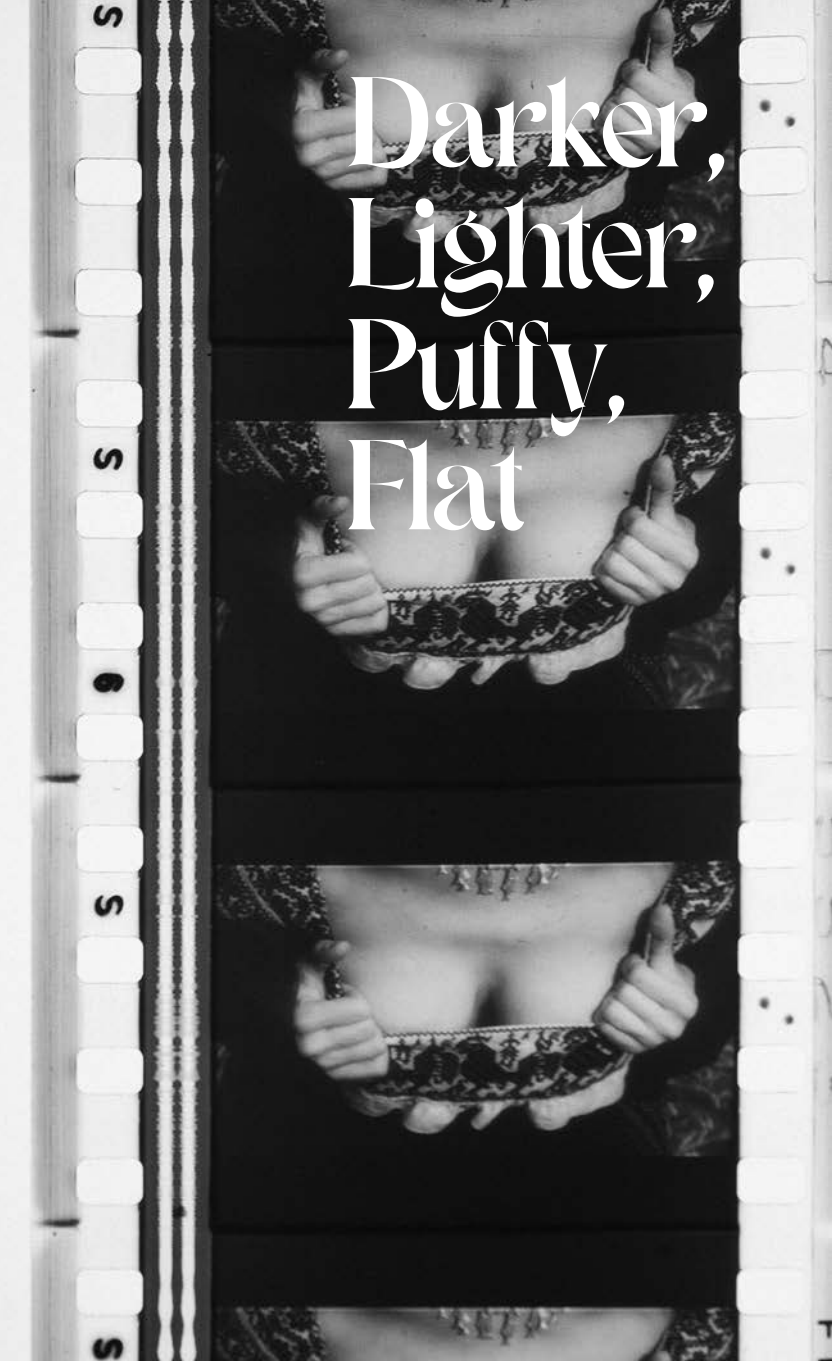
COVER

Laure Prouvost, *The Hidden Paintings*  
*Grandma Improved, Looking at you*  
*looking at me (detail), 2023 •*


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GALLERY, PHOTO: TODD-WHITE ART  
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Radha May (Elisa Giardina Papa,  
Nupur Mathur, Bathsheba Okwenje),  
*When the Towel Drops, Vol. 1 | Italy*  
(detail), 2015



Darker,  
Lighter,  
Puffy,  
Flat



# Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat

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**kunsthalle wien /  
museumsquartier**

**29/11 2023—14/4 2024**

# Institutional Introduction

**D**arker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat is an international group exhibition that explores the meaning of the breast in our cultures, societies, and art histories. The exhibition brings together artists of different generations, new commissions, and previously exhibited works that, in one way or another, explore the breast, the tensions it creates, its sensuality, and its playfulness.

Breasts are present in every facet of our lives—from everyday conversations to the portrayal of women in films and video games. They even spark public debates, such as discussions about public breastfeeding and the censorship of nipples on social media platforms. Breasts embody a striking duality as symbols both of nurturing motherhood and the eroticized female body. This dichotomy gives them considerable influence in shaping our perceptions of gendered bodies. In the realm of queer discourse, discussions surrounding top surgeries, including breast implants and removal, are marked by their historical implications.

As the title of our exhibition suggests, breasts come in a variety of forms: some larger, some smaller, some flatter, some darker, some lighter. For some they are a source of shame; for others they are something to proudly display in public. Whatever our individual experiences, we all have them.

Going back in history, breasts were a symbol of fertility and were represented without any censorship in ancient works—as with the Venus of Willendorf, for example. Amazons, the brave warriors of Greek mythology, cut or covered one of their breasts to embrace their bisexual nature; Hera (also known

as Juno) created the Milky Way from the milk of her breasts; *Galaktotrophousa* is a common Christian icon depicting Mary feeding Christ with only one breast exposed; Saint Agatha was tortured by having her breasts cut off; the symbol of the French Republic was a bare-breasted woman, the mother of the Republic; Nazi propaganda promoted domestic values and breastfeeding. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the dehumanized representation of colonized women within the West. One such example is Sarah Baartman, known as the “Hottentot Venus,” who became a spectacle in freak shows—her body objectified, controlled, and exoticized. Another notable example of someone attempting to exert control over a woman’s body is the Kokoschka doll, the life-size replica of Viennese salonnière and composer Alma Mahler commissioned by artist Oskar Kokoschka.

This exhibition at Kunsthalle Wien explores the representation of the breast and its various meanings. The artists presented here ask which depictions have been acceptable and which should be acceptable.

We would like to thank the curator of the exhibition, Laura Amann; the assistant curator, Hannah Marynissen; curatorial interns Hana Čeferin, Lara Mejač, and Anyla Kabashi; and all the artists who contributed to the exhibition. We hope that the exhibition will enrich a subject that is both ancient and contemporary, challenging our perceptions and our understanding of breasts in art and culture. ●

**What, How & for Whom / WHW**

ARTISTIC DIRECTORS KUNSTHALLE WIEN

# Curatorial Introduction

Laura Amann



Marlie Mul, *Folded painting #3*, 2017 •

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CROY NIELSEN, VIENNA, PHOTO: PASCAL PETIGNAT

It is the year 2023. Not in a galaxy far, far away, but on planet Earth. To be more precise: in Vienna, capital of Austria, a small country in central Europe. A former monarchy with an unwavering Catholic foundation and a complex history that is darkly stained by nationalist thinking and all of its far-reaching consequences. Yet at present it is—on and off—the most livable city worldwide, according to the *Economist's* annual index. A city with, in principle, affordable housing, healthcare for all, childcare, good access to higher education, a rich cultural landscape, large green and recreational areas—the list goes on and on. And while on paper—that is, in the international newspapers—Vienna comes the closest to a socialist utopia as can exist in reality, this characterization often doesn't reflect contemporary political complexities, particularly issues such as statelessness, political alienation and contemporary citizenship or differing concepts of gender and family. Despite its livability, its racist, sexist, and classist substructures are far from repaired.

It is against this backdrop that the exhibition *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat* looks at the topic of breasts and why they still seem to be the subject of so much scandal and dispute. Why is it that, in a society where we have so much to be grateful for, yet so many urgent, manmade humanitarian and ecological catastrophes of devastating proportions, a bare nipple can halt algorithms, scandalize onlookers, or be deemed worthy of a lawsuit? Why is being topless at the swimming pool regarded as unseemly for women? Why is it offensive to breast-feed in public, or (beware!) to breastfeed an animal? Why is it newsworthy to have or want bigger breasts, smaller breasts, or no breasts at all?

To reference one of our favorite sex columnists, I couldn't help but wonder: Why are we still talking about boobs?

Apart from this overarching question, another line of inquiry in *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat* is the historical and, more specifically, art-historical gaze upon breasts; in recent times they have undergone a transformation from wholesome religious symbol to secularized and sexualized object.

Thirdly, the exhibition examines how radical, queer, feminist discourses on politics and society may enter the

mainstream, ultimately being distorted and appropriated by it, and how this may enable the mainstream and the radical to feed off of one another. In a world where certain bodies are not meant to exist, their visibility is an act of resistance but also of exposure. The proud display of nipples and breasts of all shapes, sizes, and colors is an act of normalization but potentially also of sexualization or objectification. This invites the question: Is this process of absorption helpful and necessary, or is it rather destructive and problematic? For example, we could consider the appearance of a dull brand of feminism in the *Barbie* movie, or queerness permeating popular music (or basically any form of marketable commodity).

Rather than offering one clear response to these questions, *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat* offers a variety of works, practices, and voices that utilize the seemingly light-hearted, sensual, and wanton motif of breasts to speak to the burningly relevant—and occasionally dark and complex—issues of our era, teetering at the edge of sensuality and discursiveness alike.

So, let's swiftly leaf through them.

The Western art-historical canon reveals a development in the symbolism of the breast through religious depictions, especially the *Madonna Lactans* and its various iterations, whereby an abstracted (perhaps perfectly spherical or incorrectly positioned) single breast functions as a symbol evoking spiritual nourishment—reinforced through tropes such as the miraculous Vision of Saint Bernard or the Virgin of the Milk—and then becomes destabilized through more ambiguous biblical references, for example *Caritas Romana* or Susanna and the Elders, and ultimately undergoes a transformation with the one figure who embodies both the pious and the erotic: Mary Magdalene, a sex worker turned disciple—if not lover—of Jesus Christ.

From here, the motif of the breast, now more realistic and sometimes bilaterally uncovered, also enters the earliest depictions of the domestic (as in, for instance, Dutch bourgeois paintings of wet nurses) and later the political, pronouncing *La liberté* or *La France républicaine*. During the First and Second World Wars, pinup girls offered a fantasy of life back home to brave soldiers, and in Nazi propaganda, busty mothers

reared little blonde boys—the strong, Aryan *Übermenschen* of the future. It is only a hop to the type of “sex sells” advertising that we now so intimately know.

And it is precisely that type of advertising that has exacerbated societal pressures to adhere to ever-changing beauty standards—to digitally retouch and enhance one's own appearance or even undergo drastic and dangerous surgeries for longer-lasting effects. And while filters or heavily edited imagery have become the norm, nipples, at least those attached to female breasts, still suffer from censorship both in the digital and physical realms, eliciting bans from platforms or outcries for decency when people breastfeed in public.

The concept of motherhood is often closely tied to the breast that feeds, alongside the many other demands and expectations placed on the one “mothering,” such as full relinquishment of one's selfhood, needs, and ambitions beyond serving (ideally) the nuclear family. These heavy expectations on the mother turn occurrences such as infertility, miscarriage, or the simple renunciation of the role into painful, hidden, and invisible experiences.

Similarly, the sick breast, the cancerous breast, or the traces of an often life-saving mastectomy are not supposed to be seen. There exists the pressure to hide or swiftly replace through prosthetic devices or reconstructive surgery, when in fact it should be a personal choice whether to share this testimony or not.

Queer practices of binding one's bosom or undergoing top surgery in order to alleviate gender and body dysphoria or to approximate one's self-perception with physical reality are still subject to controversy, making access—whether financial or medical—even more exhausting and burdensome to obtain beyond the psychological and practical repercussions these practices already entail.

In the practice of bodybuilding, though—a seemingly grotesque continuation of binary beauty standards, particularly of muscular strength and manly body types—a powerful tool has been found with which to deconstruct precisely those mainstream ideals and shape one's own body, and perhaps even one's thinking, according to one's own desires.

# Work Descriptions

Of course, the male breast has also been scrutinized, albeit not to the same degree as its fleshier counterpart in our still-prevailing binary system of man and woman. Nevertheless, the pressure for men to look a certain way, to have a body that reflects the vision of an athletic, strong, healthy potential partner, has increased, creating a market for surgical enhancement on the one hand and severe mental health issues such as bulimia or anorexia on the other.

In a world with a more fluid understanding of genders, roles, and bodies in general, there may be new opportunities for the once-male breast to be a nurturer; caregiver; and sensual, sexual object alike. In a similar vein, interspecies bonding and caring (through breastfeeding, for instance) seems unheard of, if not taboo; yet both the practice of humans breastfeeding domesticated animals and domesticated animals nursing infants has been identified by anthropologists all over the world. At times it is a practice of survival, medical necessity, or religious meaning, but often it merely symbolizes great love and the close bond between humans and other species.

These queer-feminist reveries notwithstanding, our reality is such that the (predominantly female) breast has time and again been objectified, sexualized, and fetishized to an extent that it could easily be said, from a contemporary perspective, to be reductionist; revealing of patriarchal, heteronormative narratives of domination; and ultimately simply ridiculous. So perhaps what remains to be asked, in a world where pornography is readily at hand and the promise of pleasure can be bought, is: What is still, or could again be, erotic? ●

NOTE: Our approach towards gender and the gender binary in this project is characterized by a certain ambivalence:

Following poststructuralist, postcolonial, and queer theories, we are critical of the gender binary and strongly believe in emphasizing the constructedness of gender and that many genders exist beyond a binary system. At the same time, in view of persistent (hetero-)sexism and sexual violence, there is still an urgent need to strengthen the subject of "women" and thus adhering to the category of "gender" is to be understood as politically-strategic.

# Nina Beier

*Baby*

2018/2023



The work of Nina Beier examines the histories embedded within mass-produced objects and materials, taking a particular interest in how their meanings have evolved as the result of transcultural exchange and the passage of time. Presenting seemingly mundane items in new contexts, Beier's constructions invite a multitude of interpretations. *Baby* consists of large waterbed mattresses suspended from the wall. Filled with pebbles, coins, and water, the membranes seem to bulge almost to a breaking point. Potential interpretations of the work are endless, but one way that they can be understood is as a poetic statement about women's bodies and the immense strain that they are put under during and after pregnancy. The womb and breasts in particular undergo a dramatic transformation; the breasts swell significantly during pregnancy and breastfeeding and deflate afterward. Sagging from the walls of the exhibition space, *Baby* may allude to breasts or bodies having endured such biologically drastic processes, or simply having aged. Within the context of this show, Beier's work raises questions about how women's breasts are viewed following this evolution. Full breasts have long been fetishized within Western society, so are they valued less after carrying out their biological purpose of producing milk for offspring? Just as Beier is generally fascinated by the value of objects that are constantly re-evaluated, with *Baby* she highlights how women, and especially their bodies, endure the same scrutiny in society, raising a plethora of ethical and feminist concerns. ●

Nina Beier, *Baby*, 2018; *Charity Hotel*, 2018; *Plug*, 2018, installation view  
*European Interiors*, Spike Island, Bristol 2018 • PHOTO: STUART WHIPPS



# Misleidys Castillo Pedroso

*Untitled*

*Untitled*

*Untitled*

*Untitled*

*Untitled*

*Untitled*

*Untitled*

*Untitled*

ca. 2016–2022



Misleidys Castillo Pedroso is an artist who has created her own visual language. She was born deaf, and she uses alternative forms of communication to speech. She has spent most of her life living at home and interacting only with her family. Her art has been described as being motivated solely by her inner state. Castillo Pedroso colorfully depicts bodybuilders, body parts, demons, and mythological creatures. She paints them with gouache colors—bright and sometimes unusual—making her art free of racial stereotypes. She cuts out these figures and uses brown Scotch tape to stick them to the walls of her home in Havana. In the works shown in this exhibition, Pedroso has depicted bodybuilders, naked or in underwear; some are flexing, one is huddled in sadness, and one is a mother with bare breasts. Her posture signaling openness, she holds the baby in her lap and appears to be breastfeeding. Bodybuilding is about creating an image of strength, and bodybuilders have been described as artists who sculpt their bodies. In addition to training, they have to follow a strict diet before shows; they also shave, exfoliate, and tan their bodies in solariums or with tanning sprays to make their muscles even more visible. Their muscles are usually very exaggerated, monumental, and sometimes even grotesque. Throughout the history of bodybuilding, the ideals of “female” and “male” have changed: bodybuilders may not fit into cultural ideals of gender and seem almost to negate the binary. In recent decades, bodybuilding has also been adopted as a queer practice to shape one’s body according to one’s own desires and ideals. Other physical sports often reinforce traditional notions of gender roles and sexuality, perpetuating the idea that masculinity/femininity and heterosexuality/homosexuality are fundamentally opposed. Castillo Pedroso’s work mixes ideas of masculinity and femininity, opening up space to reimagine bodies with fewer classifications, regulations, and controls. ●

Misleidys Castillo Pedroso, *Untitled*, ca. 2018 •  
PHOTO: COURTESY CHRISTIAN BERST ART BRUT, PARIS

# Lucia Dovičáková

*I was your universe, now you are mine*

*Mama*

*Dinner*

*Milky Way*

*Here for you*

2014–2018



Lucia Dovičáková, *Milky Way*, 2015

Lucia Dovičáková explores the conflict between the notion of the ideal woman and quotidian reality, and how this feels when projected onto a woman's body. At the heart of her work are ideas about how women are represented in discourse, often in relation to an interpersonal role they play in society—as girlfriend, wife, mother, or sister. The works are ironic, uncanny, and often darkly humorous. What makes them unsettling is the tension the artist creates between the visual metaphors she uses to convey her feelings, the truths expressed, and the normalcy with which both are delivered. Breasts are used as a trope to convey Dovičáková's experiences of motherhood, her struggles with fulfilling traditional roles, and women's struggles for agency, especially within the constraints of the nuclear family. She explores both the sexual and the nurturing aspects of breasts. The painting *Dinner* recalls depictions of Saint Agatha with her severed breasts presented on a silver platter; the artist's interpretation provides contradictory yet commonplace views of the female breast as both sexual and nurturing. *I was your universe, now you're mine* explores the hardships of motherhood and the struggle to bring new life into the world while completely surrendering one's body to the role. *Milky Way* depicts four women in a milk-splashing ceremony and refers to the Greek myth of the creation of the Milky Way. Here, the artist gives the creative power described in the myth to all breastfeeding women. *Here for you* shows a woman offering her breasts and internal organs. The body is presented as an object: a shelf with doors and drawers. The painting criticizes the idea that women are expected to give everything to fulfill societal expectations; the ideal woman is seen as an endlessly nurturing object. *Mama* depicts a breast in expressive brushstrokes, the nipple and areola becoming the face of a baby. The painting succeeds in completely desexualizing the breast, focusing solely on its nurturing aspect. The nipple seems irritated, but the baby is smiling. Uncanny but comical, *Mama* asks: what are the needs of a mother? ●

# VALIE EXPORT

*Ein perfektes Paar oder die Unzucht wechselt ihre Haut*  
[A perfect couple, or fornication changes its skin]

1986



VALIE EXPORT, *Ein perfektes Paar oder die Unzucht wechselt ihre Haut* [A perfect couple, or fornication changes its skin], 1986 • PHOTOS:

© VALIE EXPORT / COURTESY SIXPACKFILM /  
© BILDRECHT, VIENNA 2023

VALIE EXPORT's extensive body of work—which combines film with body art, performance, and photography—considers the various sociopolitical ways in which the body, the gendered gaze, and femininity relate to one another. EXPORT was one of the most prolific artists to be involved in the Austrian feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Her work *Ein perfektes Paar oder die Unzucht wechselt ihre Haut* [A perfect couple, or fornication changes its skin] is a humorous commentary on the commercialization and fetishization of human bodies. Set in a farcical future, EXPORT's film imagines a world in which sexual self expression is governed by the economy and the resulting effects of this on the male and female body. For men, this entails covering themselves in advertising and modifying their bodies to become almost machinelike examples of bionic perfection, whereas the monetized female body is explicitly sexualized, as customers pay to “lick the hollow of the knee” or fondle a woman's thigh, buttocks, or breasts. Even though EXPORT examines ideas of ownership and consumerism for both the male and female characters in the film, the old marketing cliché seems doubly explicit for the woman: sex sells, quite literally. The artist plays with this convoluted dynamic; in linking bodily desire to economy, the lines between agency, consumption, positions of power, and ownership become blurred. In 1967, she cut ties with cultural expressions of male authority over women by legally changing her first and second name from Waltraud Höllinger—given to her by her father and by her former husband—to VALIE EXPORT (taken from a cigarette brand). She sees women as active agents in both their own empowerment and objectification, as exemplified by the film's female character, whose breasts symbolize both fetishization and a means of achieving financial autonomy through sex work. EXPORT never explicitly takes a moral stance, allowing for a complex and multilayered reading of a capitalist, patriarchal society that may or may not be discarded, developed, or devalued. ●

# Elisa Giardina Papa

*Brush Stroke #12*

*Brush Stroke #13*

*Brush Stroke #14*

2023



Elisa Giardina Papa's practice offers darkly humorous insights into the performance of gender and sexuality in the digital age. *Brush Stroke* is a series of flat, minimalist sculptures that are reminiscent of the marks left by the eraser tool in image-editing software, creating the impression that the spaces in which they are installed have been censored. In this iteration her sculptures evoke associations with cyber-censorship and the editing and retouching of digital imagery. The digital realm has long been a space wherein women's bodies in particular are precluded from navigating freely, especially in the context of social media; for instance, images of women's nipples are either censored or reported, while their skin, body shape, and bust size are heavily edited and exploited in the advertisements that are omnipresent in that same media. Like Giardina Papa's sculptures that announce their presence through the representation of an act of erasure, does a censored or barely covered nipple within the virtual realm actually disappear, or is it rather emphasized through this practice? The pursuit of certain ideals—larger breasts, a curvier figure, more symmetrical facial features, or blemish-free skin—puts a cycle into motion wherein the potential “likes” one receives on social media may correlate to the degree to which beauty standards are met or how overtly the female body is sexualized. Ironically, while sexualized content increases traffic and likes, the fully exposed female breast is still considered taboo, begging the question: At what point of exposure does the breast become inappropriate and sexualized within the logic and etiquette of the internet? ●

# Bruno Gironcoli

*Baby auf Edelweiß*

[Baby on edelweiss]

2007



Bruno Gironcoli, *Baby auf Edelweiß* [Baby on edelweiss], 2007 • COURTESY ESTATE  
BRUNO GIRONCOLI AND GALERIE KRINZINGER, PHOTO: TAMARA RAMETSTEINER, 2023

Bruno Gironcoli was an artist who was famous for his massive metal sculptures and color pencil drawings exploring sexuality, nostalgia, alienation, fascism, technology, repression, gender, fertility, birth, and the mother-and-child relationship. His sculptures incorporate symbolic motifs and anthropomorphic and biomorphic forms; the assemblages resemble machines and organic beings. *Baby auf Edelweiß* [Baby on edelweiss] is a metal sculpture that presents the striking visual narrative of a baby suspended delicately over a bed of edelweiss flowers. The baby appears to simultaneously emerge from, and be cradled by, the flowers. The edelweiss is a national symbol of Austria and several other countries in the region. The flower is widespread in the Alps and is a popular motif in many traditional clothing and on household items. In a common romantic narrative, a young man should pick edelweiss flowers from the peaks of the Alps to give to his beloved. The plant has also been used for nationalist propaganda in Austria. It is known to have been Hitler's favorite flower, but it was also used as a symbol in the resistance against the Nazis. It has many names, but *edelweiss*—"noble white"—is particularly memorable. Gironcoli's depiction of a baby emerging from the flowers alludes to the flower as a motherly figure. Yet the plant is without the physical attributes associated with mammalian motherhood—no breasts to nurse, no vagina to give birth, no uterus for gestation—and so the work is a contemplation on concepts of care and parenthood. Gironcoli depicts babies in an uncanny way—usually enlarged, abstracted, with repeated elements, or detached from parental figures. Given the edelweiss flower's multiple meanings and Hitler's heritage in Austria, the artwork dwells on many themes. It refers to fascist ideas of nationalism, perhaps even alluding to the mythical nationalist notion that Hitler was born from the noble white flower. The work could be interpreted as a critique of children being nursed on nationalist ideas from a very early age. ●

# Andrea Éva Győri

*Talking to Breasts*  
2018



Through the mediums of performance, installation, sculpture, and drawing, artist Andrea Éva Győri explored the interrelationships between sensuality, strength, and femininity. Her initial practice was a candid examination of female desire and self-pleasure. In 2017, however, she was diagnosed with breast cancer—a battle she lost in 2022—and her artistic focus shifted toward ideas of the female body in relation to pain and illness. Her sensitive video work from 2018, *Talking to Breasts*, sees the artist lovingly caress her breasts before undergoing a double mastectomy. Győri gently touches her flesh in an attempt to memorize the feel of her skin and her nipples, the parts of her that are so personal and familiar, wherein a tumor is slowly and fatally spreading. As the room around her slowly darkens, her investigation of pain—both physically through touch and emotionally through dialogue—becomes increasingly sorrowful. Tears roll down her chest as Győri thanks her breasts for their power, beauty, and sensitivity, and apologizes for not always appreciating them. Within the specific context of *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat*, a group exhibition that features many artistic positions on the broader cultural and social meanings of breasts, Győri's video work takes us inward and allows for a voyeuristic glimpse into a personal conversation that only the artist can fully understand—a private process of mourning that ends with the artist tearfully bidding her breasts goodbye. ●

Andrea Éva Győri, *Talking to Breasts*, 2018 •  
COURTESY ANDREA ÉVA GYŐRI ESTATE AND HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS

# Trulee Hall

*The Boob Dance*  
2018



Trulee Hall is a multimedia artist whose immersive installations and video works have been described as “erotic grotesque.” Through her practice, Hall questions clichés of sexiness and looks instead at the aspects of sex that she finds more relatable, such as the animalistic, awkward, beautiful messiness of it. *The Boob Dance* is a tongue-in-cheek look at Western society’s sexual obsession with large breasts. The sexualization of breasts became increasingly prominent after the Second World War, when this part of women’s bodies started to be commercialized through the dissemination of busty pin-up girls, Hollywood movie stars, and popular magazines such as *Playboy*. As second-wave feminism underscored, this fascination with breasts negatively affected women’s ability to achieve agency and independence in various ways, as they were judged or defined by only their bodies rather than their minds, personalities, or capabilities. Hall satirizes the ridiculousness of this fetish by giving the viewer what they desire: a pair of breasts blown up to comically (almost intimidatingly) large proportions. If women are objectified for their breasts, Hall’s work makes clear how grotesque and absurd this is. In illustrating gendered objectification through hyperbole, the artist disrupts the misogynistic gaze, exposing it for what it is: namely, a simplistic and reductionist worldview designed to uphold a power imbalance that benefits men. Taking pleasure in lampooning this chauvinist perspective through the use of humor, Hall strips it of its power and reclaims it for herself instead. ●

# Monia Ben Hamouda

*Venus as a River (Gymnasium)*

*Venus as a River II (Gymnasium)*

2023

Monia Ben Hamouda is fascinated by the ways in which humans are inextricably bound to, and shaped by, their family roots. Born into a Muslim community in Milan, Italy, she creates works that help her come to terms with both the expectations placed upon her by her own ancestry and those stemming from her contemporary surroundings. Her works are often presented as shamanic tools replete with ritualistic symbolism intended to exorcise her of these burdens, shifting focus to her need for independent expression as an artist. For *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat*, Ben Hamouda has created two new works building upon a preexisting series of hers, *Gymnasium*. These works explore the complexities of cultural assimilation, such as the pressure to accept new cultures while staying true to one's own heritage. The daughter of an Islamic calligrapher, Ben Hamouda has created a work that merges her Islamic upbringing and the biblical story of Saint Agatha, which originated in third-century Sicily. Living during the reign of Roman emperor Decius, Agatha was a chaste woman who caught the eye of the prefect of Sicily, Quintianus. Upon spurning his advances, Agatha was



Monia Ben Hamouda, *Venus as a River (Gymnasium)*, 2023; *Venus as a River II (Gymnasium)*, 2023 • COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CHERTLÜDDE, BERLIN

imprisoned and tortured. Most famously, she was tied to a pillar and her breasts were torn off with a pair of tongs. To this day, Saint Agatha is celebrated in Sicily on February 5, often by the consumption of *Minne di Sant'Agata*: small marzipan cakes that resemble the aforementioned breasts. In combining this story with Islamic calligraphy, Ben Hamouda is drawing associations between both cultures—Islamic and Christian—and their relationships to ideas of tradition, chastity, and female autonomy, as well as reflecting on how these ideas affect her today as she navigates the two cultures simultaneously. The artist's new work, *Venus as a River (Gymnasium)* and *Venus as a River II (Gymnasium)*, also references the history of the female body in sculpture. Prosthetic parts are contrasted with a variety of stones in an artistic attempt to encapsulate the fleeting human body into eternal (and sometimes abstracted) forms alongside delicate and fragile reproductions meant to imitate body parts and physical or social functions. The lines between imitation for means of representation and for functionality are blurred, reconciling strength and fragility in the virtual and physical human form. ●



# Šejla Kamberić & Aleksandra Vajd

## Revue

DISPLAY DESIGN Soft Baroque

GRAPHIC DESIGN Adéla Svobodová

SUPPORTING ROLE Marko Mandić

SET PHOTOGRAPHY Tadej Vaukman,

Karoliná Matušková

2023



Šejla Kamberić & Aleksandra Vajd, *Revue*, 2023

Visual artists Aleksandra Vajd and Šejla Kamberić both use experimental and interdisciplinary approaches in their artistic projects. Vajd is focused on expanding photography from a two-dimensional medium into an immersive and improved means of visual storytelling. Kamberić uses film, photography, objects, drawing, and installation to explore nonlinear narratives and personal stories. Both artists are particularly interested in using art as a strong communicative mechanism to create powerful political and social statements. In their first collaborative project, the artists revisit the idea of eroticism within a contemporary context by publishing and presenting a special issue of a magazine, *Erotic Revue*. The main inspiration and reference for the publication is the magazine *Eroticka Revue*, which was published in Prague in the early 1930s by a Surrealist group and was prohibited from being publicly distributed. This original magazine kept strict anonymity of the authors and other contributors. Vajd and Kamberić's newly issued *Erotic Revue*, although distributed openly, still plays with this idea by publishing its visual content anonymously. *Erotic Revue* presents two women's bodies and their intimate bond that goes beyond the usual confines of predefined relationship forms and statuses. The bodies roam territories and nudge boundaries at the intersection of professional collaboration, personal friendship, and erotic intimacy, and seem to corrode societal conventions of what is permissible in private and what is acceptable to publicly and visually share. In this sense, the magazine serves as a platform to provoke reflection on our learned but also instinctive behavior for performing relationships. The artists challenge norms by asking what happens when the components of relationships—such as emotional intimacy, physical intimacy, sexual intimacy, enduring partnerships, caregiving, collaboration, kinks, social companionship, and the dynamics of power—are mixed. They explore the space of digital intimacy in the context of the erotic, contrast the digital nude with the traditional nude, and create a strong visual language that uses their own mature bodies to rewrite women's stories. ●

# Maria Lassnig

*Art Education*

1976

**K**nown primarily as a painter, artist Maria Lassnig moved to New York in 1968, where she struggled to gain recognition for her work. In 1974, she formed a small collective with other women artists—called *Women/Artist/Filmmakers*—which included Carolee Schneemann, Martha Edelheit, and Olga Spiegel, among others. Frustrated with the issues women faced within the male-dominated art scene, they began making experimental films. Lassnig herself created animations using felt-tip pens, stencils, spray paint, and collage. Having studied in Vienna with many reputable art collections on her doorstep, Lassnig was well-versed in the ways in which women are objectified and marginalized within the Western art-historical canon. In the 1980s, the Guerrilla Girls famously asked, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” because “less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.” Lassnig’s *Art Education* opens with a Vermeer painting housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum. While posing for the painter, the model protests, “You treat me like an object,” to which he nonchalantly responds, “You are an art object now,” before demanding that she remove her clothes. When she refuses to do so, he complains, “You are not a good model; you have no breasts anyway, and you’re too old.” Although comically exaggerated, this exchange highlights the ways in which the objectification of women in art bled into larger social discourses, and vice versa. With women seen as passive objects rather than active agents, the resulting misogyny had real-life consequences for women generally, and particularly for female artists, who were fighting for recognition of their contributions to culture. Successful artists such as Lassnig, with her career of more than fifty years, are not the only pioneering examples that debunk long-upheld myths of the inferior capabilities of women. ●



Maria Lassnig, *Art Education*, 1976 •

PHOTOS: MARIA LASSNIG FOUNDATION / COURTESY SIXPACKFILM / © BILDRECHT, VIENNA 2023

*Traum vom Idealbusen / Busenwunsch / Busenillusion*  
[Dream of the Ideal Bosom / Bosom Wish /  
Bosom Illusion]  
1996–1997



Maria Lassnig endeavored to express the complex relationships between internal sensation, self-perception, and expression—what she termed *Körpergefühl* [body awareness]—in her work. Like her peers VALIE EXPORT and Birgit Jürgenssen, Lassnig often used her own image in her practice to make broader points about female representation. Lassnig was 77 years old when she made this painting. As a female artist in a predominantly male art world, her work has only recently started to gain international recognition. This self-portrait is both an expression of Lassnig's inner desires as she confronts her aging body and a demonstration that she is self-aware of having these thoughts within a very specific social context. Lassnig's conflicting feelings resulting from the various connotations of breasts—learned from her experience as a strident feminist, an artist, a woman, and from society at large—are also evident in the work's title, *Traum vom Idealbusen / Busenwunsch / Busenillusion* [Dream of the Ideal Bosom / Bosom Wish / Bosom Illusion]. As is common within her work, Lassnig approaches the subject with humor while also honestly admitting her own feelings. The breasts—the painting's focal point—blend into a grotesque female body painted using sickly greens, yellows, and purples, as if emphasizing the power of ideal breasts in distracting from the aging body attached to them. Lassnig exposes the messiness of her thoughts on this matter through the expressive application of the paint. Within the context of *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat*, it is a work that emblemizes the ways in which society's scrutinization of women's bodies, and particularly their breasts, challenges their individual autonomy. In one of her notebooks, the artist once wrote, "Beauty is a[n] agreement, conformity." Here she paints with a cognizance that even in dreaming of "ideal breasts"—large, firm, forever youthful—she relinquishes corporeal freedom. ●

Maria Lassnig, *Traum vom Idealbusen / Busenwunsch / Busenillusion*  
[Dream of the Ideal Bosom / Bosom Wish / Bosom Illusion], 1996–1997 •  
© MARIA LASSNIG FOUNDATION / BILDRECHT, VIENNA 2023

# Claudia Lomoschitz

LACTANS

2023

CONCEPT, VIDEO, TEXT Claudia Lomoschitz

SOUND DESIGN Nikkname

VOICEOVER Anne Kozeluh, Alex Franz Zehetbauer

ANIMATION ADVICE Joshu Alena,

Stefanie Schwarzwimmer



Claudia Lomoschitz, *LACTANS*, 2023 •

PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST / © BILDRECHT, VIENNA 2023

Claudia Lomoschitz combines video, archival images, performance, and text to explore queer-feminist and collective practices. Her research ranges from topics such as induced lactation to milk-sharing networks and cross-species breastfeeding. *LACTANS*, Lomoschitz's new commission for Kunsthalle Wien, looks at art-historical depictions of lactation and raises the question of how to consider lactation's cultural history. This video work builds upon a previous work—*PARTUS GYNO BITCH TITS* (2021)—in which the artist examined several myths involving nursing from throughout history, including the Egyptian pharaoh Hatshepsut drinking milk from the goddess Hathor's udder and the Greco-Roman story of Pero breastfeeding her imprisoned mother or father to save them from starvation. These stories, alongside many others, challenge ideas of nursing by reframing them through their entanglement with body politics and power relations. In this new video work, Lomoschitz challenges the idea that lactation is something that only women are biologically capable and highlights the violence that this idea has inflicted upon women and their bodily autonomy. In the images she has collected, lactation is presented as something either idealized or stigmatized and sometimes inappropriately sexualized. Lomoschitz points out that these are associations that are forced upon women specifically. Milk has a political and historical presence that has been used for centuries to justify patriarchal power structures; lactation has not been allowed to merely exist as a biological process of which both men and women are capable. In *LACTANS*, Lomoschitz asks how the constructs of the past reverberate in today's body politics. Induced lactation and formula milk open up arrays of collective nursing practices that exist outside of gender. Biological functions are used to solidify inequalities, though the biological processes themselves are subject to normative discourses. Male lactation is a phenomenon that has been known since far back in history, but it is rarely discussed today. How can heteronormative notions of care be dissolved? How can collective nursing practices emerge, and what will nursing look like in the future? ●

# Tala Madani

*Shit Mom Animation 1*

2021



Tala Madani humorously explores various power imbalances through painting, drawing, and animation. Her series *Shit Moms* deals with the relationship between parent and child, particularly the idealizations versus the (corpo)realities of motherhood. The title takes a double meaning as a reference to bad mothers and to the female bodies literally made of excrement that are the protagonists of Madani's work. In her first animation in the series, Madani shows one of the *Shit Moms* exploring a luxurious domestic setting, leaving smears of herself behind as she lounges within her beautiful home. With the character emitting a sense of utter boredom, the animation humorously raises the idea that women's reasons for being change once they become mothers. In giving all of herself to raise children, does a woman lose a sense of purpose for and within herself? This loss may occur not only in the context of mothers' roles in society at large but also physically within mothers' bodies. Intimate and formerly private body parts, such as breasts—potentially sensual and also sexual to the woman and others—are suddenly a necessity for the infant, who suckles upon them until breastfeeding is no longer required or desired. Thereafter, the breasts are forever physically changed; this is just one of the many ways women forfeit their bodies and themselves to raise offspring. Madani's video warns of the consequences of too much self-sacrifice: just like the house in which she finds herself, the *Shit Mom* is left feeling empty. She roams her golden cage as she continues to lose parts of herself. This ennui culminates in the *Shit Mom* banging her head against a table. Moments after destroying herself, the *Shit Mom* calmly puts herself back together before despondently attempting to clean up the traces of herself that she has left behind. She must put on a brave face before her family returns home. ●

Tala Madani, *Shit Mom Animation 1*, 2021 •  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PILAR CORRIAS, LONDON

# Sarah Margnetti

*Peer to peer structures*

2023



Sarah Margnetti integrates female-presenting bodies with architectural elements to upset notions of gender, sexuality, and domesticity. Her murals, textiles, furniture, and installations narrow the divide between interior and exterior in order to highlight the ways in which women's bodies are relegated to the domestic, both historically and presently. In this new commission, Margnetti responds directly to the spaces of Kunsthalle Wien to revisit a frequent motif within her practice: the caryatid. Margnetti's caryatids act as prompts to consider subsidiary gender roles and power imbalances between men and women in the public sphere. In the West, caregiving has been used as a social function to maintain capitalist and patriarchal structures. Women have been burdened with this duty of care when it comes to the domestic sphere, as they are traditionally relegated to the supportive roles of mother, wife, companion, and caretaker. Margnetti sees caryatids as metaphors for not only the ways in which women have become the pillars that uphold the family but also, by extension, society at large, as they continue to raise or support (implicitly male) future leaders and (implicitly female) future caretakers. The caryatids give shape to the unrecognized and often invisible effort required of women to sustain this socioeconomic edifice, as well as their great sacrifice in taking up these positions. Some women—mothers, for instance—even physically embody these sacrifices with C-section scars, stretch marks, or postpartum bellies and breasts. However, in the context of this new commission, Margnetti's bare-breasted caryatids are emboldened. Welcoming visitors to Kunsthalle Wien, these figures disregard strict patriarchal parameters by physically occupying public space as female bodies that are not easily identifiable as mothers, wives, or other types of caretakers. Margnetti's caryatids are doing hard work and demand to be recognized. ●

# Radha May

(Elisa Giardina Papa · Nupur Mathur · Bathsheba Okwenje)

*When the Towel Drops Vol. 1 / Italy*

2015–2018



As the collective Radha May, Elisa Giardina Papa, Nupur Mathur, and Bathsheba Okwenje develop installations that explore peripheral narratives on gender, sexuality, and colonialism through digital media. *When the Towel Drops* is an ongoing project that investigates censorship, the first iteration focusing on Italian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. Based on the archive of the Italian revision board, the work details efforts to censor both Italian and foreign film. This period of cinema coincided with the increasing capitalization of female sexuality that culminated in a specific fascination with breasts, nicknamed “mammary madness” in America. *When the Towel Drops* shows actual censored film alongside the stacks of documents that explain why the footage was removed, often citing the exposure of breasts as particularly offensive, indecent, and immoral. Presenting this in a contemporary context, Radha May brings our attention to the reasons these depictions were considered taboo and questions what has and hasn’t changed since the mid-twentieth century. The almost comic attempts to circumscribe erotic or sensual scenes through dry bureaucratic language further highlight the hypocrisy involved in exploiting female bodies on the one hand, while censoring, for instance, scenes of sapphic love or self-gratification on the other. What some see as a joyful expression of women celebrating their social, sexual, and financial freedom, others see as a threat to the veneer of femininity itself. Funnily enough, within this conservative understanding of women and their purpose, breasts—one of the most anatomically defining parts of “femininity”—become symbols of betrayal when explicitly shown on screen. ●

Radha May (Elisa Giardina Papa, Nupur Mathur, Bathsheba Okwenje),  
*When the Towel Drops, Vol. 1 / Italy*, 2015, installation view, Granoff Center  
for the Creative Arts, Providence

# Marlie Mul

*Folded painting #3*

*Folded painting #4*

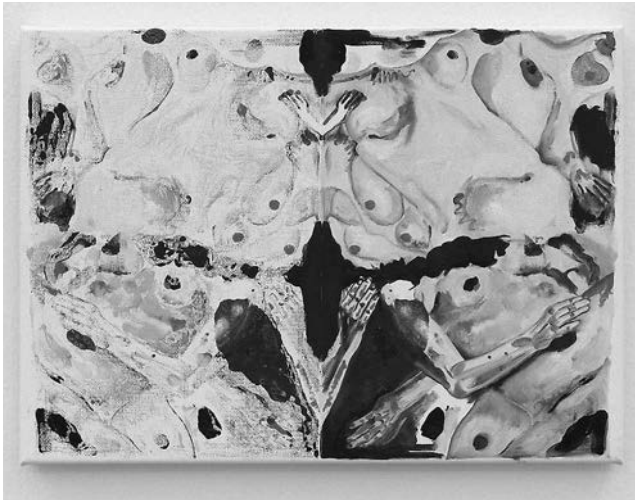
*Folded painting #6*

*Folded painting #8*

*Folded painting #9*

*Folded painting #10*

2017



Produced in 2017 just before the onset of a socially and politically turbulent time for women (exemplified by the dawn of the #MeToo movement), Marlie Mul's folded paintings question notions of femininity and conformity. This time also coincided with a period of change for the artist personally. Although not formally trained as a painter, she chose in that moment to work with what was readily available to her; she delved into painting with the nude self-portrait as a point of departure to explore her role as a woman and artist within (patriarchal) society and in an art world still dominated by the male gaze. Women's bodies have been observed, controlled, and scrutinized by society throughout history. Women are not allowed to merely exist; their physical presence must be constantly acknowledged and commented upon, thrusting significance upon their bodies. Exposed breasts, for instance, are seen as a salacious invitation. However, Mul's painted breasts spill out of themselves into something grotesque, taking up an overwhelming amount of space. She challenges ideas of control in the production of art by folding the paintings. In risking a failed print or damage to the original work, Mul defies not only conventional notions of what women's bodies look like but also the idea that artistic production is fully intentional. Uncanny and abstract, Mul's *Folded paintings* give the viewer little material upon which to imprint their prejudices about breasts. Instead, like the exhibition *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat* more generally, Mul's amalgamous forms force us to acknowledge the laughable aspects of the male gaze and abandon our usual affect upon the sight of women's nudes or breasts. ●

Marlie Mul, *Folded painting #6*, 2017 •

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CROY NIELSEN, VIENNA, PHOTO: PASCAL PETIGNAT



# OMARA Mara Oláh

*So here's Omara's provocative breasts which annoy my envious so much that I got angry and not only painted them but photographed myself alone in the mirror because I had no one to take a photo of me... But those bored domestic whores see me as a whore!!!! Take that you little whores, who do not want to breastfeed or give birth. They are not fake breasts. And why are they so beautiful? Because they breastfed the world's most beautiful daughter!!!!*

2014-2016

*The 5 forint lingerie The peak of the peaks because it's not enough that I escaped from the grip of death to the farm in Városcsőd to see no chimney. What's the rumour? In 1888 There's nothing wrong with her! She lives her life with a young dick!!! Here I was set up with Robika Alföldi*

2016

*Mara's 5 forints lingerie*

2016

The practice of Romani artist Mara Oláh, who used the moniker OMARA, is centered around the exploration and expression of her experiences and can be considered socially and politically critical. She used her practice as a means to come to terms with the humiliation she felt throughout her life because of her identity. OMARA turned to art to help her cope with pain from cancer, alienation from her daughter, and the grief she felt after her mother's death. Although she is often considered to be a naïve painter, her practice included photography, performances, actions, provocative appearances, and statements. Most of her works contain inscriptions that follow neither grammatical rules nor those of linearity. The texts have a performative quality rather than a narrative one, and they are a means by which she expressed her reality of being a Romani woman: suffering from sexism and racism and being let down by society. The photographs shown in *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat* show OMARA

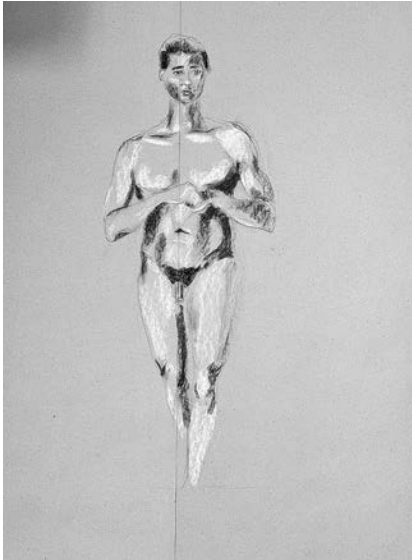


OMARA Mara Oláh, *So here's Omara's provocative breasts...*, 2014-2016 •  
PHOTO: COURTESY EVERYBODY NEEDS ART AND LONGTERMHANDSTAND, BUDAPEST

wearing lingerie. The inscriptions cover most of each image except for her breasts. With these works, she challenges stereotypical representations of Romani women as objects of sexual fantasy and their depiction as old witches, sex workers, fortune tellers, and deceivers. She questions the idea that it's acceptable for men to be with younger women while the reverse is often frowned upon. She criticizes the fetishization of her body and represents it as the body of a proud mother by highlighting the nurturing role of her breasts. The photographs represent OMARA's sexual freedom and the idea of controlling one's own representation. Often, in Western societies, the breasts of older women are viewed with disgust and are rarely represented as sexual. When these photographs were taken, OMARA was in her late sixties. By presenting her breasts and body in lingerie, she nonchalantly normalizes the sexuality of aging women. ●

# Abdul Sharif Oluwafemi Baruwa

*to be boobi*  
2023



Abdul Sharif Oluwafemi Baruwa, *to be boobi* (detail), 2023 •  
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND EXILE, VIENNA / © BILDRECHT, VIENNA 2023

Abdul Sharif Oluwafemi Baruwa's practice is characterized by fluid movement between the domestic and the public. Personal histories are skillfully and sensitively embedded into complex contemporary discourses, carefully deconstructing what is generally imposed according to one's gender, race, or nationality at the intersection of patriarchal and postcolonial narratives. For *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat*, Oluwafemi Baruwa has transformed found everyday objects, such as lamps, shades, patterns, and broken plates, into a carefully constructed installation titled *to be boobi*. The arrangement is reminiscent of a domestic setting but distorted through a play of dimension and scale. The installation involves commemorative elements that are both a celebration of the breast and a critique of the colonial and patriarchal remnants that dictate beauty standards (and therefore also our interactions and daily lives). The video *Schwarztee* [Black tea] is staged as a confessional vlog entry as might be found on YouTube. We see the artist's naked torso and face as he inspects his own breasts, talking of his insecurities as an adolescent and the pressures to adhere to rigid ideals despite the many shapes that men's breasts can take, before breaking into an impromptu spoken-word poem referencing the organic black tea packaging next to the camera. What could be perceived as an innocent and nonchalant approach to one's own corpor(e)ality evolves into a frank and probing monologue that allows for a lustful gaze on one's own body and a critical exploration of the underlying binary structures that claim to define it (yet these can easily be challenged and refuted). In this sense, the installation is testament to a form of individuation that allows space for doubt, error, and learning just as much as playfulness, sensuality, and eroticism. But not only is the lifelong process of becoming within the confines of a patriarchal society and the long reign of the male gaze under scrutiny; the notions of belonging and community that inevitably go with this are opened up and examined. ●

# Laure Prouvost

*The Hidden Paintings Grandma Improved,  
Looking at you looking at me*

2023



Laure Prouvost is a mixed-media artist and filmmaker who combines language, sound, and video with sculpture and painting to create installations. Through language and imagination, she aims to disrupt linear narratives and to explore how images relate to words and meanings. In the series *The Hidden Paintings Grandma Improved*, the artist tells the story of her grandmother, who found hidden paintings by Prouvost's grandfather depicting women's breasts and other sexualized body parts. Prouvost's grandmother then took it upon herself to improve the paintings by adding text to them. These textual phrases change the meaning of the paintings by taking control of the representation and subverting it. From mere imagery, the paintings turn into witty, funny stories. The painting *Looking at you looking at me* from this series shows two pairs of breasts in profile, emerging from the left and right sides of the painting, facing each other. The pairs of breasts, rendered in pale pink tones, are irregular in shape with sharp, pointed nipples. The phrase "Looking at you looking at me" is centered at the bottom of the painting. This added phrase de-objectifies the breasts and engages the imagination, letting the viewer suppose that they are having a conversation. It perhaps also references the viewer, giving the impression that the painting is aware of someone observing it and is reciprocating the gaze. The once-fetishized image of the breasts takes on a new meaning beyond the biological and the sexual. It is liberated to look and to be looked at as a (non-) sexualized part of the human body, not restricted or censored. Through this series, Prouvost and her grandmother take the lead in telling their own stories, in which multiple perspectives intertwine. They break away from the patriarchal mindset that has kept breasts hidden, private, and objectified. ●

Laure Prouvost, *The Hidden Paintings Grandma Improved, Looking at you looking at me*, 2023 • © LAURE PROUVOST / COURTESY LISSON GALLERY, PHOTO: TODD-WHITE ART PHOTOGRAPHY / © BILDRECHT, VIENNA 2023

# Christina Ramberg

*Ticklish Construction*

1974



Christina Ramberg explored the sexualization and objectification of women's bodies through restrictive clothing such as corsets. Her work, influenced by surrealism, features torsos, hands, and heads. It questions societal norms around the representation of women. Ramberg was a member of the Chicago Imagists, an informal group from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and exhibited in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the Hyde Park Art Center. In the 1970s, Ramberg developed the *Corset/Urn* series, which explores the forms of modulated bodies. In her acrylic painting *Ticklish Construction*, she depicts a woman's torso in profile. The images take the form of a comic strip that tells the story of a woman putting on a bondage-style corset. Ramberg saw this restrictive garment as a manifestation of control over gendered bodies—a means for patriarchal society to construct women's bodies as if they were "architectural objects" to be controlled and manipulated. The origins of the corset, which was initially genderless, can be traced back to the Minoans of Crete. It resurfaced during the Renaissance as a woman's garment and continued to evolve over time. In the Victorian era, the pursuit of the hourglass figure that defined femininity led to tightlacing, which was painful, left scars, and caused organ damage and respiratory problems. Maternity corsets were designed to conceal early pregnancy by temporarily hiding the growth of the belly. The practice of tightlacing in pregnancy led to stories of deformed babies and monstrous mothers. In reality, miscarriages were the most common consequence. Today, the corset has found a new role as a fetish object associated with bondage. It represents pleasure through pain and a sense of liberation through control and discipline. Historically used to enhance feminine attributes, it has gained significance in queer gender expression. Although Ramberg represented corsets physically restricting the body, they have come to symbolize gender and sexual freedom. ●

Christina Ramberg, *Ticklish Construction*, 1974 •

PHOTO: © MUMOK – MUSEUM MODERNER KUNST STIFTUNG LUDWIG WIEN

# Adam Rzepecki

*Project of the Father Pole Memorial*  
1981



In 1979, Adam Rzepecki founded the Łódź Kaliska group with Marek Janiak, Andrzej Kwietniewski, Andrzej Świetlik, and Makary (Andrzej Wielogórski). A group of artists of the neo-avant-garde, they produced work independently using photography, film, and performance art while working toward the collective goal of critiquing the absurdity of the “People’s Poland” under socialism. Rzepecki’s work *Project of the Father Pole Memorial* was created in response to the cult of *Matka Polka* [Mother Poland] propagandized during the communist regime. With its name taken from the 1830 poem “Do matki Polki” [Ode to Mother Poland] by Adam Mickiewicz, *Matka Polka* was symbolic of a self-sacrificing maternal figure whose courage and moral strength benefited a greater cause. In practice, this meant that Polish women were burdened with the responsibility of raising their families with a strong patriotic spirit to uphold the country’s national identity. The term was also enmeshed with the cult of the Virgin Mary, which was deeply embedded within Polish history through the influence of the Catholic Church. Within the church, the self-sacrificing nature of the Virgin Mary was perpetuated through imagery of her breastfeeding the Baby Jesus, which symbolized the nurturing of all Christians. In communist Poland this took on a new political meaning, as the country viewed itself as a messianic leader with the ability to guide other “politically oppressed” countries to freedom. In his work, Rzepecki playfully turns this image on its head by blending the sacred with the profane and the surreal. Unlike the associations conjured by the breastfeeding mother—of nurture and care, as well as the self-sacrificing Virgin Mary—a child suckling on the nipple of a man seems futile and absurd, and makes a mockery of the archetype of strong masculinity that was expected of the New Soviet person. ●

Adam Rzepecki, *Project of the Father Pole Memorial*, 1981 •

PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAWID RADZISZEWSKI GALLERY, WARSAW

# Toni Schmale

*schlauch* [hose] #4

*schlauch* [hose] #5

2023



Toni Schmale's artistic practice questions binary thinking when it comes to gender, be it in relation to gender roles, gender traits, or gender stereotypes. Her sculptural works are often reminiscent of exercise equipment or fitness machines and are made, with high precision, of materials such as steel, concrete, or rubber. Their inability to function demonstrates a certain resistance that can be understood as a critique of existing power structures in bodybuilding and of the idea of the perfect body. Her sculptures are presented as a "connection between the inner and outer world"; they seem to be torn between the solidity of objects and the flexibility of mental images. They take on an imagined life of their own, inviting us to explore the relationship between body and mind by evoking our memories, attachments, and associations. *Schlauch* [hose] #4 and *schlauch* [hose] #5 look like the battle ropes used in fitness training, but the sculptures are made from steel tubes attached to steel plates. Sitting somewhere between industrial design, fitness equipment, torture device, and fetish furniture, they refer to the conditioning of the human body and allow us to imagine actions that can be performed on or with them. The sculptures challenge the idea of building the perfect body through the impossibility of their use, suggesting that perfection is just another (unattainable) social construct. In this instance, a reference to breasts is also clear: not only do the sculptures come in a pair but also their tubular shapes inspire thoughts of sucking or irrigating. The notion of the nurturing female breast blurs into associations with sexual play. Additionally, breasts presented in the context of bodybuilding highlight the deeply ingrained idea that the muscular body is exclusively masculine. Schmale's sculptures seem to confidently and nonchalantly inhabit a space of body discomfort caused by stereotypical gender attributes. ●

Toni Schmale, *schlauch* [hose] #1, 2022; *schlauch* [hose] #2, 2022, installation view  
*Hier und Jetzt: Wien Skulptur 2022*, Neuer Kunstverein, Vienna, 2022 •

PHOTO: MANUEL CARREON LOPEZ, KUNST-DOKUMENTATION / © BILDRECHT, VIENNA 2023

# Maja Smrekar

*unit: Hybrid Family*

2023

CONCEPT Maja Smrekar

PATTERNS DESIGN Zlata Ziborova

THANKS TO Sebastijan Bandur, Sanja Grcić,

Lana Grahek, Aljaž Rudolf, Marko Šuštar, Jože Zajc

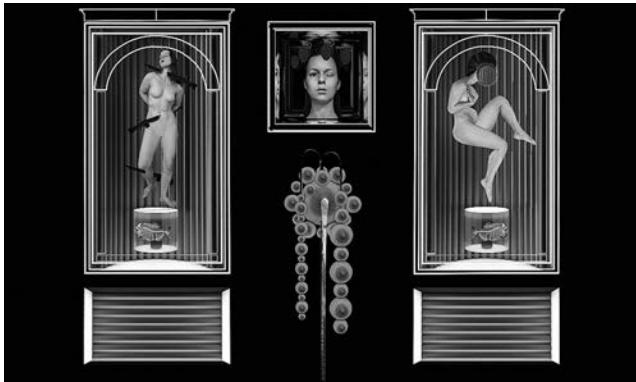


Maja Smrekar challenges established notions of social structures, domesticity, anthropocentrism, family, and motherhood while speculating about possibilities for cohabitation between humans and nonhumans. She takes an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates site-specific installation, performance, photography, drawing, video, and sound, as well as workshops, lectures, and texts. The site-specific installation *unit: Hybrid Family* (2023) is an expansion of one of Smrekar's best-known projects, *Hybrid Family* (2015–2016), in which she spent three months training her body to produce milk to breastfeed her puppy, Ada. By involving another species in the act of nursing—which is often considered to be the closest relationship between two beings, generally the mother and child—the artist explored possibilities for breastfeeding that are not conditioned by gender, reproductive organs, or genetics and offered a new, hybrid form of family that may inspire alternative futures. The work *unit: Hybrid Family* continues Smrekar's explorations of the social and ideological instrumentalization of women's bodies and breastfeeding. The stylized domestic interior brings to mind traditional Biedermeier-style living rooms, signifying the period of the Industrial Revolution that saw the rise of the middle class. This social group later established the ideal of the nuclear family and the institution of home within a new capitalist discourse. At first glance ordinary, cozy, and intimate, the space reveals unexpected qualities: unusual objects and motifs appear, disrupting this picture-perfect backdrop. Subtly incorporated elements from Smrekar's previous project, such as breast pumps and the icon-like portrait of the artist breastfeeding a puppy, have invaded the Biedermeier idyll and “queered” a space otherwise full of heteronormative markers of home, marriage, and family. This uncanny encounter between bourgeois domesticity and interspecies nurturing reveals possibilities for future living arrangements supported by the advancement of technology and the undoing of heteronormative preconceptions. ●

# Mariya Vasilyeva

ALTAR 2.0

2019



Mariya Vasilyeva, *ALTAR 2.0*, 2019 •

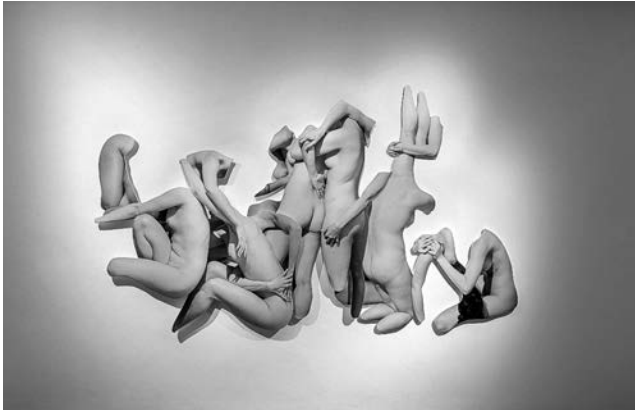
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST / © BILDRECHT, VIENNA 2023

Mariya Vasilyeva works with digital collage, video installation, and performance to question patterns of identity and the gendered power dynamics thereof, particularly for women. Her practice considers body politics and the representation of women in public versus private. She often uses her own body as a site of digital manipulation to address broader social concerns. Vasilyeva's video installation *ALTAR 2.0* contrasts baroque architecture and imagery synonymous with the Roman Catholic Church with the aesthetics of contemporary pornography and eroticism, highlighting the perverse connections between sex, violence, and sexual violence within the religion. Three saints, whose depictions have historically had erotic undertones, are presented upon a "neon altar" reminiscent of brothels, strip clubs, tanning salons, and other establishments related to the body cult. On the left is the artist as Saint Sebastian, whose depicted martyrdom has been adopted as emblematic of homoerotic desire by the LGBTQ+ community. To the right she appears as Saint Teresa, whose visions of God were sexualized most famously in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–1652). In the center, Vasilyeva as the Virgin Mary, with a halo of hand grenades, looks down over a Fountain of Youth made of breasts. Breasts themselves have been viewed with both disdain and erotic pleasure throughout the history of the Catholic Church, as they underwent a process of secularization and depictions of the Virgin Mary nursing Christ became increasingly realistic and eroticized from the fifteenth century onward, whereas earlier, more abstracted images were meant to symbolize spiritual nourishment. In presenting herself as these religious figures in a gratuitous manner akin to modern pornography, Vasilyeva's work brings private pleasure uncomfortably into the public sphere. Undertones of sexual arousal are made overt to emphasize her point that the fetishization of others is—and historically always has been—an aspect of "worship" in Western society, even in the most religious or private of contexts. ●



# Dorottya Vékony

*Fertility I.*  
2020



Dorottya Vékony explores themes of reproduction and childbearing while unveiling their socially uncomfortable and consciously ignored aspects, such as infertility, miscarriage, and abortion. Using images of the body and an interdisciplinary approach that frequently combines photography, video, sculpture, and installation, she is interested in the role of collective care in processing and healing from trauma.

In the fragmented photo collage *Fertility I.* (2020), we can catch glimpses of legs, arms, breasts, stomachs, thighs, and backs, which are taken from photographs of women performing different fertility rituals. The intertwined women's bodies make supportive gestures that go beyond the usual erotic connotations of naked bodies and stress the community aspect of woman-to-woman relationships. By actively participating in fertility rites, support groups, and workshops, working closely with different women's groups, and drawing from her personal experience, Vékony explores the ways that women overcome difficult situations by talking, sharing, being together, and creating alternative systems of care and support in a society that often sustains an atmosphere of shame, isolation, erasure, and silencing.

Rather than highlighting the individual positions of each depicted body, the puzzle-like composition brings to light the importance of solidarity, togetherness, and collective consciousness in overcoming societal pressures on the female body and heteronormative notions of motherhood and reproduction. ●

# Marianne Vlaschits

*The Deluge*  
2023



Marianne Vlaschits explores the deep connection between human and celestial bodies. Her work is a compelling synthesis of astrophysical research and visual narratives by women painters from different historical periods. Her œuvre includes painting, installation, video, and occasionally performance art. Within this diverse body of work, she embarks on a journey of exploration that sheds light on the fundamental nature of matter and the intricate interplay of the cosmos. Vlaschits art delves deep into the imperceptible transformations that occur in the quantum realm, which, although hidden from our naked eyes, underpin the very fabric of the universe. Her approach challenges the prevailing tendency to dichotomize the world into culture and nature, in which humans and their bodies are increasingly categorized as components of culture. By intricately interweaving the celestial and the corporeal, Vlaschits offers a fresh perspective that invites us to reimagine ourselves as an integral part of nature, the universe, and a vast, enigmatic whole. *The Deluge* was featured in the exhibition *Danger Seasons*, a term used to describe the period from May to October when nature is most vulnerable to the ravages of hurricanes, wildfires, and heatwaves. Through her work, Vlaschits not only blurs the boundaries between the human and the cosmic but also raises urgent questions about our relationship with the environment and our role in addressing the ecological crises of our time. *The Deluge* depicts an imaginary, distant world, where two moons shine in the night sky and the ground is made up of abstract shapes that intertwine and swirl. The only recognizable shapes are those of two breasts with shiny nipples. Neither sexual nor nurturing but instead alluding to landscape, these breasts are an invitation to leave preconceived notions behind and form new ones. ●

# Rafał Zajko

*Bread and Milk*

*Wet Nurse (The Chapel)*

*Gleaner*

*Monstrance II (Pleasure Principle)*

*Monstrance I*

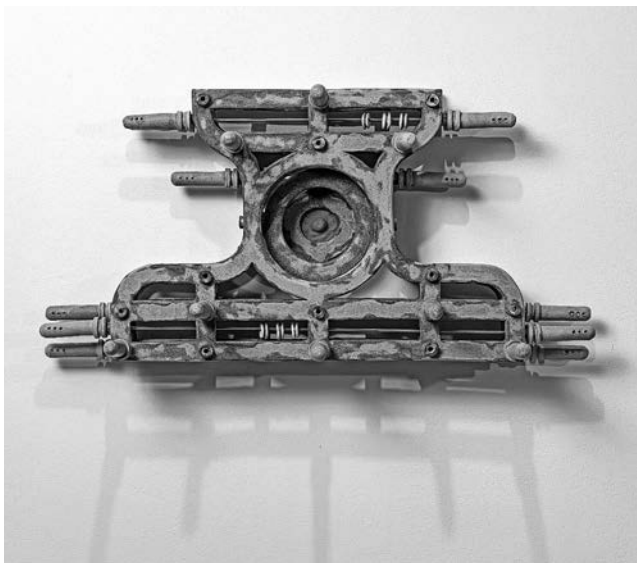
*Monstrance III (Choir)*

*Mothernity*

*Transubstantiate II*

*Transubstantiate I*

2023



Rafał Zajko, *Mothernity*, 2023

Rafał Zajko's diverse sculptural practice often combines ceramics, prosthetics, and performative elements with industrial materials to examine industrialization and its impact on class, cultural heritage, and queer identity. In his new commission for Kunsthalle Wien, he draws a parallel between the industrialized production of grain and milk. Zajko develops a motif from a previous work—nippled loaves of bread—into an emblem for the ways in which, through grain agriculture, Mother Earth “breastfed” and nurtured industrial (and, by extension, social) progress. At the same time, the artist remains skeptical of what progress really means; both lactose and gluten intolerance, for instance, are increasingly common, hinting at something fundamentally wrong with industrialized nutrition. In *Bread and Milk*, the artist ties this theme of advancement to the additional example of the Catholic church, questioning the idea of linear progression when it comes to cultural attitudes around breasts, breastfeeding, and parenting. Depictions of the breastfeeding Madonna became increasingly realistic during the Renaissance, which caused an outcry from moralists within the church. At the same time, the church actively encouraged wet-nursing. Crowning Zajko's installation, *Wet Nurse (The Chapel)* is a sculpture made from synthetic milk that slowly melts, its residues collected and refrozen each time to illustrate these capricious attitudes. Zajko further responds to the push-and-pull between liberal and conservative views by offering a queered alternative to them. Three of the central works combine nipples with monstrances, ceremonial vessels that carry the sacramental bread believed to (literally) turn into the body of Christ when consumed during Communion. The nipples in his work—including casts of the artist's own and those produced by a prosthetic technician—speak to no particular gender. Instead, they turn his sculptures into abstracted and mechanized representations of a body that is nurturing yet exists beyond traditional notions of parenting. ●

# My See-Through Tops are Soft Revenge for My Shame

Aziza Harmel

While talking with Laura on the phone, I told her that I didn't think I should be the one writing about boobs. I said I wasn't queer enough. That made her laugh. I said that I am still learning how to carry my own tits and that learning how to do so should not be the work of a lifetime. That also made her laugh. Is it, though, the work of a lifetime?

Back when I first started to get tits, in my high school days, I had nightmares in which I forgot to wear a T-shirt to class. In those nightmares, I felt shame. I was starting to become a version of my future adult self, and it was not the version I wanted to be. But the future had already come for me, and it was full of topless-beach hangouts and see-through tops. Though I have mastered performing the art of shamelessness, I still have an ambivalent relationship to my body. I should not be saying this, because I want you to think I am cool and because I have done real transgressive stuff in my life, but I do still feel a bit rebellious and transgressive while I am wearing those see-through tops. When I say I am rebellious because I wear see-through tops, I make fun of myself, yet I do so proudly—affirmatively—just as my nipples point right toward you.

Like I said, I know how to act as if showing my tits is not a big deal. I guess my see-through tops are a kind of soft revenge for my shame. I have other forms of revenge, which I hope are less gentle—I might mention some later in this text without naming them as such.

So when my crush (that is, former crush) gave me the book *Females* by Andrea Long Chu, saying that the motto of the book is “everyone is female and everyone hates it,”<sup>1</sup> of course I had to read it. It was not only this quote that made me want to read it but also that it was, after all, a crush who gave it to me. I thought the book might therefore contain a code to crack that would make my crush love me and my tits forever (which, of course, never happened). *Females* was still worth reading—that a lot of it annoyed me does not matter that much. I was fascinated by the freedom with which Chu writes. To provide some context, the thesis of the book is

1 Andrea Long Chu, *Females*, London: Verso Books, 2019, p. 20.

that “femaleness is a universal sex defined by self-negation.”<sup>2</sup> She also writes: “I’ll define as female any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another.”<sup>3</sup> The “female” identity on which the book is based is admittedly less a biological condition than an existential one. Chu refers to femaleness not as an anatomical or genetic characteristic but rather a universal existential condition. To be female, Chu argues, is to make room for the desires of someone else, to have those desires projected onto you. Each chapter of *Females* begins with quotes from Valerie Solanas’s play *Up Your Ass*. Of Solanas and her 1967 book *SCUM Manifesto*, Chu has said: “I did buy the argument in *SCUM*—a totally byzantine idea that men are women and women are men, she’s sort of writing herself in a circle—but I did buy it, and I did enjoy adopting the position, among other things, to get a rise out of people.”<sup>4</sup> With *Females*, Chu sees herself as following the form of *SCUM Manifesto*—a form that constantly dismantles itself. “We are all female” is an impossible claim, yet Chu makes it thinkable—desirable, even. One might disagree with what she is stating, but in reality it does not matter, because, to use a phrase from Solanas, writing itself is both “impossibly serious” and “seriously impossible.” And so is Chu’s essay. She follows Solanas’s unwavering dedication to her own ambivalence. In many ways, as Chu herself suggests, this book is about what it means to stand by these ambivalences. I am personally not so interested in whether or not we all are female, and even if we were, I doubt that we would all hate it. Yet I do understand and practice ambivalence, and I fight to defend it.

Let’s come back to boobs—that is, after all, what this text is supposed to be about; though it might be more about pleasure and pain and about looking at both without blinking.

I left Tunisia for the first time in my life when I was 20 years old. It was my first-ever time in a plane. I went to live

in Amsterdam with my ex-boyfriend (who is now also my ex-husband). I was accepted into the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague, in the graphic design department. I sucked at graphic design; actually I hardly knew what it meant. To this day, I still don’t understand why they took me. I have a theory that it was related to quotas, since I was the only Arab at the school. In any case, I made the best of it. My first day at school was a nightmare—similar to the nightmares I had back when I was in high school, where I went to class topless. It was the same feeling of discomfort and shame. My jeans were way too tight, my top was way too see-through, my heels were way too high and uncomfortable, and my handbag was way too small. Why did I do that to myself? I was going to an art school, for God’s sake, in the early 2000s! I was the only non-hippie, non-hipster, and non-white (which became my thing later). I arrived very late for class because I got lost first in Amsterdam, then in The Hague, and eventually inside the school itself. While walking in the empty corridor of the school building, I felt like the whole neighborhood could hear my heels resonating as they hit the floor. It was a miracle that I made it to class. I spoke bad English, but that didn’t matter because the class was in Dutch. I, of course, did not speak any Dutch. There were no chairs left, so I had to sit on the floor. This would have been totally fine, but the jeans I was wearing were not made for such recklessness. They were so tight that they accommodated, at best, sitting on a chair. While making my way to the floor, I felt like I was doing the limbo while dancing the twist and failing graciously at both. When I finally made it to the floor, half of my big (beautiful) ass was hanging out of my jeans and half of my 2000s thong was visible. I kept pulling down my see-through top to hide the half of my ass that was hanging out of my jeans. The class was in Dutch, but every now and then, out of context, they spoke to me in English. It was fucking hell. It lasted five hours—I had time to die and then come back to life.

When the class was finally over—though it felt endless—some of my classmates introduced themselves and wanted to take me for a drink. All I wanted to do was go home; take off my ridiculous outfit; relieve my feet, ass, and tits; cry; smoke

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Sophie Kemp, “Andrea Long Chu on Her Juicily Transgressive Book, *Females*,” *Vogue*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.vogue.com/article/andrea-long-chu-interview-females>.

pot; eat; and then die. I answered, “Yes, great! Of course!” There were four of them and they all had bikes, but they were dragging them along in order to walk with me. I did not have a bike, mainly because I did not know how to ride a bike. It started raining, making my tits pop even more through my see-through top. My classmates obviously thought we would go faster if we used the bikes. Logical, yet impossible for me. I had to confess that I could not ride a bike, which, for Dutch people, means that you have some kind of sickness or had a traumatic childhood. I tried to explain that I simply never learned, but I don’t think they got it. We made it to the bar, and while we sat there, they told me that my top was see-through. I said it was because of the rain. We got drunk. It helped. But I still hated that school.

I spent years trying to fit in, and it turns out that I am very good at it, though I did not do it for a long time.

It takes a lot of time to understand the violence of blending in, though I do agree with Chu that self-negation is ontologically part of me. Like I stated earlier, it does not matter whether we agree with Chu or not. That is not the point. She says herself that her claim is totally indefensible. Somehow that is precisely what interests me about it. This is the idea from the book that I couldn’t shake while continuing to formalize my own self-negation. It is ambivalence that makes self-negation thinkable and bearable from a perspective of embodied contradictions, which form the sum of my desires. My own affirmation.

As much as I want to believe that this text is about boobs, it is not. Just like *Females* is not about femaleness. *Females* confronts what it means to be a constant embodiment of contradictory knowledge. We are in this world, making up for those painful cleavages with shallow fixes (see-through tops, for example) and other deeper, more mysterious tools.

I did, after all, come back to my tight jeans and see-through tops, and I never learned how to ride a bike. ●



OMARA Mara Oláh, *Mara's 5 forints lingerie*, 2016 •

PHOTO: COURTESY EVERYBODY NEEDS ART AND LONGTERMHANDSTAND, BUDAPEST

# On Top

Jules Gleeson

British artist Claye Bowler's 2022/2023 solo show at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, was simply titled *Top*. A deft triple entendre, 'Top' refers at once to trans surgeries which remove breasts and reconstruct chests, the gay sex position, and finally one's spot on the British National Health Service's interminably long waiting lists. Spanning work collected across six years, from Bowler's original request for a specialist consultation with a GP through to recovery from revisions in 2022, material within the installation ranges from simple sums to two lumps of Bowler's own unwanted tissue. The installation aims to archive, in comprehensive detail, the layers of deliberation and self-fashioning that enfold a single surgical procedure.

For Bowler, a debut at the Henry Moore Institute was clearly the beginning of a remarkable career (he already had extensive curatorial experience, which supported the show's form as an archival hoard). Yet the installation also addressed the worsening dysfunction that British trans people are subjected to both by state institutions and the public gaze. Strained by the swingeing budget cuts resulting from more than a decade of right-wing governance afflicting the healthcare system and an unprecedented surge in the numbers of those medically transitioning, the antiquated "gender identity clinic" system left Bowler with a long way to the top.

This waiting time was put to varied use by the artist. Casts made during this period capture both Bowler's pre-surgical body and the desired forms he could previously only imagine. These latex-filled castings appear like cocoons cast aside or the shed skins of a reptile. The show's respondent, Morgan M. Page, remarked in an interview with Bowler that she found the result akin to viewing a sculpture's offcasts without the piece itself (or himself) being exhibited.

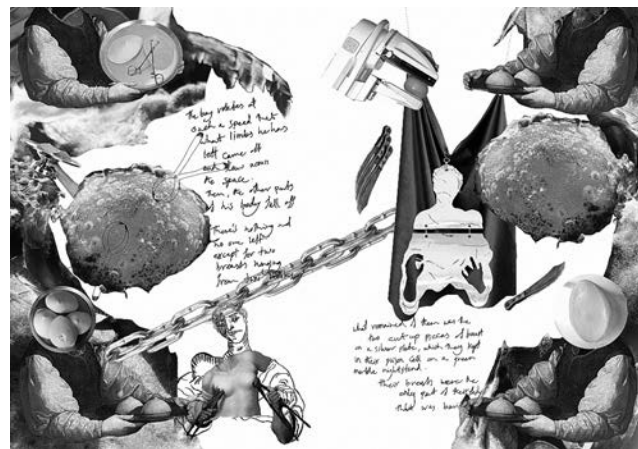
Around these figurative (and disfigurative) glimpses, the installation fills shelves and archival cabinets. It includes the simple yet frantic arithmetic of calculations that itemize the costs of procedures and recovery time weighed against savings and then crowdfunding (catching the moments that Bowler's faith in the free yet unpredictably slow NHS waned and then vanished). The process of casting himself repeatedly impelled

Bowler to act: repeatedly obliging himself to visualize the form being denied to him left him with a pressing need to secure the procedure privately. Both the wait that preceded this decision and the juggling of expenses and single-purpose income that followed fuel the show.

Approaching the same theme through different means, multimedia artist Kasra Jalilipour's *Saint Agatha as a Boy* purposefully draws together iconic references, from Christian hagiography to medical fetish play, in a sequence of frenetic collages. In an interview for the trans aesthetics special issue of German art magazine *Texte zur Kunst* this year, Jalilipour explains that the exuberant “too much” layering of this work teases out their position as an atheist from two Abrahamic religious backgrounds, raised in Iran.

One of the most highly venerated Christian martyrs, Saint Agatha (ca. 231–251 AD) was reportedly a sworn virgin who was tortured and then imprisoned for refusing the advances of a Roman prefect. Among other torments, Agatha survived having her breasts torn from her body with a pair of tongs, only to die later in jail. This defiant fate made her a lasting reference point for Christian women enduring breast cancer, who offered her prayers inspired by the grace she demonstrated. The popular cult around her has lasted since: in Agatha's home region of Sicily, Minne di Sant'Agata cakes are served on her feast day, depicting her severed breasts in marzipan stuffed with ricotta and sponge, topped with a cherry.

As patron saint of breast cancer victims, Agatha of Sicily is an ambivalent figure for Jalilipour; Agatha at once emblemizes the bosom as the site of worst possible embodied affliction and, in many depictions, also miraculous restoration following her disfigurement (divine favor returns her breasts to her physique, either in jail or after her death). Recasting Agatha as a boy speaks to the moments when dysphoria threatens to prize the body apart entirely: breasts are the location of life's harshest agony, and for those who see them can inspire a desire whose object has truly no use for. In Jalilipour's collage, Agatha's torso appears twice: once as an empty outline (intruded into by a mammogram scan cross section), and then again in full form, being torn apart by tongs. The work identifies



Kasra Jalilipour, *Study of Saint Agatha as a Boy*, No 4, 2023

exactly the reduction that can seem to be the only alternative outcome to top surgery: the body apparently ceasing to be anything else but unwanted breasts. “There’s nothing and no one left: except for two breasts hanging from two hooks,” explains a handwritten note imposed across a chain, to the left of three copy-and-pasted cleaver-scimitars.

Behold the form of twenty-first-century boyhood: a composite of stitching, clamps, and scalpels.

Some of the excised “breasts” present in the work seem to be the padding used to stuff bras (colloquially known in Britain as “chicken fillets”). Rather than accept any simple division between natural form and civilizing intervention, metal surgical tools and containers contrast with limp silicone filler. As Jalilipour puts it: “I play with the idea of organic versus nonorganic, soft versus hard, like juxtaposing jelly with the stainless steel plates.” Hetero- and homosexuality also seem unsettled by this playful reimagining of Agatha: is this boy version of the saint refusing the desire of a prefect who fails to recognize him? Or is his commitment to a queer mode of chastity just as total?

In both Bowler's triple entendre in the use of the word “Top” and Jalilipour's mingling evocation of religious and clinical



frames, we see artists grappling with the excess of roles their procedures are taken to be tasked with. The formal crowding and purposeful clutter used by each artist emphasizes the over-coded nature of these operations. Rather than moments of tidying or clarifying, top surgeries appear as moments of chaos without center or finality. And how could it be otherwise, when so many symbolic moments are superimposed onto both breasts and their excision? We must separate top surgeries from the stifling, feminizing associations surrounding therapeutic mastectomies. These surgeries need to be pulled free, through puncturing the twinning of the male body with the default embodied form.

But first, for those who don't yet find this obvious, let's consider why people commit to these procedures at all.

While testosterone treatments generally achieve rapid alterations of how recipients' voices and faces are interpreted by those they encounter in their daily lives, society appears stubbornly resistant to certain cultural reconfigurations. Specifically, the full integration of men with visible breasts. For many men, this turns safe passage through the world into a matter of daily chores, careful calculations, and sacrifices of public life. Temporary relief can be found in binders (which flatten breasts to the chest when worn) or loose-fitting tops. But these measures often feel piecemeal and frustrating (and some breasts, like Bowler's, are unable to bind.) Top surgeries offer relief to those left dysphoric by their breasts, typically reshaping their movements, sartorial choices, posture, and the spaces they opt to interact with. Many anticipating the surgery speak in terms of the next summer: the relief of being able to undress at the side of a pool or on the beach without preparations, or without second-guessing the gazes of those around them. The chance to be topless and freed, rolling back one's shoulders, in whatever company. The freedom to slip on a vest or crop top without a binding undergarment, attention to cut, or ambient anxiety at being misidentified each time any stage of this process is skipped. For others the blessing comes more with hindsight: many mention that the toll taken on their executive functions by the procedure of binding was hardly noticed until weeks after the procedure had become

finally unnecessary. Perhaps it becomes obvious while sifting through wardrobes or charity stores without pangs of "If only..." or while admiring the physiques of others without a flush of envy or regret.

Beyond this lifting of pressure, top surgeries pose a challenge to manhood as the most basic order of a body. Rather than a simple removal of breast tissue, these operations are equally the production of a chest. While a surgeon able to remove breast tissue is relatively simple to find, the act of reconstruction is a more rarefied skillset. Finding a reliable surgeon is simplest through community referrals and resources. Photos of "results" are cataloged in shared folders and compared by those evaluating surgeries. Continuing the work of late twentieth-century subcultural magazines, warnings about incompetent or negligent physicians are exchanged through digital channels, along with recovery guides and notes from those who are witness to breakthroughs in surgical technique. As much as a removal, top surgery requires an act of craft. While in prevailing ideological terms the male is often cast as the neutral or default form for human life, top surgeries are defined exactly by the measures taken to sculpt, to fill in as much as they flatten, and to create chests anew.

With the metaphor of bodybuilding, we find this point reaching completion: trans men focused on muscular hypertrophy treat the aftermath of top surgeries as both a target site and a means to an end (gaining full access to locations that had previously been fraught). Packing on pectoral muscle is taken to complete the desired effect of surgery, and removing breast tissue greatly facilitates participation in the majority of the world's gyms. These popular institutions are well known for de facto sex segregation and a distinctive brew of cultural narrow-mindedness and freewheeling biohacking auto-experimentation. While, more recently, alternatives such as Vienna's Queer Muscle have begun to draw more people into these subcultures, for trans males across much of the world, the first year after top surgery serves as a starting point for ready access and intuitive focal point for muscle sets. In that way, these operations allow for chests to be packed out as much as flattened.

Today, top surgeries have begun to spill beyond the confines of transition technologies. Mastectomies have long been a touchpoint for both queer theorists, such as Eve K. Sedgwick, and lesbian poets, such as Marilyn Hacker. The NGOs overseeing “awareness raising” around breast cancer have drenched popular depictions (from fundraisers to support resources) in pink. At best, this was an attempt to prevent women (usually middle-aged to elderly) undergoing possibly life-saving mastectomies from feeling “unwomaned.” But too often, this presentation of living through cancer has become cloying, and suggested only a single (defensive) path through radical bodily changes it demands. Similarly, both in the West and beyond, focus has come to rest on the prospect of breast reconstruction (immediate, disambiguating, consolatory). Doctors may introduce the notions of both the removal and replacement of breasts in a single move; Jalilipour’s work was partly inspired by their feeling deeply moved by reports of Iranian doctors pressuring reluctant women to accept post-mastectomy breast augmentation.

In that clinical context, it’s probably inevitable that the case of trans men came to serve as a reference point for resistance to the not-so-subtly coercive press-ganging of cancer survivors into boob jobs. In communist theory journal *Endnotes* (not known for its confessional writing), Jeanne Neton reflected on her experiences pressing for a non-reconstruction operation in a former East German hospital in “Notes from the Chemo Room.” This piece is a marked contrast to Neton’s first contribution to *Endnotes*, “The Logic of Gender” (co-written with Maya Gonzales), a magisterial and schematic overview of domestic drudgery understood as “indirectly market mediated” labor. In “Notes from the Chemo Room,” Neton follows her own struggle and those of fellow patients with narrow clinical expectations for conventional embodiment (with support from her trans-male boyfriend). She contrasts the offerings for those accepting breast augmentations with the singular negation presented to those refusing them: “The thing is, when you opt for reconstruction, doctors give you all sorts of options. They often like to joke that you can even get bigger boobs if you want to. But when you refuse implants they

give you only one choice: the cut, the crossing-out...” In this light, the experiences of trans men offer a stark rejoinder to the unchecked negativity of clinicians. “A boob job or nothing” is revealed to be as false a dichotomy as any.

After months of dialogue with other patients (past and present), Neton’s final confrontation with hospital staff sees a young medic strenuously attempt to veto Neton’s tentative suggestion that she have no reconstruction. Brushing over Neton’s reference to trans top surgeries (and ignoring her boyfriend), this medic insists that the tissue stripping will generate a hole, which couldn’t possibly be wanted. Neton uses all caps to emphasize two points made by the recalcitrant medic: her proposed chest form is described as a “HOLE,” and she is told, “YOU DON’T WANT THAT.” Between these two capitalized outbursts, we can see the phobia of the medical establishment voiced: unreconstructed breasts are a nothingness or barren space. Neton has challenged the typical heteronormy clinicians expect to play out through their patient’s physical forms. Strenuously, alarmingly, the doctor informed Neton of what shape she desired herself to be.

Describing herself as already weakened from six months of chemotherapy, Neton was able to avoid being spoken over only with support from her partner and, more unexpectedly, from a much older medic. The junior clinician’s viscerally negative reaction was met with bemusement by her institutional superior. After asking Neton a relatively simple, left-field question (whether she wanted her replaced nipples to point outward like most men’s do, or forward like most women’s), the older medic authorized the procedure and reassured Neton that the “hole” feared by her younger colleague would instead provide a chance for Neton’s chest to be filled out with muscles through gym workouts.

In a note, Neton lingers on the balance of this lopsided treatment: certainly the novelty of clinical practice she’d demanded may have resulted in a certain insecurity, she allows. But altogether, Neton’s personal account seems to undercut any hope that the medical profession may be undergoing a positive and progressive reformation. Venomous attitudes toward irregularly-sexed forms are clearly still a lively presence



Claye Bowler, installation view *Top*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds 2022/2023 •  
PHOTO: BOB HARRIS, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HENRY MOORE INSTITUTE

in supposedly therapeutic professions, and don't land along tidy generational lines. So we can't have faith that the expressive potential of sex will be simply a matter of waiting for the "old guard" to be swept away. This is unmistakably true in the hospital where Neton sets her scene (it's quite possible that older professionals in Berlin in the 2010s were trained in a context where transition procedures were provided fully through the state; Britain still remains notionally committed to this).

Lingering with this "HOLE" that Neton encountered, we can see another way in which top surgeries have expanded beyond the trans-male communities of their development. The week I write this essay, a furor arose around photos of consensual scarification that a nonbinary Instagram user had commissioned for themselves. Working in a tattoo parlor, the artist carved two grooves beneath their breasts. The posted photo was taken while the incisions were fresh, and the artist stated that they expected a hit of "euphoria" from the procedure. Trans men often take measures to make scar tissue minimally visible (with incisions beneath the bosom easier to conceal with chest hair, and around the areola typically less visible at

a glance). By contrast, this scarification commission plucked the thorns from the rose.

Pushback against this genderqueer pioneer by a minority of trans men was visceral, although the visual outcome of the procedure remains unclear at this point. Across time, the fading scars will surely come to resemble those from a small boob job or perhaps the marks left by an implant being removed. Or else it's possible the artist will grow chest hair, and (as with most trans men) the scars will fade from view altogether. Regardless, it seems that the myriad variations of what each of us wishes to do with our own physique will be the cause of consternation for a while yet.

This discursive flare-up taken alongside Neton's report on extracting humane outcomes from post-Soviet clinical sexed aesthetics shows us the interplay between trans and cis states of embodiment. From another position, Bowler and Jalilpour both address this same moment of mingling through their formally heterogeneous exhibits. The twenty-first century is providing moments in which trans physiques come to be fully recognized and taken as desirable. Not only moments of metamorphosis but also their residue (scar tissues and scraps of sculpting offcasts) are being revalued and desired. In becoming widely known, reference points exceed their expected containers, genres, and forms. The shape this mutual corruption will take tomorrow may be uncertain, but it needn't be terrifying. Unlike the young doctor who attempted to stonewall Neton's unconventional request, we could begin by simply asking what exactly it is that each of us wants from our chest. ●

# Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body

Rathy Acker

## Preface Diary

I have now been bodybuilding for ten years, seriously for almost five years.

During the past few years, I have been trying to write about bodybuilding.

Having failed time and time again, upon being offered the opportunity to write this essay, I made the following plan: I would attend the gym as usual. Immediately after each workout, I would describe all I had just experienced, thought and done. Such diary descriptions would provide the raw material.

After each workout, I forgot: to write. Repeatedly. I... some part of me... the part of the 'I' who bodybuilds... was rejecting language, any verbal description of the processes of bodybuilding.

I shall begin describing, writing about bodybuilding in the only way that I can: I shall begin by analyzing this rejection of ordinary or verbal language. What is the picture of the antagonism between bodybuilding and verbal language?

## A Language Which Is Speechless

Imagine that you are in a foreign country. Since you are going to be in this place for some time, you are trying to learn the language. At the point of commencing to learn the new language, just before having started to understand anything, you begin forgetting your own. Within strangeness, you find yourself without a language.

It is here, in this geography of no language, this negative space, that I can start to describe bodybuilding. For I am describing that which rejects language.

Elias Canetti, who grew up within a multitude of spoken languages, began his autobiography by recounting a memory. In this, his earliest remembrance, the loss of language is threatened: "My earliest memory is dipped in red. I come out of a door on the arm of a maid, the door in front of me is red, and to the left a staircase goes down, equally red..." A smiling man walks up to the child; the child, upon request, sticks out his tongue whereupon the man flips open a jackknife and holds the sharp blade against the red tongue.

"... He says: 'Now we'll cut off his tongue.'"

At the last moment, the man pulls the knife back.

According to memory, this sequence happens every day. “That’s how the day starts,” Canetti adds, “and it happens very often.”<sup>1</sup>

I am in the gym every three out of four days. What happens there? What does language in that place look like?

According to cliché, athletes are stupid. Meaning: they are inarticulate. The spoken language of bodybuilders makes this cliché real. The verbal language in the gym is minimal and almost senseless, reduced to numbers and a few nouns. “Sets”, “squats”, “reps”, ... The only verbs are “do” or “fail” adjectives and adverbs no longer exist; sentences, if they are at all, are simple.

This spoken language is kin to the “language games” Wittgenstein proposes in his *The Brown Book*.<sup>2</sup>

In a gym, verbal language or language whose purpose is meaning occurs, if at all, only at the edge of its becoming lost.

But when I am in the gym, my experience is that I am immersed in a complex and rich world.

What actually takes place when I bodybuild?

The crossing of the threshold from the world defined by verbal language into the gym in which the outside world is not allowed (and all of its languages) (in this sense, the gym is sacred) takes several minutes. What happens during these minutes is that I forget. Masses of swirling thought, verbalized insofar as I am conscious of them, disappear as mind or thought begins to focus.

In order to analyze this focusing, I must first describe bodybuilding in terms of intentionality.

Bodybuilding is a process, perhaps a sport, by which a person shapes her or his own body. This shaping is always related to the growth of muscular mass.

During aerobic and circuit training, the heart and lungs are

exercised. But muscles will grow only if they are, not exercised or moved, but actually broken down. The general law behind bodybuilding is that muscle, if broken down in a controlled fashion and then provided with the proper growth factors such as nutrients and rest, will grow back larger than before.

In order to break down specific areas of muscles, whatever areas one wants to enlarge, it is necessary to work these areas in isolation up to failure.

Bodybuilding can be seen to be about nothing but *failure*. A bodybuilder is always working around failure. Either I work an isolated muscle mass, for instance one of the tricep heads, up to failure. In order to do this, I exert the muscle group almost until the point that it can no longer move.

But if I work the same muscle group to the point that it can no longer move, I must move it through failure. I am then doing what are named “negative reps”, working the muscle group beyond its power to move. Here is the second method of working with failure.

Whatever way I chose, I always want to work my muscle, muscular group, until it can no longer move: I want to fail. As soon as I can accomplish a certain task, so much weight for so many reps during a certain time span, I must always increase one aspect of this equation, weights reps or intensity, so that I can again come to failure.

I want to break muscle so that it can grow back larger, but I do not want to destroy muscle so that growth is prevented. In order to avoid injury, I first warm up the muscular group, then carefully bring it up to failure. I do this by working the muscular group through a calculated number of sets during a calculated time span. If I tried immediately to bring a muscle group up to failure by lifting the heaviest weight I could handle, I might injure myself.

I want to shock my body into growth; I do not want to hurt it.

Therefore, in bodybuilding, *failure* is always connected to counting. I calculate which weight to use; I then count off how many times I lift that weight and the seconds between each lift. This is how I control the intensity of my workout.

Intensity times movement of maximum weight equals

1 Elias Canetti, *The Tongue Set Free*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1979, p. 5.

2 Here and throughout the rest of this article, whenever I use the phrase “language game”, I am referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s discussion of language games in *The Brown Book*, (Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1960).

muscular destruction (muscular growth).

Is the equation between destruction and growth also a formula for art?

Bodybuilding is about failure because bodybuilding, body growth and shaping, occurs in the face of the material, of the body's inexorable movement toward its final failure, toward death.

To break down a muscle group, I want to make that group work up to, even beyond, capacity. To do this, it helps and even is necessary to visualize the part of the body that is involved. Mind or thought, then, while bodybuilding, is always focused on number or counting and often on precise visualizations.

Certain bodybuilders have said that bodybuilding is a form of meditation.

What do I do when I bodybuild? I visualize and I count. I estimate weight; I count sets; I count repetitions; I count seconds between repetitions; I count time, seconds or minutes, between sets: From the beginning to the end of each workout, in order to maintain intensity, I must continually count.

For this reason, a bodybuilder's language is reduced to a minimal, even a closed, set of nouns and to numerical repetition, to one of the simplest of language games.

Let us name this language game, *the language of the body*.

### The Richness Of The Language Of The Body

In order to examine such a language, a language game which resists ordinary language, through the lens of ordinary language or language whose tendency is to generate syntax or to make meanings proliferate, I must use an indirect route.

In another of his books, Elias Canetti begins talking from and about that geography that is without verbal language:

*A marvelously luminous, viscid substance is left behind in me, defying words ...*

*A dream: a man who unlearns the world's languages until nowhere on earth does he understand what people are saying.<sup>3</sup>*

3 Elias Canetti, *The Voices of Marrakesh*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1978, p. 23.

Being in Marrakesh is Canetti's dream made actual. There are languages here, he says, but I understand none of them. The closer I am moving toward foreignness, into strangeness, toward understanding foreignness and strangeness, the more I am losing my own language. The small loss of language occurs when I journey to and into my own body. Is my body a foreign land to me? What is this picture of "my body" and "I"? For years, I said in the beginning of this essay, I have wanted to describe bodybuilding; whenever I tried to do so, ordinary language fled from me.

"Man," Heidegger says, "is, the strangest."<sup>4</sup> Why? Because everywhere he or she belongs to being or to strangeness or chaos, and yet everywhere he or she attempts to carve a path through chaos:

*Everywhere man makes himself a path; he ventures into all realms of the essent, of the overpowering power, and in so doing he is flung out of all paths.<sup>5</sup>*

The physical or material, that which is, is constantly and unpredictably changing: it is chaotic. This chaos twines around death. For it is death that rejects all of our paths, all of our meanings.

Whenever anyone bodybuilds, he or she is always trying to understand and control the physical in the face of this death. No wonder bodybuilding is centered around failure.

The antithesis between meaning and essence has often been noted. Wittgenstein at the end of the *Tractatus*:

*The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen—in it no values exist, and if they did, they'd have no value. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.<sup>6</sup>*

If ordinary language or meanings lie outside essence, what is

4 Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, New York: Anchor Books, 1961, p. 125. By "man", Heidegger means "human".

5 Ibid., p. 127.

6 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1972, p. 145.

the position of that language game which I have named *the language of the body*? For bodybuilding (a language of the body) rejects ordinary language and yet itself constitutes a language, a method for understanding and controlling the physical which in this case is also the self.

I can now directly talk about bodybuilding. (As if speech is ever direct.)

The language game named the language of the body is not arbitrary. When a bodybuilder is counting, he or she is counting his or her own breath.

Canetti speaks of the beggars of Marrakesh who possess a similar and even simpler language game: they repeat the name of God.

In ordinary language, meaning is contextual. Whereas the cry of the beggar means nothing other than what it is; in the cry of the beggar, the impossible (as the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* and Heidegger see it) occurs in that meaning and breath become one.

Here is the language of the body; here, perhaps, is the reason why bodybuilders experience bodybuilding as a form of meditation.

“I understood the seduction there is in a life that reduces everything to the simplest kind of repetition,”<sup>7</sup> Canetti says. A life in which meaning and essence no longer oppose each other. A life of meditation.

“I understood what those blind beggars really are: the saints of repetition ...”<sup>8</sup>

### **The Repetition Of The One: The Glimpse Into Chaos Or Essence**

I am in the gym. I am beginning to work out. I either say the name “bench press”, then walk over to it, or simply walk over to it. Then, I might picture the number of my first weight; I probably, since I usually begin with the same warm-up weight, just place the appropriate weights on the bar. Lifting this bar off its rests, then down to my lower chest, I count “1”. I am

visualizing this bar, making sure it touches my chest at the right spot, placing it back on its rests. “2”. I repeat the same exact motions. “3” ... After twelve repetitions, I count off thirty seconds while increasing my weights. “1” ... The identical process begins again only this time I finish at “10” ... All these repetitions end only when I finish my work-out.

On counting: Each number equals one inhalation and one exhalation. If I stop my counting or in any other way lose focus, I risk dropping or otherwise mishandling a weight and so damaging my body.

In this world of the continual repetition of a minimal number of elements, in this aural labyrinth, it is easy to lose one’s way. When all is repetition rather than the production of meaning, every path resembles every other path.

Every day, in the gym, I repeat the same controlled gestures with the same weights, the same reps, ... The same breath patterns. But now and then, wandering within the labyrinths of my body, I come upon something. Something I can know because knowledge depends on difference. An unexpected event. For though I am only repeating certain gestures during certain time spans, my body, being material, is never the same; my body is controlled by change and by chance.

For instance, yesterday, I worked chest. Usually I easily benchpress the bar plus sixty pounds for six reps. Yesterday, unexpectedly, I barely managed to lift this weight at the sixth rep. I looked for a reason. Sleep? Diet? Both were usual. Emotional or work stress? No more than usual. The weather? Not good enough. My unexpected failure at the sixth rep was allowing me to see, as if through a window, not to any outside, but inside my own body, to its workings. I was being permitted to glimpse the laws that control my body, those of change or chance, laws that are barely, if at all, knowable.

By trying to control, to shape, my body through the calculated tools and methods of bodybuilding, and time and again, in following these methods, failing to do so, I am able to meet that which cannot be finally controlled and known: the body.

In this meeting lies the fascination, if not the purpose, of bodybuilding. To come face to face with chaos, with my own failure or a form of death.

7 Canetti, *The Voices of Marrakesh*, p. 25.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Canetti describes the architecture of a typical house in the geographical labyrinth of Marrakesh. The house's insides are cool, dark. Few, if any, windows look out into the street. For the entire construction of this house, windows, etc., is directed inward, to the central courtyard where only openness to the sun exists.

Such an architecture is a mirror of the body: When I reduce verbal language to minimal meaning, to repetition, I close the body's outer windows. Meaning approaches breath as I bodybuild, as I begin to move through the body's labyrinths, to meet, if only for a second, that which my consciousness ordinarily cannot see. Heidegger: "The being-there of historical man means: to be posited as the breach into which the preponderant power of being bursts in its appearing, in order that this breach itself should shatter against being."<sup>9</sup>

In our culture, we simultaneously fetishize and disdain the athlete, a worker in the body. For we still live under the sign of Descartes. This sign is also the sign of patriarchy. As long as we continue to regard the body, that which is subject to change, chance, and death, as disgusting and inimical, so long shall we continue to regard our own selves as dangerous others. ●



<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 137.

Monia Ben Hamouda, *Gymnasium*, 2020 • COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CHERTLÜDDE, BERLIN



# Breast Cancer: Power vs. Prosthesis

Audre Lorde

On Labor Day, 1978, during my regular monthly self-examination I discovered a lump in my right breast which later proved to be malignant. During my following hospitalization, my mastectomy and its aftermath, I passed through many stages of pain, despair, fury, sadness and growth. I moved through these stages, sometimes feeling as if I had no choice, other times recognizing that I could choose oblivion—or a passivity that is very close to oblivion—but did not want to. As I slowly began to feel more equal to processing and examining the different parts of this experience, I also began to feel that in the process of losing a breast I had become a more whole person.

After a mastectomy, for many women including myself, there is a feeling of wanting to go back, of not wanting to persevere through this experience to whatever enlightenment might be at the core of it. And it is this feeling, this nostalgia, which is encouraged by most of the post-surgical counseling for women with breast cancer. This regressive tie to the past is emphasized by the concentration upon breast cancer as a cosmetic problem, one which can be solved by a prosthetic pretense. The American Cancer Society's Reach For Recovery Program, while doing a valuable service in contacting women immediately after surgery and letting them know they are not alone, nonetheless encourages this false and dangerous nostalgia in the mistaken belief that women are too weak to deal directly and courageously with the realities of our lives.

The woman from Reach For Recovery who came to see me in the hospital, while quite admirable and even impressive in her own right, certainly did not speak to my experience nor my concerns. As a 44 year old Black Lesbian Feminist, I knew there were very few role models around for me in this situation, but my primary concerns two days after mastectomy were hardly about what man I could capture in the future, whether or not my old boyfriend would still find me attractive enough, and even less about whether my two children would be embarrassed by me around their friends.

My concerns were about my chances for survival, the effects of a possibly shortened life upon my work and my priorities. Could this cancer have been prevented, and what could I do

in the future to prevent its recurrence? Would I be able to maintain the control over my life that I had always taken for granted? A lifetime of loving women had taught me that when women love each other, physical change does not alter that love. It did not occur to me that anyone who really loved me would love me any less because I had one breast instead of two, although it did occur to me to wonder if they would be able to love and deal with the new me. So my concerns were quite different from those spoken to by the Reach For Recovery volunteer, but not one bit less crucial nor less poignant.

Yet every attempt I made to examine or question the possibility of a real integration of this experience into the totality of my life and my loving and my work, was ignored by this woman, or uneasily glossed over by her as not looking on "the bright side of things." I felt outraged and insulted, and weak as I was, this left me feeling even more isolated than before.

In the critical and vulnerable period following surgery, self-examination and self-evaluation are positive steps. To imply to a woman that yes, she can be the 'same' as before surgery, with the skillful application of a little puff of lambswool and/or silicone gel, is to place an emphasis upon prosthesis which encourages her not to deal with herself as physically and emotionally real, even though altered and traumatized. This emphasis upon the cosmetic after surgery reinforces this society's stereotype of women, that we are only what we look or appear, so this is the only aspect of our existence we need to address.

Any woman who has had a breast removed because of cancer knows she does not feel the same. But we are allowed no psychic time or space to examine what our true feelings are, to make them our own. With quick cosmetic reassurance, we are told that our feelings are not important, our appearance is all, the sum total of self.

I did not have to look down at the bandages on my chest to know that I did not feel the same as before surgery. But I still felt like myself, like Audre, and that encompassed so much more than simply the way my chest appeared.

The emphasis upon physical pretense at this crucial point in a woman's reclaiming of her self and her body-image has

two negative effects:

1. It encourages women to dwell in the past rather than a future. This prevents a woman from assessing herself in the present, and from coming to terms with the changed planes of her own body. Since these then remain alien to her, buried under prosthetic devices, she must mourn the loss of her breast in secret, as if it were the result of some crime of which she were guilty.
2. It encourages a woman to focus her energies upon the mastectomy as a cosmetic occurrence, to the exclusion of other factors in a constellation that could include her own death. It removes her from what that constellation means in terms of her living, and from developing priorities of usage for whatever time she has before her. It encourages her to ignore the necessity for nutritional vigilance and psychic armament that can help prevent recurrence.

I am talking here about the need for every woman to live a considered life. The necessity for that consideration grows and deepens as one faces directly one's own mortality and death. Self scrutiny and an evaluation of our lives, while painful, can be rewarding and strengthening journeys toward a deeper self. For as we open ourselves more and more to the genuine conditions of our lives, women become less and less willing to tolerate those conditions unaltered, or to passively accept external and destructive controls over our lives and our identities. Any short-circuiting of this quest for self-definition and power, however well-meaning and under whatever guise, must be seen as damaging, for it keeps the postmastectomy woman in a position of perpetual and secret insufficiency, infantilized and dependent for her identity upon an external definition by appearance. In this way women are kept from expressing the power of our knowledge and experience, and through that expression, developing strengths that challenge those structures within our lives that support the Cancer Establishment. For instance, why hasn't the American Cancer Society publicized the connections between animal fat and breast cancer for our daughters the way it has publicized the connection between cigarette smoke and lung cancer? These links between animal

fat, hormone production and breast cancer are not secret. (See G. Hems, in *British Journal of Cancer*, vol. 37, no. 6, 1978.)

Ten days after having my breast removed, I went to my doctor's office to have the stitches taken out. This was my first journey out since coming home from the hospital, and I was truly looking forward to it. A friend had washed my hair for me and it was black and shining, with my new grey hairs glistening in the sun. Color was starting to come back into my face and around my eyes. I wore the most opalescent of my moonstones, and a single floating bird dangling from my right ear in the name of grand asymmetry. With an African kente-cloth tunic and new leather boots, I knew I looked fine, with that brave new-born security of a beautiful woman having come through a very hard time and being very glad to be alive.

I felt really good, within the limits of that grey mush that still persisted in my brain from the effects of the anesthesia.

When I walked into the doctor's office, I was really rather pleased with myself, all things considered, pleased with the way I felt, with my own flair, with my own style. The doctor's nurse, a charmingly bright and steady woman of about my own age who had always given me a feeling of quiet no-nonsense support on my other visits, called me into the examining room. On the way, she asked me how I was feeling.

"Pretty good," I said, half-expecting her to make some comment about how good I looked.

"You're not wearing a prosthesis," she said, a little anxiously, and not at all like a question.

"No," I said, thrown off my guard for a minute. "It really doesn't feel right," referring to the lambswool puff given to me by the Reach For Recovery volunteer in the hospital.

Usually supportive and understanding, the nurse now looked at me urgently and disapprovingly as she told me that even if it didn't look exactly right it was "better than nothing," and that as soon as my stitches were out I could be fitted for a "real form."

"You will feel so much better with it on," she said. "And besides, we really like you to wear something, at least when you come in. Otherwise it's bad for the morale of the office."

I could hardly believe my ears! I was too outraged to speak then, but this was to be only the first such assault on my right to define and to claim my own body.

Here we were, in the offices of one of the top breast cancer surgeons in New York City. Every woman there either had a breast removed, might have to have a breast removed, or was afraid of having to have a breast removed. And every woman there could have used a reminder that having one breast did not mean her life was over, nor that she was less a woman, nor that she was condemned to the use of a placebo in order to feel good about herself and the way she looked.

Yet a woman who has one breast and refuses to hide that fact behind a pathetic puff of lambswool which has no relationship nor likeness to her own breasts, a woman who is attempting to come to terms with her changed landscape and changed timetable of life and with her own body and pain and beauty and strength, that woman is seen as a threat to the "morale" of a breast surgeons office!

Yet when Moishe Dayan, the Prime Minister of Israel, stands up in front of parliament or on TV with an eyepatch over his empty eyesocket, nobody tells him to go get a glass eye, or that he is bad for the morale of the office. The world sees him as a warrior with an honorable wound, and a loss of a piece of himself which he has marked, and mourned, and moved beyond. And if you have trouble dealing with Moishe Dayan's empty eye socket, everyone recognizes that it is your problem to solve, not his.

Well, women with breast cancer are warriors, also. I have been to war, and still am. So has every woman who had had one or both breasts amputated because of the cancer that is becoming the primary physical scourge of our time. For me, my scars are an honorable reminder that I may be a casualty in the cosmic war against radiation, animal fat, air pollution, McDonald's hamburgers and Red Dye No.2, but the fight is still going on, and I am still a part of it. I refuse to have my scars hidden or trivialized behind lambswool or silicone gel. I refuse to be reduced in my own eyes or in the eyes of others from warrior to mere victim, simply because it might render me a fraction more acceptable or less dangerous to the still

complacent, those who believe if you cover up a problem it ceases to exist. I refuse to hide my body simply because it might make a woman-phobic world more comfortable.

As I sat in my doctor's office trying to order my perceptions of what had just occurred, I realized that the attitude towards prosthesis after breast cancer is an index of this society's attitudes towards women in general as decoration and externally defined sex object.

Two days later I wrote in my journal:

*I cannot wear a prosthesis right now because it feels like a lie more than merely a costume, and I have already placed this, my body under threat, seeking new ways of strength and trying to find the courage to tell the truth.*

For me, the primary challenge at the core of mastectomy was the stark look at my own mortality, hinged upon the fear of a life-threatening cancer. This event called upon me to re-examine the quality and texture of my entire life, its priorities and commitments, as well as the possible alterations that might be required in the light of that re-examination. I had already faced my own death, whether or not I acknowledged it, and I needed now to develop that strength which survival had given me.

Prosthesis offers the empty comfort of "Nobody will know the difference." But it is that very difference which I wish to affirm, because I have lived it, and survived it, and wish to share that strength with other women. If we are to translate the silence surrounding breast cancer into language and action against this scourge, then the first step is that women with mastectomies must become visible to each other.<sup>1</sup> For silence and invisibility go hand in hand with powerlessness. By accepting the mask of prosthesis, one-breasted women proclaim ourselves as insufficients dependent upon pretense. We reinforce our own isolation and invisibility from each other, as well as the false complacency of a society which would rather not face the results of its own insanities. In addition, we

withhold that visibility and support from one another which is such an aid to perspective and self-acceptance. Surrounded by other women day by day, all of whom appear to have two breasts, it is very difficult sometimes to remember that I AM NOT ALONE. Yet once I face death as a life process, what is there possibly left for me to fear? Who can every really have power over me again? [...] ●

1 Particular thanks to Maureen Brady for the conversation which developed this insight.

# List of Works / Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat

**Nina Beier, *Baby*, 2018/2023**

**Misleidys Castillo Pedroso,**  
*Untitled*, ca. 2016 • COURTESY  
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**Lucia Dovičáková, *I was your  
universe, now you are mine*,**  
2014

**Lucia Dovičáková, *Mama*, 2014 •**  
COURTESY OF RICHARD GREGOR  
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)

**Lucia Dovičáková, *Dinner*, 2015**

**Lucia Dovičáková, *Milky Way*, 2015**

**Lucia Dovičáková, *Here for you*,**  
2018

**VALIE EXPORT, *Ein perfektes Paar  
oder die Unzucht wechselt  
ihre Haut* [A perfect couple,  
or fornication changes its  
skin], 1986 • © VALIE EXPORT /  
COURTESY SIXPACKFILM**

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**Bruno Gironcoli, *Baby auf  
Edelweiß* [Baby on edelweiss],  
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KRINZINGER AND ESTATE BRUNO  
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**Andrea Éva Győri, *Talking to  
Breasts*, 2018 • COURTESY  
ANDREA ÉVA GYŐRI ESTATE AND  
HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS**

**Trulee Hall, *The Boob Dance*,**  
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**Monia Ben Hamouda, *Venus as  
a River (Gymnasium)*, 2023  
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**Monia Ben Hamouda**, *Venus as a River II (Gymnasium)*, 2023

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**Šejla Kamerić & Aleksandra**

**Vajd**, *Revue*, 2023 • GRAPHIC  
DESIGN Adéla Svobodová •  
DISPLAY DESIGN Soft Baroque  
• SUPPORTING ROLE Marko  
Mandić • SET PHOTOGRAPHY  
Tadej Vaukman, Karoliná  
Matušková

**Maria Lassnig**, *Art Education*,  
1976 • © MARIA LASSNIG  
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SIXPACKFILM

**Maria Lassnig**, *Traum vom  
Idealbusen / Busenwunsch /  
Busenillusion* [Dream of the  
Ideal Bosom / Bosom Wish /  
Bosom Illusion], 1996–1997 •  
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**Claudia Lomoschitz**, *LACTANS*,  
2023 CONCEPT, VIDEO, TEXT  
Claudia Lomoschitz • SOUND  
DESIGN Nikkname • VOICEOVER  
Anne Kozeluh, Alex Franz  
Zehetbauer • ANIMATION  
ADVICE Joshu Alena, Stefanie  
Schwarzwimmer

**Tala Madani**, *Shit Mom*  
*Animation 1*, 2021 • COURTESY  
THE ARTIST AND PILAR CORRIAS  
LONDON

**Sarah Margnetti**, *Peer to peer  
structures*, 2023

**Radha May** (Elisa Giardina Papa,  
Nupur Mathur, Bathsheba  
Okwenje), *When the Towel  
Drops, Vol.1 | Italy*, 2015–2018

**Marlie Mul**, *Folded painting #3*,  
2017 • COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
CROY NIELSEN, VIENNA

**Marlie Mul**, *Folded painting #4*,  
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**Marlie Mul**, *Folded painting #6*,  
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**Marlie Mul**, *Folded painting #9*,  
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CROY NIELSEN, VIENNA

**Marlie Mul**, *Folded painting #10*,  
2017 • COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
CROY NIELSEN, VIENNA

**OMARA Mara Oláh**, *So here's  
Omara's provocative breasts  
which annoy my enviers so  
much that I got angry and  
not only painted them but  
photographed myself alone  
in the mirror because I had no  
one to take a photo of me ...  
But those bored domestic  
whores see me as a whore!!!  
Take that you little whores,  
who do not want to breast-  
feed or give birth. They are*

*not fake breasts. And why are  
they so beautiful? Because  
they breastfed the world's  
most beautiful daughter!!!!*,  
2014–2016 • COURTESY THE ART-  
IST AND LONGTERMHANDSTAND,  
BUDAPEST

**OMARA Mara Oláh**, *The 5 forint  
lingerie The peak of the peaks  
because it's not enough that  
I escaped from the grip of  
death to the farm in Városföld  
to see no chimney. What's the  
rumour? In 1888 There's noth-  
ing wrong with her! She lives  
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Here I was set up with Robika  
Alföldi*, 2016 •  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
LONGTERMHANDSTAND, BUDAPEST

**OMARA Mara Oláh**, *Mara's  
5 forints lingerie*, 2016 •  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
LONGTERMHANDSTAND, BUDAPEST

**Abdul Sharif Oluwafemi**  
**Baruwa**, *to be boobí*, 2023 •  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND EXILE,  
VIENNA

**Laure Prouvost**, *The Hidden  
Paintings Grandma Improved,  
Looking at you looking at  
me*, 2023 • © LAURE PROUVOST /  
COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

**Christina Ramberg**, *Ticklish  
Construction*, 1974, mumok  
– Museum moderner Kunst

Stiftung Ludwig, Wien,  
acquired in 1974

**Adam Rzepecki**, *Project of the  
Father Pole Memorial*, 1981,  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAWID  
RADZISZEWSKI GALLERY

**Toni Schmale**, *schlauch* [hose]  
#4, 2023

**Toni Schmale**, *schlauch* [hose]  
#5, 2023

**Maja Smrekar**, *unit: Hybrid  
Family*, 2023 • CONCEPT Maja  
Smrekar • PATTERNS DESIGN  
Zlata Ziborova • THANKS TO  
Sebastijan Bandur, Sanja  
Grcić, Lana Grahek, Aljaž  
Rudolf, Marko Šuštar, Jože  
Zajc

**Mariya Vasilyeva**, *ALTAR 2.0*, 2019

**Dorottya Vékony**, *Fertility I.*,  
2020 • COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
LONGTERMHANDSTAND, BUDAPEST

**Marianne Vlaschits**, *The Deluge*,  
2023 • COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
LA BEAST GALLERY

**Rafał Zajko**, *Bread and Milk*, 2023  
*Wet Nurse (Chapel)*  
*Gleaner*  
*Monstrance II (Pleasure  
Principle)*  
*Monstrance I*  
*Monstrance III (Choir)*  
*Motherly*  
*Transubstantiate II*  
*Transubstantiate I*

# Public Program

**Opening *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat***  
Wed 29/11 · 7 PM ·  
Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

**Queereeké x Kunsthalle Wien**  
Wed 29/11 2023 · 7:30–10 PM

Queereeké has been causing a furore at Kampnagel in Hamburg for 10 years and the queer collective is coming to Vienna for the exhibition opening. Queereeké is not just karaoke but spontaneous choreography, provocative performance, subversive humour and overcoming the binary between audience and performers—a queer practice that touches people on a deep level. Care work in the best sense. Let's get the show started!

**Sticks and stones may break my bones but thread will tell my story**  
Embroidery Workshop curated and led by Jelisaveta Rapaic

Sat 16/12 2023 · 3–6 PM ·  
Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

Sat 20/1 2024 · 3–6 PM ·  
Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

A workshop dedicated to slowness, patience, tactility, precision and softness under the guise of arts and crafts, with embroidery as a byproduct. We invite you to take part in a group session of creating new images inspired by the exhibition and its narratives, stitch by stitch, by concentrating on simple, small-scaled, repetitive movements, slowly building and controlling the outcome. The workshop will take place in the exhibition space itself. Participants will learn basic and advanced stitches and techniques, while immersing themselves in the imagery of the

exhibition. You are welcome to bring your own looms, threads, fabrics or personal textiles.

For beginners as well as more advanced crafters.

The workshop will be held in English. Fee: €5 / materials and tools provided. Please register at [vermittlung@kunsthallewien.at](mailto:vermittlung@kunsthallewien.at)

## Old masters meet contemporary art

Combined guided tours  
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna  
x Kunsthalle Wien

Thu 25/1 2024 · 6:30–8:15 PM

Thu 29/2 2024 · 6:30–8:15 PM

Thu 28/3 2024 · 6.30–8:15 PM

Meeting point: 6:30 PM in the entrance foyer of Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

The breast has an important symbolic significance in the art of the old masters and its depiction still has cultural, social and political meaning today. Using selected works from the collection of Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna and the exhibition *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat* at Kunsthalle Wien, you will learn how breasts have been depicted throughout history and which cross-connections, parallels and shifts can be discovered.

Admission tickets and annual passes for both museums are valid in both institutions.

Guided tour fee: €6

Please register at [besucherservice@kunsthallewien.at](mailto:besucherservice@kunsthallewien.at)

## It Comes in Waves

Pleasure Writing Workshop  
with Helen Palmer  
dates to be announced

How is pleasure connected to writing? What is a writing flow? How do we embody pleasure in words? How is writing connected to the body?

In these workshops we will do a series of simple writing experiments, working with constraints (and their removal) in order to break down writers' block, free ourselves from grammatical undergarments and feel the sensory pleasure of language. We will work with the sound, shape and feel of words as sensory objects with moods and textures, exploring the vital and immediate relation between language and the body.

No writing experience is necessary!

The workshop will be held in English. Please register at [vermittlung@kunsthallewien.at](mailto:vermittlung@kunsthallewien.at)

## Ballet Performance

by Sonia Dvorak  
date to be announced

Professional ballet dancer Sonia Dvorak invites us to join an intimate dance performance especially commissioned for the exhibition and reacting to its themes and display. The young and naïve ingénue is still the most common female leading character in ballet and—unless one's body looks convincingly adolescent—being cast in these roles becomes much less likely. Breasts are consequently either hidden for most repertoires or hyper-sexualized for the roles of sex workers. In her new performance, Dvorak builds her choreography upon a repertoire of movements subconsciously made by dancers when feeling insecure or embarrassed of their bodies during rehearsal. Movement is overlaid by spoken stories of Dvorak's personal experiences as a

professional and as a student, bringing this issue to the fore for an audience beyond the ballet world.

## Curatorial Tours

with Laura Amann  
dates to be announced

## Guided Tours

Thu 7/12, 21/12 2023 · 4/1, 18/1, 1/2, 15/2, 7/3, 21/3, 4/4 2024 · 5:30 PM ·

Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

Every first and third Thursday of the month at 5:30 PM you can discover the exhibition with our art educators and discuss the contexts and backgrounds of the exhibited works.

The guided tours are free of charge and are held in German.

## My View

*My View* is a program series in which experts, and interesting people are invited to present their personal view on the exhibition. Dates and further information will be communicated on the homepage.

## Programs for Schools

Kunsthalle Wien offers an extensive program for schools. Further information and to register, please contact [vermittlung@kunsthallewien.at](mailto:vermittlung@kunsthallewien.at)

## Kunsthalle Wien Podcast

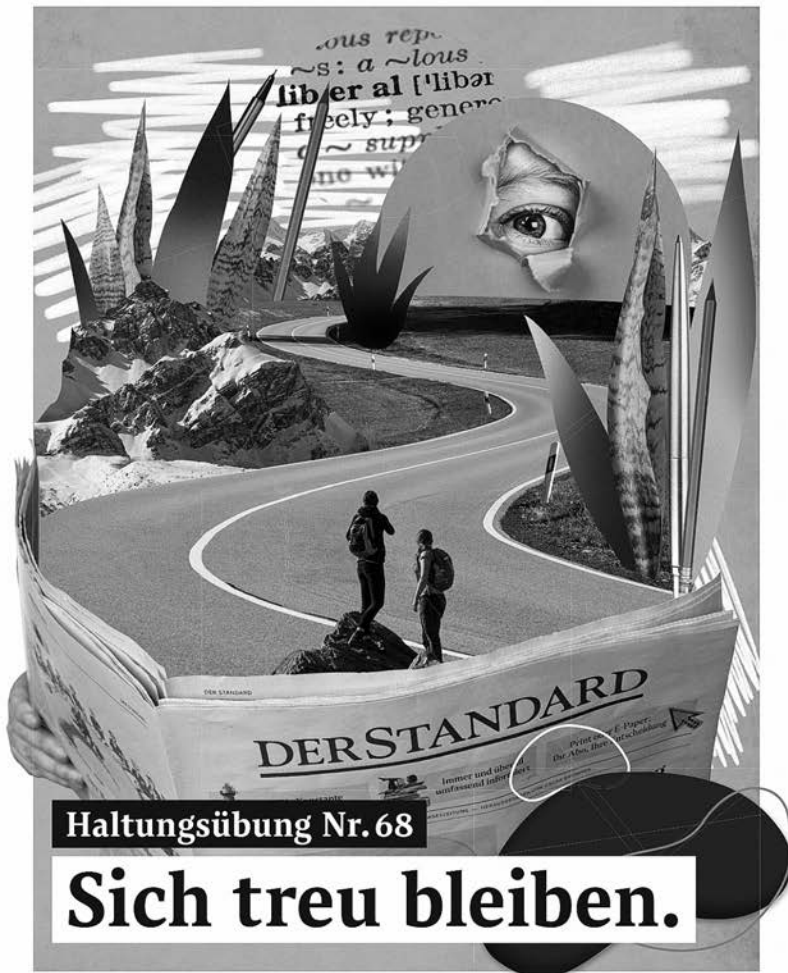
Tune in and listen to the podcast to hear what the artists in the exhibition have to say about their work.



## Free admission!

Every Thursday 5–9 PM!

Details and regular updates on the public program for *Darker, Lighter, Puffy, Flat* can be found on our website [www.kunsthallewien.at](http://www.kunsthallewien.at)



Haltungsübung Nr. 68

**Sich treu bleiben.**

Wer unabhängig und frei von jeglicher Agenda kommuniziert,  
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[derStandard.at](http://derStandard.at)

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## EXHIBITION

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Wolfgang Kuzmits

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Laura Amann

#### ASSISTANT CURATOR

Hannah Marynissen

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Lara Mejač

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#### CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT

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Danilo Pacher

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#### INFRASTRUCTURE

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Mathias Kada  
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Alexander Aschenbrenner  
Scott Hayes  
Didi Hochhauser  
Bruno Hoffmann  
Alfred Lenz  
Martin Sturm

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Karine Fauchard  
Parastu Gharabaghi  
Vinko Jaeger  
Marit Wolters  
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TEXTS

WHW (INSTITUTIONAL INTRODUCTION)

Laura Amann (CURATORIAL INTRODUCTION)

Laura Amann • Anyla Kabashi • Hannah Marynissen •

Lara Mejač (WORK DESCRIPTIONS)

Aziza Harmel • Jules Gleeson • Kathy Acker • Audre Lorde (ESSAYS)

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WORK DESCRIPTIONS, ESSAY AZIZA HARMEL)

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Anne Pitz (ESSAY JULES GLEESON)

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**Rafał Zajko ...**



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