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### POLARITIES LIMITS AND THRESHOLDS



#### PRESENT TO THE LIMITS

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# PRESENT TO THE LIMITS. TRANSMEDIA STRATEGIES BY FEMALE ARTISTS IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND WITHIN THE *kobieTY/woMEN* COLLECTION.

## ABSTRACT

The work of female artists with their own image, situated against the background of the development of new media art and the false canons of mass culture, explains the legitimacy of feminist contexts. This work based on reclaiming one's own image requires looking into the lens of the camera or playing roles produced by popular culture. Long-term practices with feminist contexts, standing in front of the lens as if in front of a mirror, i.e. in front of oneself and in front of an audience, have identified a group of repeated visual clichés. They now extend into new contexts of social conflict, where mechanisms for reclaiming women's identities have become useful in combating the problem of domination in general.

## 1. THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

Looking at oneself, using one's face and body as a working matter, is deeply anchored in art as self-portraiture. However, the legacy of workshop practices with the self-portrait of women as well as men cannot be judged by one measure. Access to education and artistic practice in a patriarchal world until the 19th century was reserved only for men (Nochlin, 2023). The secondary position of women in the field of art, as indeed in most other fields, has clearly influenced the lack of great female artists in historical records, but also the sharpening of the differences between male and female approaches to many art contexts.

The area of creative self-image work in women's art, with a history significantly shorter than the self-portrait of men, was also subject to socio-cultural mores. From the 16th century, when the development of women's self-portraiture dates, female artists were expected to be reserved and modest. Only the boldness of the twentieth century revealed a path of change in this kind of women's work, which leads from images that are pleasing and subdued to those that are truthful and break down previous boundaries (Borzello, 2016).

It would be difficult not to connect the revolution of the self-portrait created by a woman with the development of new media, which have become an area for women artists to reclaim their independence. The emergence of photography and then film, video, the internet and social media ran almost in sync with the successive waves of feminism. In the new media, women in the arts discovered ways of expressing themselves that men had not managed to establish before them, as they had in the history of drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking and every classical technique in which they had dominated for centuries.

However, it was not immediately that the new media in art brought out the truth about women. The tools that artists began to use quickly built a visual market of advertising and mass media, looking at women through male eyes. This product-based visual canon of women appearing on packaging, billboards, in erotica and pornography soon distorted the cultural image of women in general (Jansen, 2019).

Perhaps this is why the current of self-portraiture in new media art has been so clearly dominated by women. Female artists felt obliged both to create a history of women's self-portraiture and to reclaim the feminine visuality appropriated by the male perspective in mass culture. By stepping in front of the lens, they were not only making up for lost lessons in portraiture, but creating a counterpoint to the male narrative. With the development of new media and the emergence of motion in the mechanisms of real-image capturing, the perspective of women's creative contestation of the female image expanded.

Confronting how woman is presented by the culture of the patriarchal order, through the prism of social norms and stereotypes, the women of the neo-avant-garde felt empowered to create through their private image not only their own portrait, but the image of all women.

However, artistic criticism based on on-camera actions did not end with the changing social awareness of women's rights for two reasons. Firstly, the struggle is not over yet, and attempts to restore old images of women are a typical phenomenon in a polarised society. Secondly, the camera-oriented activity of women artists seems to extend the thematic field well beyond feminist contexts. However, artists coming out of the framework of reclaiming their own identity are still operating on feminist schemas, which the path of development of these practices should bring closer.

## 2. THE MIRROR OF THE LENS

Hair, face, body, all areas of female visuality became the playing field in the advertising and mass media world of the 20th century. A pretty, well-groomed woman with the right proportions and sex appeal if the image is directed at men, and full of homely warmth and joy if the target audience are families. The consumerist visuality produced a distorted socio-cultural canon of the woman, but the field of art was not without fault in this respect either. The representations of women in the works of the old masters, men, perpetuated a delicate and subdued or erotic image of them. The sum of these phenomena had a significant impact on the notion of female beauty in general, which the rebellious avant-garde artists challenged. The unmasking of such strongly perpetuated visualities became a long-term process of working on one's own image, which, through the art world and cultural institutions, gradually penetrated into wider public awareness.

The crisis of the notion of beauty in art that began with the avant-garde revo-



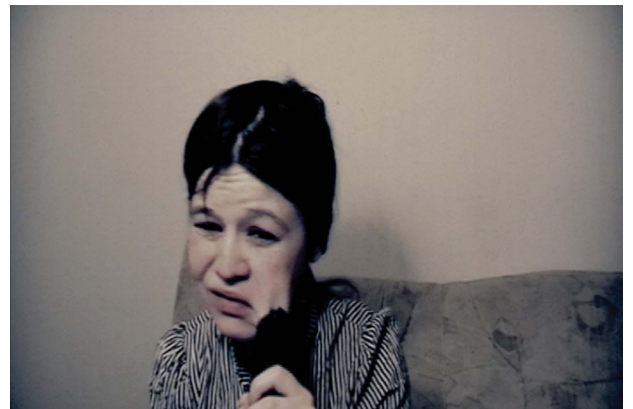


Figure 1/2/3/4/5.  
"To Clean Oneself", Monika Misztal  
video, 2011

lution exerted a stamp on the actions of all artists, but for women artists the notion of beauty had an additional context. Marina Abramović made this particularly clear in her 1975 on-camera performance *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*. The nude artist, as suggested by her bare shoulders and breast, is combing her hair in front of the lens as if in front of a mirror. This process, however, is not reminiscent of the joyful posing in front of a mirror, straight out of a cosmetics commercial or the intimate and romantic painting images of the old masters.

The Serbian artist's hair combing is a struggle, a fight against the thick and dense hair typical among Balkan women, reflecting the difficulty with which artists confront the notion of beauty. Perhaps it is also the struggle of those outside of the capitalist world for which female and male citizens of socialist countries longed at the time. Abramović literally pronounces the words while combing, 'must be beautiful', emphasising the claiming attitude of the cultural world and society, which expect certain standards of female visuality. The artist's movements as well as the tone of her voice seem aggressive at times, which is meant to blatantly express her rebellion against the need to fit into the frame of a good-looking woman with a tidy hairstyle created earlier.

In a similar frame, Monika Misztal sets the camera in front of herself in 2011, adding a Hoover, a device culturally ascribed to women whose job it is to keep the house in order, to discipline her look. This cliché still lingers in the very term 'cleaning lady', which, in the Polish artist's action, can evoke a particular association with the wave of female economic refugees from central and eastern Europe who have dominated the cleaning and care sector in the West. In her on-camera performance *To Clean Oneself*, Misztal uses a switched-on Hoover to clean her face and hair in a pose as if she were preparing her image in front of a mirror. However, as in Abramović's work, this procedure does not lead to the expected forms of beauty. The artist's body makes uncontrollable noises as she cleans her face with the suctioning air, and the strands of hair pulled into the tube do not yield to being tidied up; on the contrary, they appear even more tousled. Ultimately, the titular procedure of cleaning oneself does not make the author of the action more orderly, but rather emphasises the expressiveness of the portrait so widely contested in Misztal's paintings.

Creative elaborations of the mechanism of reflecting one's own image in the mirror were reinforced by the technological revolution. The introduction of phone cameras and their subsequent equipping with a second lens reinforced the false canon of the female image. The ubiquity of the selfie and vlogging awakened a narcissistic swathe of society where anyone could stand in front of the lens. Most newcomers were eager to fit into the familiar media canon and went to the extreme of aestheticising their image with available filters, presenting forever smiling faces and flawless complexion. This phenomenon testified to the constant need to reclaim the feminine image, which was responded to by new media artists whose actions formed the current of selfiefeminism. The weeping Audrey Wollen, the freshly cosmetically treated Agata Zbylut or the hyper-realistically sexualised Arvida Byström are all artists from different parts of the world who, on one of the most famous visual social platforms, Instagram, manifest their opposition against the terror of visual norms (Miaskowska, 2022).

Reflecting one's own image in the mirror of the lens has become a formal cliché of feminising artists since the beginning of women's creative work with new media. Critically correcting oneself through make-up, hairstyle or body treatments in women's





Figure 6/7/8/9.  
"Consumption Art", Natalia LL  
video, 2017

*Courtesy of the  
ZW Foundation / Natalia LL Archive*



creative work has drawn a clear line between the image of women constructed by popular culture and how artists reclaim the truth about ourselves.

### 3. WORK ON THE ROLE

The pop-cultural ideal of feminine beauty is not just limited to general appearance, but also extends to appropriate behaviour. Depending on the needs, the image of the woman is used to communicate parental values through the figure of the warm and understanding mother or caring values when the woman becomes a nurse, an exemplary housewife and an ideal wife. Nor is the mythologising of the female image limited to these laudable variants, but it also caters to male sexualised notions. All these mechanisms of appropriating the female image, of putting into specific roles, are clearly opposed by neo-avant-garde artists.

Martha Rosler, who, in her 1975 film *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, sets the camera in her own kitchen in a New York loft, is a forerunner of creative commentary on the roles proposed by mass culture in front of the lens. In an alphabetical arrangement, Rosler presents everyday objects that are culturally ascribed to women. The role played by the artist seemingly fits in with the image of women hosting cooking programmes or food commercials (Mullins, 2019). The kitchen objects, a fork, a knife, a grater, a whisk, however, become tools of oppression in the artist's hands. After the presentation of each object, the artist uses it to make disturbing gestures suggesting acts of aggression for which such objects could be used. Rosler's decoding of kitchen equipment alludes to domestic violence, which, in contrast to the common kitchen roles of women, is rather eliminated from social visibility.

In a similar vein, the screen obedience of women is blurred by Pipilotti Rist in the 1997 film *Ever is Over All*. The film's female protagonist, in typical Rist visual elaboration, in an airy blue dress and red shoes, joyfully strides down the street in slow motion (Curtis, 2021). At first, everything seems to allude to the pleasing mood of the visibility of delicate people, especially as the protagonist is walking with a flower in her hand, which often accompanied painterly images of portrayed women. Only that, after a while, this prop turns out to be at the same time a solid hammer, with which the woman smashes the windows of cars parked along the pavement. Although the narrative turns from seemingly subdued to anarchic, the pace and music remain completely unchanged, as if all the gestures were planned and even condoned. People passing the vandal, including a saluting policewoman, express their approval with smiles. With her destructive march, Rist deconstructs the prudish and correct disposition of women presented in the media. With time, we notice that the phallic shape of the destructive lily may symbolise power mainly attributed to men, which in *Ever is Over All*, through both the lead and the role of the policewoman, has clearly been assumed by women.

The obliteration of the popularised meanings of female attitudes, gestures, and images also applies to the sexual sphere, whose cultural schemas have been established by male desires. Sex and eroticism have long been present in art, but it was the women of the neo-avant-garde who began to use the consumerist language of perceiving female sexuality to expose it.

A Polish pioneer of feminist art and one of the first artists to work with a





Figure 10/11.  
"Pastoral Fuck", Kinga Michalska  
and Jadis Dumas

*Courtesy of the Artists*



film camera, Natalia LL, repeatedly used the motif of sexuality and her own body in the process of reclaiming female identity (Jankowska, 2002). In the 1973 film *Impresje*, the author records herself playing with her body by touching and shaking her own curves, an apparent source of erotic pleasure. Unrestrained sexuality, hitherto mainly compared to pornography, is engaged by Natalia LL for the purpose of art. At the same time, for three years from 1972, the artist carried out the project *Sztuka konsumpcyjna* (Consumption Art) by photographing and recording portraits of many women who, in front of the lens, deliberately made seductive gestures while eating bananas, kisel or sausages. The advertising poses of the women invited by Natalia LL referred to the objectification of the female image. Revealing feminine sexuality by giving it the status of art dethroned its distorted sense previously created in the capitalist world of male desires.

The destruction of established meanings through the manipulation of conventions also interested a German artist Brigit Hein, who created *Kali Film* in 1988 using the found footage technique. Using scenes from horror movies, war films and B-grade pornography, Hein stripped them of their narrative context and, by rearranging the material, re-conceptualised the understanding of female sexuality on screen (Curtis, 2021).

By combining erotic fantasies with violence, the artist addressed the low instincts on which cinema preys. At the same time, she invoked the Hindu goddess Kali, who symbolises extraordinary feminine power. With a mixture of violence and eroticism, Hein contradicts traditional sexual roles, thus constructing a new face of female sexuality.

Female artists' work with the camera and footage contested the roles of women in television programmes, commercials and porn films. The mass character of these media took its toll on the entire visual canon of femininity, the recovery of which could not be limited to the discovery of new images. Simulating schematic roles and the reinterpretation of their meanings successively obliterated the stereotypical profile of women on screens.

#### 4. FEMINIST CLICHÉS

The recovery of the female image by female artists has identified a certain group of cultural clichés which, when repeated in front of the lens, are automatically marked by the legacy of feminist struggle. Posing as if in front of a mirror or assuming a pre-created role by a female artist is thus fundamentally a kind of resistance and critique of social conflicts through art. The feminist narrative of on-camera artistic actions thus extends to other contexts of the present. Among those particularly close to the feminine narrative are issues related to nature and climate change.

The ecofeminist formula of protest is an intrinsic combination of the powers of the oppressed against the imperialist mechanisms of a patriarchal world characterised not only by male domination over women, but also by colonial domination, which amounts to the exercise of power over the environment and the plunder of territorial wealth (Kronenberg, 2017).

An interesting example of on-camera actions repeating feminist clichés in the context of extended critique will be the activity of a Canadian artist duo Kinga Michalska and Jadis Dumas. In their 2017 film production *Pastoral Fuck*, the artists refer to the pornographic schema of female sexuality by comparing it to a similar treatment of the earth. In camp-erotic incarnations, they contest the identity of Native North American



Figure 12/13/14/15.  
"Pastoral Fuck", Kinga Michalska  
and Jadis Dumas

*Courtesy of the Artists*





dwellers and their relationship with this place. The artists' nude stylings are reminiscent of tribal tattoos and decorations, but created from contemporary plastic-coloured glitter. However, the idyllic mood of the postcard-like landscapes of nature combined with the frivolous poses of the authors is disrupted when their gestures of approaching nature turn from delicate to aggressive. At that point, the kitsch-fairytale scenery disintegrates, betraying the tackiness of the recording studio, and the shots of the female artists posing against an amateur greenbox take on a perverse tinge. Both America and a woman, often an immigrant, become objects of sexual exploitation, and the destruction of nature is synonymous with sexual oppression of women.

Creative actions extend the critique of domination over women to a critique of man's domination over nature. I therefore add my voice to this narrative in the 2023 on-camera performance *Oil Makeup*. For the makeup of the title, a ritualistic image enhancement, instead of coloured cosmetics, I use oil from my own car and lawnmower, devices of conscious environmental degradation. I further filter the image reflected in the lens as in a mirror through images corrected by artificial intelligence libraries, thus posing the question of my image in the face of social and climate change. Body oiling itself is a nourishing grooming process, but in the hands of women it is a beauty treatment, an analogue version of enhancing appearance that we now prefer to create virtually by means of digital corrections. They allow us to achieve the desired results faster by replacing cosmetic oils with fossil fuels. Embarrassing oiling with machine secretions is a way to face caricatured everyday life in which we fail to find a balance between technological advances, the environment and the desire to create a better image.

Working in a female duo as in the case of Michalska and Dumas, or the inclusion of *Oil Makeup* in the *kobieTY* collection which links intergenerational and feminising activities in academia, as well as many other community-based activities of female artists is part of the participatory context of contemporary women's work.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The creative attitude to self-image is gendered. The actions of female and male artists have been placed at two different poles, which has been dictated by cultural and moral dependencies historically.

Supporting the female artists in their search for an independent and new way of looking at themselves was the new media, a double-edged tool that has done just as much harm to the very image of women in the mass media space. Female artists, however, embarked on a long-term struggle to reclaim the female image appropriated by popular culture in order to finally draw a line between what is product and what is real.

Women's actions in front of the camera have often been associated with letting the audience into the private sphere, where making the truth public and giving it the status of art has supported the erasure of false canons. For what has always accompanied women's creative work with the image are its contexts. Whether it is the portrait itself reflected en masse, usually through male perspective; whether it is playing out socially produced roles into which female artists did not agree to fit; or whether it is commenting on what affects us all today and resonates with the working mechanism of female new media artists.



Figure 10/11/12/13.  
Oil Makeup, Marta Miaszkowska  
video, 2023





The socially engaged stance of women in front of the camera, who used to denounce the canon of female visuality, has systematised the handling of visual clichés, which are extended into new contexts of critique through art.

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