

## A CRACK IN MY VENN DIAGRAM

By Sofie Bakke Ringstad

*This text investigates physical and conceptual spaces. Through a reflection on the exhibition The Plastic Body at Stavanger Art Museum, the Polish artists' use of hollows and cavities will enter a dialogue with our own understanding of identity, feminism and historical context. From Magdalena Abakanowicz' bent figures to the silhouettes of Ana Mendieta, the text will explore how negative spaces function as containers of meaning and how we as onlookers create connections across time, space and concepts.*

### HOLLOWS ARE HEROES

The ten artists presented in The Plastic Body - which mainly exhibited sculpture – were all women, and their works serve as witnesses to a period in Polish art that many west of the Iron Curtain knew (and know) little about. Their works are voluminous, bending and buckling. And as an unpremeditated thematic twist that appears in hindsight, most of these works embody a form of hollow: a dip, a fold, a dent, a crack. A negative space.

This text is about the hollows. Those found in ourselves, in works of art, in concepts and in Venn diagrams (you know, the ones made up of two or more circles, more or less overlapping with each other).

In the science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin's essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" from 1988 she suggests that (pre)history isn't really about spears and mammoths, but about containers to keep things in. The reason why we remember the spears is that a mammoth hunt makes a better story and is easier to paint on the cave wall. As Le Guin puts it, who wants to hear about how "I wrestled a wild-oat seed from its husk"<sup>1</sup>. But apart from the things that enthralled our forefathers and foremothers round the fire, the real hero of history is "a thing that can contain something other than itself"<sup>2</sup>: a container, a bottle, a box, basket, a purse. A hollow.

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<sup>1</sup> Le Guin 2019:27

<sup>2</sup> Le Guin 2019:28

The hollows are the heroes of the essay you are now reading. They are transformative spaces that create the ground for imagination and ideas. In *The Plastic Body* these hollows are full of metamorphic potential – at times hopeful, often ill-aboding. We shall start with the latter.

### *THE NEGATIVE SPACE / DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?*

In Magdalena Abakanowicz' (1930–2017) sculpture *Crack and Back* from 1981 there sits a body, bent double, with legs stretched out in front. Or rather, the body is no longer there, but we see its outline. A thin hard shell has caught the person's posture, eternally bent with an unnaturally large back. The shell's legs stop above the knee, there is neither neck nor head. The colours are earthy and dark. Who has forced the body into this position? What has this person borne on its shoulders that can have pressed it down into this state?

The material used for this hollowed-out human form is jute, as is used in coarse sacks. The membrane-like result reminds one of gauze bandages, used for healing. Something has been severely damaged – a whole person broken – and all that is left is the eternally bowed hollowed dressing. Yet the imprint of the body is not alone. The jute outline is sitting on a narrow wooden plank which again rests in a primitive cage made of wooden poles. The work is uncanny, raising urgent questions about the missing body.

In Abakanowicz' hollowed form we do not see the contours of a person; we see the person itself. She invites each of us to project our version of a body into the empty space. We call this *Negative space*: what one does not see has the same effect as the physical expression. As in Le Guin's essay the hollow room becomes the transformative factor, a container with room for our own images and experiences. We attribute elements of our own world view to the "negative" area, and this is why it resonates so profoundly in each of us.

The hollow theme can be seen in many of the works shown in *The Plastic Body*, in particular the sculptures of Alina Szapocznikow (1926–1973). I see from the exhibition text that her work took an entirely new course with the growth of a tumour in one of her breasts. It seems as if the formation of a new shape in her body forced her to break with concrete volume in her art. In her work *Large Tumour I* (1969) photographs (cast into and under a layer of) polyester are twisted and warped. Another work Piotr's *Head* (from the series *Herbarium*) – which she made only months before her death from breast cancer at 47 – evokes associations of a death mask. We see a face cast in polyester resin. The mask billows behind sterile museum glass as if it has lain too

long in the sun. It bulges, contracts, lacks volume. As in the work of Abakanowicz the actual person is no longer there, the imprint alone survives.

Wanda Czełkowska (1930–2021) is another artist intent on hollows, dents and bulges in her sculptures. Her works undulate as if there were bubbles heaving under the surface leaving dents as they swelled. The human head is the theme of many of her works, though we are never given a clear figurative representation of anything like that. The result is grotesque asymmetrical creatures in plaster, often with exposed metal framework. It is almost as if we are looking into a human blueprint, as if Czełkowska is leading us into the early phases of Creation, or perhaps more drastically into decomposition.

A third artist working with *negative space* is Ewa Pachucka (1936–2020), represented in the exhibition with her textile sculpture *The Open Man* (1969). This is her only contribution to *The Plastic Body*, yet her hanging figure clearly forms one of its central works. Pachucka's man is knitted and crocheted from the natural material sisal. A hole penetrates his stomach, like a peephole on one side and wide open on the other. The man's penis weighs heavily on the floor, but his legs are missing, and his arms have grown into the body's thighs. The work evokes many associations and as in the other works and figures in the exhibition it is up to the beholder to provide the body with a story.

### MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD

I was born three years after the collapse of the Soviet Union (and therein, the Eastern bloc) and for a long time simplified propaganda posters were the only visual expression I knew of art history in the Eastern bloc. When you reflect on the fact that the art in *The Plastic Body* was created parallel to such insistent social realism you realise how radical the ten artists were. They all lived in totalitarian conditions; two of them had been in concentration camps and internments camps during the Second World War.

As so often happens when one learns something new, the exhibition fills in a blank space in my knowledge of the world – leaving new impressions in my mental map of geography and history of art. *The Plastic Body* awakens immediate associations to similar works and expressions I have seen, and as the human brain tends to do, my thoughts zoom into high gear to connect these two impulses with one another. Small craters in the lunar landscape of my mind fumble towards

each other in the dark, like a Venn diagram where the circles try to overlap. I am trying to make sense of the world.

In this mental Venn diagram one circle consists of *The Plastic Body*, encompassing the artists and works that I have recently got to know. In the next circle is the name of the Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta (1948–1985). On the other side of the Atlantic at the very same time as the Polish artists were creating their sculptures Mendieta was working with identical themes. Like Magdalena Abakanowicz she made a series of works where only the outline of a body remained, and like Teresa Murak she let plants grow out of her works. Like Maria Pinińska-Bereś she worked with the female body as artistic material, often outside the context of an institution or gallery. But *in contrast to* many of her Polish colleagues, Mendieta was an out and out feminist, and would presumably have been happy with having her work called exactly that – “feminist art”.

For in the exhibition text it is stated that «a western notion of feminism is hardly productive in an analysis of the former Eastern bloc»<sup>3</sup>. In other words, my hasty assumptions and connections are at best simplistic, and the visual and discursive codes that make me read the Polish works as feminist, did not apply to the artists shown in *The Plastic Body*. On the contrary they had their own intellectual points of departure which still made them create art which I today would automatically categorize as feminist.

There are of course exceptions. The 7:16 minute long video *Change. My problem is a Problem of a Woman* (1979) by Ewa Partum is deeply feminist; and in the performance *Laundry II* from 1981 by Maria Pinińska-Bereś (1931–1999), reproduced in *The Plastic Body* as photo documentation, the artist hangs cloths on a line, each cloth carrying a letter which together formed the word “Feminism”. Yet what this term entailed for them cannot be directly transferred to the interpretation I have or the one Ana Mendieta might have had.

The part of the Venn diagram where Mendieta and the Polish artists overlap (the section where there occurs a joint colour, or which could be stripy) can therefore not be crudely labelled “Feminism”. The diagram resists my elementary logic, and the circles become two magnets

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<sup>3</sup> Stavanger Art Museum 2024

repulsing each another. I need another term to understand the encounter between my earlier knowledge and the works in *The Plastic Body*.

### *THE SHORTCOMINGS OF CONCEPTS / SAME, SAME BUT DIFFERENT*

In Mendieta's most well-known series *Siluetas* she worked repetitively with the imprint of a woman's body, the hints, the remnants. In some places there is a paint stain, a body that has left its trace on the canvas; in other places there are deep abstract indentations in the ground. In other places the imprint has caught fire and the woman's body is burning. In one of the works Mendieta is herself lying in a hole in the ground, as in a grave between stones. Over her body there are flowers growing, forcing themselves up between her legs and arms. Just like the cross in Teresa Murak's work *Object, Bra* (1975/6) from *The Plastic Body* where the female attributes, bra and panties, have been taken over by nature.

The artists are working with the same themes, similar experiences of being a woman. And in the light of Ursula K. Le Guin's essay, I shall insist that they share yet another quality: Both Mendieta's work and several of the Polish artists' sculptures are "a thing that contains something other than itself".<sup>4</sup> This means that even I from my present-day Norwegian point of departure immediately see the dents in their stories, immediately recognise their experience. Their women's bodies and objects sprout and sink back into nature simultaneously. On their different sides of the world the artists have used the same tools to talk about the times they live in. So, in what common linguistic denominator can I fuse these impressions?

We are living in a world obsessed by terms and concepts. This is clear even in this text; all I want to do is to sort the artists and their works into boxes, to categorise and describe them – I am even writing an essay about it! Why should this be so? To quote the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951): "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." If I cannot manage to find words for the associations that crop up, I cannot then understand my world. I need a language in order to digest the impressions made by the exhibition.

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<sup>4</sup> Le Guin 2019:28

## TERMS FULL OF HOLES

Why is it so tempting to call the Polish artists feminists? Does it really matter what we call them when we are all fighting the same battle? Why do we so crave a term to stand behind, as if it were a banner? The text for the exhibition *The Plastic Body* says that “The word ‘plastic’ means malleable, elastic or flexible. The title refers both to sculpture as a ‘plastic art’ and to the way the works extend the definition of body by representing the body in new ways”.<sup>5</sup> Like the title of the exhibition terms and labels are themselves elastic and relative.

In *The Argonauts* (2015) Maggie Nelson provides a good example of how the term feminism and the perception of gender change with time. In her autobiographical book Nelson describes her college professor in feminist theory who had “[...] used her whole life on problematising and deconstructing identity”.<sup>6</sup> At some point a group of students rebelled against her feminist, indeed, but traditional way of teaching and they invited her in return to a private lecture. There – contrary to every tenet of the teacher’s lifelong work – each visitor was asked to pin a label on their chest, stating what they identified themselves as.

Horror! A physical label actually defining who one is. What happened to those deconstructed identities? The professor must have wondered: how did we go from gender being a construction to everyone knowing and publicly proclaiming which identity is theirs? From this we can imagine a Venn diagram where the overlapping common denominator is “feminism”, but where the components in their respective circles do not recognise themselves in the others. Terms are complex, full of holes, dents and contradictions.

## MEANS AND ENDS

A Venn diagram can contain several circles, and we need to go back to the exhibition’s framework to include more. One of the artworks - Maria Pinińska-Bereś’ (1931–1999) *Table II – Feast* from 1968 – consists of a low table. In the middle of the table there is a mat, a knife and fork and in addition two uninviting pear-shaped female breasts. They have been parted from their body and now function perversely as salt and pepper shakers. To the right of the cloth a

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<sup>5</sup> Stavanger Art Museum 2024

<sup>6</sup> Nelson 2005:79

female thigh sticks out of the tabletop, and I follow the leg right down to the foot that is resting on the edge of the table. A shadow of the leg is drawn up on the tabletop. On the left Pinińska-Bereś has also drawn the face of a woman; she is laughing, but has a wild stare, with her hair dancing round her head like Medusa's snakes. The female body is literally served up. Pinińska-Bereś has used the properties of the home - or rather the kitchen - to say something about a woman's place in society.

A decade after this work was created the resistance movement *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo) was formed in Argentina. Like the Polish artists in *The Plastic Body* these women also lived in a totalitarian regime, the Argentine military dictatorship (1976–1983). The group was formed by mothers searching for their missing children<sup>7</sup>, and they started gathering on the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires to protest against the regime that had abducted them. Most of them were housewives with no activist experience, and their signature was traditional white headcloths; the garment of domesticity became their battle helmet. On it they embroidered the names of their lost children: the personal became political.<sup>8</sup>

To begin with they were on their own but from 1980 feminist groups began joining the protests of the mothers. This proved difficult for *Las Madres*: their activism was anchored in the home and their narrative about themselves did not correspond with the feminist movement that was engulfing the western world. As a member of the group put it: "It was difficult for us to share our resistance with the feminists [...] They confused *Las Madres*; we were scared by these new ideas about what it was to be a woman [...] It was hard for us to observe that motherhood could be seen as patriarchal notion."<sup>9</sup>

The same struggle, different narratives. A resistance group that uses feminist strategies yet is scared stiff by feminism. I look at my Venn diagram and draw a new circle. This is for *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*. Just like the Polish artists in *The Plastic Body* they used feminist tools without knowing or identifying with the way the term "Feminism" is understood today. So, what do we find in the overlapping sphere between the circles in my Venn diagram?

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<sup>7</sup> Often young adults who protested against the dictatorship.

<sup>8</sup> An allusion to the feminist motto "The Personal is Political", which became generally known through an essay by the activist Carol Hanisch in 1969.

<sup>9</sup> Bellucci 1987:86

## THE INVISIBLE BETWEEN THE STARS

The apparently empty is never without meaning or content, even though it may seem like it to the naked eye. While writing this text I take a break to leaf through the inventory of procrastinations: Instagram. NASA has posted images of shimmering nebulae with the text: "The space between the stars is not empty but rather filled with filaments of dust and gas (known as the interstellar medium), which is often invisible until something illuminates it"<sup>10</sup>. Art mirrors the world and vice versa.

Like Le Guin, I believe that hollows are really transformative places. While working on this text, it has become clear to me that it is the hollows that make the works in *The Plastic Body* resonate so powerfully with those who see it today; that we can provide our own meaning, fill the works and sites with our own domains and experiences, making them relevant in another time than the one they were created in. This makes it so intriguing to categorise them: like all great art, they are recognised through time and space because they speak of universal themes. They look like something already familiar to us.

Maybe the place where the circles in my Venn diagram meet is no neutral, simple and definable area, but a crack. The sort of crack where water trickles between two rocks, where a small tree against all odds has decided to grow. A crack that becomes filled with meaning the moment it becomes illuminated. This crack may remind us of Magdalena Abakanowicz' clitoris-like wall hanging in *The Plastic Body*. Rough, purplish, red lips bulge out from the walls, open up to me and let me peer into the hollow within. Maybe I need to sink into this crack to find the term I am looking for.

«I said it was hard to make a gripping tale of how we wrestled the wild oats from their husks, but I didn't say it was impossible»<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> NASA 2024

<sup>11</sup> Le Guin 2019:36



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## BIOGRAPHY

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