

MA Contemporary Dialogues: Fine Art
Coexistent Perspectives (ADCD7001)

5. Research two contemporary artworks that address the concepts of identity and memory. Employ critical analysis and relevant theoretical perspectives to compare and contrast them.

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Matuschka 'Beauty Out Of Damage', Self-Portrait, 35mm Photograph, 1993



Joel-Peter Witkin 'Still Life With Breast', Gelatin Silver Photograph, 2001

With/out The Breast: memento mori and de/re-construction of identity in the work of Matuschka & Joel-Peter Witkin.

This discourse will compare and contrast the photographs 'Beauty Out Of Damage' (1993, Matuschka), an image which illustrates her personal experience with breast cancer and mastectomy, and 'Still Life With Breast' (2001, Joel-Peter Witkin), a work which includes an excised human breast, in relation to concepts of memory and identity. It will discuss the allusion to Memento Mori, Vanitas, The Uncanny, Trauma, Illness Identity, the Abject and the Sublime in both works.

To begin, Gross (2015, p. 638) describes identity as 'the reconciliation of all our various roles into one enduring and stable personality', therefore, identity can be seen as the sum of our experiences and memories. What is implicit in both photographs is the reference to physical trauma and trauma memories. These have been shown to impact on our sense of personal identity and our perception of the world in general. Indeed Rose (2003, cited in Gross, p. 299) suggests: '... Memory defines who we are and shapes the way we act more closely than any other single aspect of our personhood ... Whatever happens to us ... we're still ... recognisably ourselves provided our memories are intact. However ... Lose your memory and you, as you, cease to exist.' It is notable that both Matuschka and Witkin have personal histories resonant with traumatic experiences, for Matuschka her breast cancer surgery and, for Witkin, the experience of witnessing a child's death, and arguably, neither picture would exist without these personal trauma experiences and the subsequent memories. Indeed, the effectiveness of both works depends on our memory of the conventional female form which acts as a reference. Both photographs ask us to imagine/remember what a female body looks like and then this image is disrupted.

It's notable then, that both artists chose photography to express their ideas. Photography is notable for being a medium that offers the illusion of reality and truth, it factually captures a moment in time, there is a documentary quality to it and both these photos capture a moment, a historical moment: for Matuschka it's both a personal and a culturally historic moment and, for Witkin it is an implied personal moment, but it is also a work that sits in the historical context of both still-life and memento mori. Indeed, Bowdler (1996, p. 50) suggests 'The power of Witkin's photographs lies in his manipulation of the way that we view photographs as evidence of actuality and recordings of reality...He uses a photograph as a painting and then relies on our conditioned reading of the photograph to elicit our disbelief and shock at what we see before our eyes'. In Camera Lucida, Barthes (1981, p. 27-28) describes both the studium, 'the order of liking', he suggests 'to recognise the studium is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions ... to understand them...' and the punctum which he claims will 'break the studium', an element which 'rises from the scene ... like an arrow, and pierces me' (1981, p.26) It is arguable that in both 'Beauty Out Of Damage' and 'Still Life With Breast' the punctum is triggered: in Matuschka it's the juxtaposition of the beautiful model in sunlit surroundings, with the inclusion of the uninhibited scar. For Witkin, the inclusion of the human breast in otherwise sedate, formal surroundings.

It is, of course, difficult to encounter art that focuses heavily on the female breast without a consideration of gender and the representation of women and women's bodies within history, art and culture. The art world has a long history of objectifying the female body, indeed, Garland-Thomson (2009, p.141) declares 'Breasts are ubiquitous cultural icons', this is, perhaps, unsurprising when we consider '... female breasts have received more erotic attention from males than any other part of the body.' (Morris, 2004, p. 142) Building on Freud's concept of scopophilia (the pleasure derived from looking and/or being looked at), Berger (Ways of Seeing, 1972) explored the predominantly 'male gaze' prevalent in the visual arts, that, according to Felluga (2015, p. 274) turns women into '... passive objects to be looked at (rather than subjects with their own voice and subjectivity)' Eaton (2008, pp. 873–893) goes on to argue this is from a predominantly '... masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents and represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer'.

Both photographs focus heavily on the female breast but disrupt the way we perceive it, the way we stare. Indeed, in reference to Matuschka's image, Garland-Thomson (2009, p. 154) writes: 'That exposed wound and the unexpected difference of her body make people awkward starers ... She forces everyone to look hard, not so much at what we do not want to see, but at that which we are not supposed to stare.' From a young age children are encouraged not to stare, and especially, not to stare at that which is different from them, at people who are wounded, deformed, physically or genetically different. The implication then is, our own sense of identity is inextricably linked to our 'sameness' with others. The photographs of Witkin and Matuschka ask us to subvert this indoctrination, and to stare, to stare at what we have been trained not to, at that which is different, to over-come our discomfort and question why it exists. Their work illustrates there are people in the world who live with this difference everyday and, arguably, are trapped in a world that inadvertently accentuates their differences. Because their wounds won't heal fully, they won't be returned to the comfort of 'sameness'. Through social constructs of 'courtesy' and acceptable behaviour, they arguably find themselves more rejected, more isolated. Witkin & Matuschka, bring these contradictions into the light, into our gaze. They present what we have been conditioned to believe is ugly, unacceptable, and different to us, as a beautiful work of art that demands to be seen, questioned, and celebrated. 'Plato talked about beauty in terms of an object's suitability and utility for its purpose. In other words, if a thing is fit for function then it will be beautiful'. (Osborne & Sturgis, 2006, p. 15) In both images, the breast is damaged beyond use, it now has no conventional function, however, in these photographs, it is, arguably, being repurposed as an object of art/creativity, thereby, redefining the identity of the breast, redefining the female identity.

Therefore, both works effectively disrupt the dominant representation of the female body in art. They challenge us to reconsider our ideas about the female body, femininity and feminine identity. Both artists are subverting the male gaze and issues of objectification of the female breast. They are taking this highly sexualised part of a woman's body and questioning the way we look at/interpret it. Matuschka challenges our perceptions of the 'ideal woman', of conventions of female beauty. She presents her body in a classic pose, accentuating her natural beauty and playing with the expectations of a beautiful woman. Looking soft, gentle, rounded and feminine, but, her breast is missing, yet, arguably, she is still beautiful. Therefore, she presents us with a conventional stereotypical beauty disrupted by disfigurement, she follows the conventions of the male gaze but challenges/disrupts with a missing breast. On the other hand, Witkin, subverts the male

gaze by very literally, treating the female breast as an 'object'. He's showing it alongside mundane items in a composition which follows the conventions of classical art, but feels almost like a parody. It's as if he is inviting us to look at this highly sexualised part of the female form and saying 'here it is, you love to look at breasts, here is a breast!' and he's literally served it up on a plate. The breast in question is rounded, plump and looks healthy. This is incongruent with the fact that it's also excised from a human body. In both works then, we experience a powerful reconsideration of the representation of female identity. Both artists demand a recalibration of our cultural ideas of beauty and what is art. Both photographers are highlighting the 'deformity', the 'scars', the things that are most associated with ugliness, otherness and shame, the things we usually hide rather than celebrate.

However, this focus on the scar, the excision, the different-ness, might initially engender uncomfortable emotions or sensations in the viewer. In 1925 Freud coined the term 'The Uncanny' which he suggested '... was an anxious feeling, that individuals experienced with strangely familiar objects.' (Osborne & Sturgis, 2006, p. 105) It's arguable that both Witkin and Matuschka's works confront us with the uncanny, with the strangeness of the familiar that is now unfamiliar, the strangeness of the scar and the missing breast in Matuschka's work and of the breast served up on a plate in Witkin's. In both of these works there is much that is familiar but the context alters our perception and elicits feelings of uncanniness. We are aware that the excised breast, on the plate, was taken from a woman's body, but that body is now missing. We are also aware that Matuschka has the body of a woman which is now missing a breast. This uncanniness, this discomfort might lead to feelings of abjection. This experience of abjection is visceral, and confusing, Kristeva (1982) defines the abject as '...the place where meaning collapses, the liminal, the borderline, that which defines what is fully human and what is not.' She goes on to describe the abject as '... borderline to the body and society. A corpse, for instance, is an example of the abject as it reminds us of our own mortality.' (Osborne & Sturgis, 2006, p. 175)

Indeed, a cursory glance at each of the photographs might, arguably, elicit feelings of horror and distress. They are both showing us the reality of the horror and destruction that can be wrought on a body through disease and surgery. Indeed, Matuschka is hiding her healthy breast and intentionally drawing our attention to the diseased breast, to her scar. If, like Buchler (2010, p. 3), we consider that 'Abjection refers back to the construction of identity...' then we can understand why 'confrontation with it proves an inherently traumatic experience...a reminder of our own mortality and the fear of the unknown'. Kristeva (1982, p. 3) asserts the necessity of the abject, she describes it as 'What I permanently thrust aside in order to live'. Therefore, what we see in Matuschka's image and might extrapolate from Witkin's is the casting aside of disease and illness from the body in order to live, a casting off of the abjection of cancer.

If our feelings of horror are palpable, why then do we engage with such challenging subject matter and how indeed, can we reconcile our appreciation of the beauty in both images? Indeed, both photographs are imbued with the abject but arguably also present us with beauty. In his discussion of Kant's theories of the sublime de Mul (2011) suggests it is '... connected with experiences that upset our hopes for harmony'. Indeed, faced with both Matuschka and Witkin's images we might experience (de Mul, 2011) '... a 'negative lust' in which attraction and repulsion melt into one ambiguous experience.' Shaw (2006, p. 2) suggests '...

whenever the power of an object or an event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, we resort to the feeling of the sublime. As such, the sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits.' We experience these 'limits' in Witkin's juxtaposition of the ordinariness of the plate, the flowers, the fruits, the impression of afternoon tea in a formal dining-room with the fear of the excised human breast and also in Matuschka's beautiful young woman, with a soft rounded body and a large scar where we expect to see a breast. As Shaw (2006, p. 48) observes 'For Burke, the "source of the sublime" ... operates in a manner analogous to terror.' The idea of disease leading to amputation is terrifying, the sight of an excised breast on a plate is equally alarming. Therefore, we can extrapolate that both Witkin's and Matuschka's images are exploring identity through both an abject and yet sublime experience.

Both works ask us to question what has happened outside of the photographic 'evidence', we implicitly understand that there is a person, a human being, who has been altered, or damaged in some way. A person who has undergone a traumatic and transformative experience. An experience we implicitly understand alters their sense of identity, changes the way we perceive them. They are both female and the breast, as an important identifier of their gender, has been removed/excised. A fact that invites us to address issues of illness, an awareness that something terrible has happened to the photographers subjects. Both photographs are concerned with the amputation of the female breast and we can't help but wonder what impact that might have on an individual's sense of self. Indeed Bury (1982 p.169) argues serious illness causes '... profound disruptions in explanatory systems normally used by people, such that a fundamental re-thinking of the person's ... self-concept is involved'. In light of this Sulik (2011, p. 229) argues '*Becoming a breast cancer survivor* ... involves the development of an illness identity and the (re)writing of one's personal biography.' In her photograph Matuschka presents herself as a seemingly healthy and fit young woman but we are challenged with the incongruence of the missing breast. In Witkin's work, the breast appears healthy and we have the incongruence of a seemingly healthy breast missing a body. Sulik (2011, pp. 238-239) notes 'In Western society, women's breasts symbolize femininity and female sexuality. Damage to, or removal of, the breasts is aberrant in a heteronormative culture that is "obsessed with breasts." She goes on to observe (Sulik, 2011, p. 261), 'In addition to dealing with physical and emotional side effects of breast cancer treatment, diagnosed women come to terms with their feelings about having a body that does not conform to normative feminine expectations.' Arguably then, both works expand on and explore the concept of an 'illness identity', an identity that is shaped through depictions of illness, deformity, the contrast between social 'norms' and the abnormal. Matuschka's work explores the traditional feminine identity, subverted by illness and surgery and expressed through self-portrait (ie internalised in a traditionally feminine way) whereas, Witkin's work explores illness and deformity through an external (impersonal?) source (ie through other people) in an external (traditionally masculine way).

Both works also raise questions of whether our identity lies in our bodies and the representation of our physical beings. Kagan (2012, p. 125) explores the idea of a 'brain' version of the body and suggests our identity is linked to this. He points out that we can transplant another's organs into our own body and still be perceived as the same person, however, if another person's brain is transplanted into our head, we cease to be us, now we are the other person. In this model, a change in our bodies does not change our identity, however,

a traumatic event, arguably, does alter our own sense of our identity and can alter the way we are perceived by others; Matuschka is now, no longer an artist but she is an artist with one breast, an artist who experienced breast cancer. Indeed, rather than attempt a reconstruction of her original female identity through surgical reconstruction, Matuschka embarked on her own form of identity reconstruction through her work as an artist and activist. Through exploring her new body through her art, by drawing attention to the missing breast, she redefines herself as more than a breast, more than a sexual object, she transforms into an artist and an artist's subject. The deformity is lifted into the beautiful. Witkin also does this, his subject matter transcends societies pre-conceived notions of what is abject, ugly, disfigured, that which should be hidden, talked about in hushed voices, into something which is brought into the light, placed centre-stage and presented as worthy of our attention and respect. The human body, in all its iterations is valid and worthwhile. It is beautiful enough to be considered 'art'.

As has been observed Witkin's still-life approaches trauma and subsequent amputation from a more detached perspective than Matuschka's. We are aware, looking at the photograph, that this particular trauma did not happen to the artist himself, it's not a personal memory. His feels more biographical in contrast to Matuschka's autobiographical approach. Although it could be argued that Matuschka's work is heavy with symbolism: of disease, illness identity, etc., Witkin's is more heavily immersed in spiritual symbolism and identity. An investigation of Witkin's past work shows a deep interest in meaning and symbolism, that is steeped in Memento Mori (symbols of the reminder of death). Indeed, Bowdler (1996, p. 73) observes 'Witkin's ... memento mori are created using a long standing traditional language and form...he is also challenging the sphere of the photograph and questioning its boundaries.' Rothstein (2014) elaborates further by pointing out Witkin's 'infinite capacity for symbolic interpretation' and suggests 'like the "vanitas" of the 17th century Witkin uses these symbols to spark introspection'. With this in mind, we can infer each of the objects included in 'Still Life With Breast' have been carefully selected by the artist, not just for their visual aesthetic but also for their symbolic meaning. However, the meaning is not obvious, leaving room for personal interpretation.

The photograph includes a fig, a pomegranate and a breast displayed on a porcelain plate, with two flowers (a rose and an aster/daisy) with a butterfly on the table in front. The inclusion of the fruit and flowers, arguably, reflects the common use of both in traditional still-life painting and Memento Mori where they were often used to represent the battle between good and evil over the soul. Indeed, the butterfly was considered a symbol of salvation. Therefore, in 'Still Life With Breast' the objects appear to represent the spiritual. Each is symbolic within the Catholic faith (indeed Witkin was raised as a Catholic). Every item is offered equal importance, although, the significance of the breast is, of course, alluded to in the title of the work. Each item is displayed with space around it, lending weight to the argument that each is symbolic in some way. Both flowers are associated with the Mother Mary and the butterfly is a symbol of resurrection and metamorphosis. The three objects on the plate (a fig, pomegranate, and a human breast) appear to represent the Holy Trinity. The fig tree is the only tree known to have been in the garden of Eden, figs represent prosperity and faith, the pomegranate is a symbol of fertility and immortality and, in this instance, the human breast, perhaps represents Eve, the first woman, cast out of Eden, it also represents fertility, the myths of femininity, motherhood and spirituality. The female breast is associated with mother's milk, with

life, nourishment, health, connection, eternal life, however, in both works, the breast is damaged/missing, perhaps representing a loss of motherhood, nourishment, femininity and sexuality. Indeed, the breast itself, seems to be a reminder that we all must face our mortality, that we are corporeal, however, the objects around it, offer redemption and hope with their representation of resurrection and transformation into something new and changed. Arguably, the woman, in Witkin's photograph, who lost the breast, has had to adapt to being changed, to face her possible mortality and Matuschka's work also reflects this transformation. The transformation of the human body and female identity through the trauma, of disease and surgery. If we consider serious '... illness involves a recognition of the worlds of pain and suffering, possibly even of death, which are normally only seen as distant possibilities or the plight of others.' (Bury, p. 169) we can see how both Witkin and Matuschka's photographs might be replete with symbolism. Witkin's still-life includes symbols associated with his Catholic, spiritual identity. Matuschka's image can be argued to invoke impressions of the Mary (Madonna), the white clothing evoking concepts of Christian purity, the veil, the covered hair, the white dress, the modest posture in the photograph. Both photographs also allude to Vanitas symbols, containing allusions to the vanities of worldly pleasures and goods: in Witkin's the luscious fruits, Georgian stripe wall-paper, porcelain plate, the 'feast' we are being served, the heavy draped curtain. In Matuschka's the tailored dress, the lengthy veil, the make-up.

Therefore, both Witkin's excised breast and Matuschka's missing breast serve as a kind of Vanitas/Memento Mori, a reminder of the fragility of life. Indeed, in Matuschka's picture her scar arguably signifies a memento mori symbol, reminding us of the transience of our existence, it exploits our awareness and memory of death and the transience of life to provoke a response. Indeed, in her image the left of the photograph has a dark background (this is on the cancer side), the side of the healthy breast is well lit. If we consider memento mori is linked to the battle between life and death, illness and health, then Matuschka inhabits the liminal place between the two. It's as if she's emerging from the darkness and despair of life threatening illness and treatment, towards the light of life and hope. Indeed, the light streaking in feels reminiscent of religious paintings. It's interesting that, the German word for sublime (erhabene) also translates to 'exalted' and in this term (De Mul, 2011) '... we hear echoes of the religious connotation of the concept [of the sublime]'.

In conclusion, Matuschka and Witkin's photographs challenge us to experience the female breast in a different way to traditional art/media representations. They both subvert the male gaze through their display of excision and scarring. They illicit an awareness of the fluidity of identity and the way it can be altered as a result of traumatic experience and memory. Both illustrate how important our memory of a standard female body is to their work and how a traumatic incident can influence a creative outcome. They also ignite our personal memory and awareness of the transience and vulnerability of life.

Matuschka's work explores memory and personal identity from the perspectives of gender, objectification, the Male Gaze, trauma and illness etc. She is choosing to subvert our expectations and present herself in an objectified way (that of a beautiful photographer's model) but with her breast cancer scar exposed. Her illness identity is therefore, exposed, as is her identity as a woman, a breast cancer survivor, and as an artist post-surgery. Her photograph takes on the role of an autobiographical account of a moment in the life of a woman and the subsequent aftermath of the trauma inflicted on her body. She uses herself as the canvas and

explores from her own experience, her own body and its 'autobiographical memory' (Tulving 1972, cited in Gross p. 291) in a very internalised way.

In contrast, Witkin, uses another as a canvas and explores via their body, from a more external perspective and as a result, Witkin's work arguably feels more detached. His focus is more on spiritual identity. He displays objects within the historical context of still-life painting and memento mori and the breast in the photograph is one more of these objects. The breast is objectified and the photograph references female identity from within the context of still-life and memento mori and effectively exposes his intersectional identity as a white, male, Catholic raised artist. Arguably, Witkin's photograph conforms to gender stereotypes of male detachment and control, Matuschka's to stereotypes of female 'giving' and vulnerability.

Both artists are showing us the horror of reality, the horror and destruction that can be wrought on a body through disease and surgery and the subsequent damage that can be done to a person's sense of identity. However, they are also showing how an identity can be reformed and redefined, how it can be removed from 'normal' expectations and moulded will-fully and consciously into a new interpretation. In western culture certain things have become 'hidden', or sanitised (death, mutilation, deformity...) and concepts of true beauty have been manipulated and prescribed. Witkin & Matuschka show us the beauty in the Taboo and in the reality of all aspects of life and what it is to be human.

Heidegger (Osborne & Sturgis, 2006, p. 120) claimed '... art can produce truth, if you let it work. It can reflect new ways of thinking about the human condition. And its greatest purpose is to reflect on the nature of being.' In 'Beauty Out Of Damage' and 'Still Life With Breast', Matuschka and Witkin, arguably, are effectively celebrating the will to live, survive and flourish through the adversity of traumatic experience and memory, and the subsequent reconstruction and expression of identity.

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