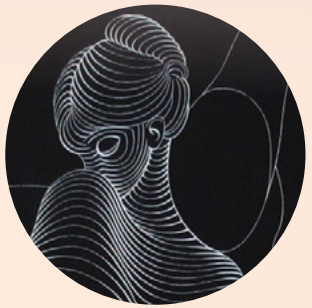


HANS BELLMER

The Other/The Alien/The Same





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The Other/The Alien/The Same

HANS BELLMER'S GHOSTLY PRESENCE AND THE INALIENABLE RIGHT TO DESIRE

edited by
MIECZYSŁAW JUDA

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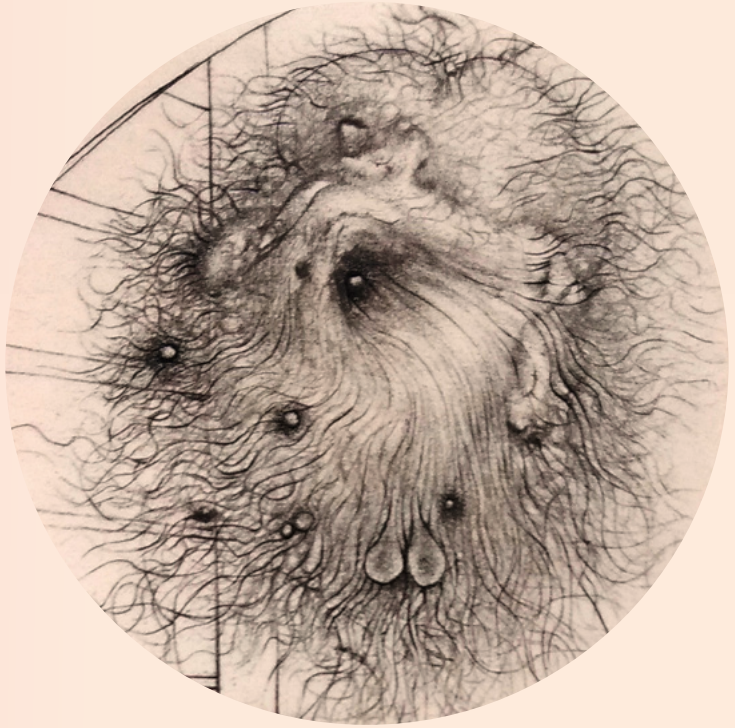


Hans Bellmer. The Boundless Boundaries Introduction

Life, love, and death are one – it is the way toward eternity, unattainable yet impossible not to try. The mysticism of this way is not what it is, but that it is. The world as an experience belongs to the basic relation I–You. This is our way to go through. There is no other way of human existence. Meeting the Other is the way, which is impossible to avoid. In the case of Bellmer, however, as accurately noticed by K.A. Jeleński, it takes a disturbing form: The internal landscape of the body is connected with death and love: a lover and a murderer are its privileged explorers[1].

When home appears, the world appears. When home disappears, the world turns into a delusion. We cannot have no home, because home means roots. Without it, we are left crippled and stranded, abandoned to what we call moire or fate. We are not really there, since there is no core or anchor, which serves us always and ever, helps us last and lets us be. It makes us. To be means to have a home and permanent presence within. Therefore, we are always from somewhere, where our home is – who leaves home, returns to it. One who does not have a home, returns nowhere, because the one has no roots, the one is from nowhere, like a vagrant or a pilgrim, without the goal of the pilgrimage even looming on the horizon.

1 K.A. Jeleński, *Bellmer albo Anatomia Nieświadomości i Fizycznej Miłości*, Gdańsk 1998, p. 5

Was that the case with Hans Bellmer, who was born in 1902 in then German Katowice (Kattowitz), in the house at 10 August–Schneider–Strasse (now Adama Mickiewicza Street), and lived in a tenement house at what is now 47 Kościuszki Street? What could have been/must have been a material trace of his presence? We do not know much. We do not know, where was the doll clinic he passed by, going to his middle school, nor where he attempted to photograph for the first time. He was one of the most original artists of the 20th century, and his art, dark and fascinating, was known to a quite small inner circle until recently. He was a son of an engineer, Hans Johann Bellmer and Maria Donnerstag, and went out into the world: in 1923, he stated studying in Technische Hochschule (Higher School of Technology) in Berlin, enrolled against his will; he lived in Berlin, where he met a dadaist, John Heartfield, and George Grosz, who encouraged him to make art. Back in Katowice, in 1922, he had the exhibition of his (now missing) gouaches, for which he was arrested and temporarily detained by the Polish authorities on account of undermining moral foundations of the State. He dealt with typography and book illustration, and his works started leaning toward drafting precision combined with the inclination to obsessive, strongly erotic subjects. In 1924, during his stay in Paris, he came about the hurricane of surrealism, all-consumed with penetrating mechanisms of the Unconscious, and dived into the swirl of artistic Bohemia of both Paris and Berlin: Giorgio de Chirico, Otto Dix, Oskar Kokoschka, André Breton, Paul Éluard. In 1926, he launched his own advertising agency in Berlin, and after 1930, during vacations which he always spent in Carlsruhe, for days on end he made sketches of little girls from the orphanage nearby, whose drawings were, presumably, the initial studies of the first *Doll*, made between 1933 and 1934. It was built of wood as a realistic mannequin of a woman, with ball joints as joints of its legs and arms, and a mechanism of rotary panoramas in the stomach, which could be watched through the hole in the navel, and which were meant to express thoughts and dreams of an adolescent girl. The whole was completed with the 1934 publication of the book *Die Puppe* with ten staged photographs of Bellmer's *Doll*, and his poetic foreword in prose, while the project was finalised the same year by releasing 18 photos of *The Doll* in Paris *Minotaure* – the flagship magazine of surrealists. The official initiation of Bellmer's presence in the surrealist movement became a fact. And then, exhibitions in London, Paris, Tokyo, New York, construction of the second *Doll*, inspired by Kleist's essay *On the Marionette Theatre* and the sculptures of the late 1930s, like the emblematic *The Machine-Gunneress in a State of Grace/La Mitrailleuse en État de Grâce* – a combination of a praying mantis, telescope, and several artificial woman's body parts, the turmoil of war, two marriages, meeting G. Bataille, and illustrations for his key texts: *Madame Edwarda* and *l'Histoire de l'oeil*, then illustrations for books of Louis Aragon, Jean Cocteau, Lautrémont, and Marquis de Sade, the first retrospective exhibition at the Paris Centre National d'Art Contemporain in 1971, and the gaping hole of absence in his country of origin. But only for so long.

Bellmer is the Other. He is always the Other, because he is not like us, he is not The Same, he does not fulfil himself in the same. He is different. He has other preferences, the other outlook of the world and boundaries of accessible desire, other fascinations.

Bellmer is Alien. Everywhere, he is not at home: a German, but in/from Katowice, maybe even a Jew from the collaborative part of France Vichy – his second wife, Marcelle Céline Sutter, the mother of his twin daughters, Béatrice and his beloved Doriane, will denounce him as such – incapable of finding any lasting understanding with the environment of surrealist and modernist Bohemia, neither the French nor the German one, despite periodical affiliation and hopes of some type of association. All that because the Alien is someone who carries permanent traces of presence, difference/distinction impossible to reduce/annihilate. And he does not strive for erasing them. That is not what he wants. He does not want to be The Same.

In the case of Bellmer, then, what is home, even more –*oikos*, a household? This specific habitable zone, where life is born and takes its course. First in Poland, later in Germany, and in France. The household of all entrusted to our effort and care. The touch of the untouchable. First, there is Chronos, the god of clock time, gauge of the moment and everyday diligence. But there is also Kairos, emerging from the depths of Logos like a voice of Platonic Phaedrus, preaching about anamnesis, which means recalling what our soul once saw while wandering in the procession of gods and raising its head toward the real Existence. In the case of Bellmer, every historical enhancement of recall, every wave of interest, is like Kairos' intervention, preaching that there is something ontically stronger, the force which is actually making the world, but we learn about it only in these special moments of experience, when it really reaches us. Thereby, really, the Alien, the Other, becomes The Same before our own eyes. That is how *oikos* transforms into *polis*: the community of a physical place, territory, of which we can draw a map in order to navigate it and therefore be at home, and the community of purpose, which builds identity, i.e. the sense of being and being "at home". For Hans Bellmer, it was the permanent gaping void of absence in the country and place of origin, or more like hauntological presence, like a phantom, phantom pain. At first, throughout the post-war period, he is not here, he does not exist in his starting point, in Katowice. It is hard to imagine that Bellmer and all what he carried with him could be reconciled with the world of dominant doctrine, the state of social justice of workers and peasants, the avant-garde of heavy-industrial working class. For years, he had been the classic great absentee, like the founders of Katowice, Richard Holtze and Friedrich Grundmann, the former: a German and, on top of that, a Mason, soon forming a lodge of brethren in the freemasonic faith in the better world, and the latter: also German-speaking, as it were at the time, who would bring together local smithies (*bogucka, załęska, szopienicka, rożdzieńska*) and the miners' estates of Giszowiec and Nikiszowiec, to forge Katowice. This slow yet relentless work of erasing and rewriting the world anew, took time.

It was only after the political transformation, in the mid-1990s, that the first attempt of resurfacing of the familiar artist was made in the form of an exhibition, curated by the duo Szymczyk–Przywara in the Silesian Museum in Katowice, and the first actual monographic publication of album–anthology: *Gry lalki. Hans Bellmer Katowice 1902–Paryż 1975*[2] (The Games of the Doll. Hans Bellmer Katowice 1902–Paris 1975) with (historical) texts of H. Von Kleist, A. Jouffroy, M. Sporoń, S. Rosiek, S. Eiblmayr and A. Mahon. In 2000, Andrzej Urbanowicz, the restless spirit of the Katowice underground, founds the Bellmer Association, and in 2002, on the centenary of Hans Bellmer's birthday, he organises a large conference in the Contemporary Art Gallery BWA in Katowice, gathering other great spirits of the world orbiting around Bellmer: Andrzej Kostołowski, Andrzej Przywara, Tadeusz Komendant, Tadeusz Sławek, Henryk Waniek, while at the turn of 2002 and 2003, the Silesian Museum hosts an exhibition of photographs and prints from the collection of Jean-Marie and Doriane Bihl-Bellmer. Later, by means and effort of the Katowice History Museum's team, curated and patiently led by Natalia Kruszyna, there was launched the institutional entity for preservation and recreation of Bellmer's legacy, which builds the collection of his works, purchasing some of them on the free market. The conference and publication *Bellmer/Visat*[3] in 2015, on the 150th anniversary of Katowice's birthday, is a phenomenon of its own specific gravity, presenting a selection of Bellmer's works from the period of the artist's intense collaboration with Georges Visat's publishing house and the art gallery ran by his wife, Susanne, as well as texts authored by A. Jouffroy, N. Kruszyna, K. Łata-Wrona, A. Taborska, G. Visat and H. Waniek. In 2017, M. Turek's comic book publication *Bellmer Niebiografia*[4] (Bellmer Nonbiography) is released, and on the 50th anniversary of the artist's death, in 2025, The Institute of Literary Studies at the University of Silesia organises an academic conference titled ANAGRAMY AWANGARDY (ANAGRAMS OF AVANT-GARDE), participated by A. Nawarecki, J. Kornhauser, J. Dąbrowski, M. Baron-Milian, J. Franczak, J. Orska, P. Marecki, A. Kremer, A. Grzemska, K. Prusiel, N. Kruszyna, B. Śniecikowska, M. Bukowiecka, M. Rakoczy, D. Kołodziej, J. Skurtys, M. Piotrowska-Grot, P. Dybel and, the undersiged, M. Juda.

Thus, Bellmer returns home, where he is at home, where he is from, but also *au monde entier.* He suddenly reappears in completely unexpected places. Like during the 55th Biennale Arte in Venice in 2013 with *La Poupée 1936/1965*, a reconstruction of one of his notorious *Dolls*, made in 1965 based on the original model of the 1930s, along with several photographs and drawings. Whoever decided to stop to see them, however, experienced Bellmer's *modus operandi*: the controversial practice of making provocative, often grotesque sculptures of dolls – adolescent girls – against artistic rules and standards imposed by oppressive reality. These

2 *Gry lalki. Hans Bellmer Katowice 1902–Paryż 1975,* A. Przywara and A. Szymczyk (eds.), słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 1998

3 *Bellmer/Visat,* Natalia Kruszyna (ed.), Katowice 2015

4 M. Turek, *Bellmer Niebiografia*, Kultura Gniewu, 2017

disturbingly expressive prints came from the series *Petit traité de moral* (Éditions Georges Visat, 1968). During the 59th Biennale Arte in 2022, we happened upon some kind of Bellmer's echo, finding photographs of costumes designed by Alexandra Exter for Yakov Protazanov's 1924 film *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, radiating their noble glow among the peculiar quasi-mannequins, quasi-dolls, made by Louise Nevelson. On the same occasion, Roger Ballen of the Republic of South Africa pavilion, in collaboration with Lebohang Kganye and Phumulani Ntuli, took us on a journey symbolising the process of self-discovery, existential anxiety, necessary work through our trauma, and only then moving *Into The Light*. We remember Ballen's photos from the visit in Poland within the 17th edition of Ars Cameralis Silesiae Superioris Festival in 2008 (*The Sorrow of Death*), the ambiguous images of people and animals, objects closed up in mysterious rooms, as if prison cells, and the unforgettable portrait of the twin brothers, physically verging on deformation (*Shadow Chamber*), so "documentary" that they are almost like dolls. If we add the memorable works of Nobuyoshi Araki, i.a. the intimate images of family life, nudity of beautiful, often rope-bound women, identified obscenity of takes, offensive sex scenes, but also sensual depictions of flowers, then the association with Bellmer is almost automatic. Both artists wander the twilight zone, spread between art and pornographic accusation. Images of women and their transmutations, often on the verge of sadomasochistic correlations, exceed the accepted areas of taboo. In both cases, however, we know that it was not about the dazzle of sexuality, but rather the pursuit of existential truth, borderline exploration of the hazardous affinity of sex and death, and asking questions if there are and how (in)transgressible are the borders of human dignity. This triangle: Bellmer – Ballen – Araki plots the space of the symbolic imaginarium, emanating the light of image, the *raison d'être* of which is always the same, the existential marriage of the ethical and the aesthetic.

All that is entranced with the phantoms of ultimate, ever insatiable/unquenchable desire, up to the horizon of acceptability, the boundaries of which are never fixed, but always negotiable, like all that refers to human life. Although the normalising work of time actually takes it course, Bellmer's photographs, intentionally obscene, simply shame-less, featuring Nora Mitrani's exposed vagina and anus, are still so today, let alone the borderline figure *La croix gamahuchée*, in which a man is lying on the ground and fingering his partner, who is standing over him. These are photographs of 1946, published in the catalogue *Bellmer: photographe* from the artist's photo exhibition at Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou in 1983.

The procedures of leaving and coming back, conscious uprooting and anchoring again, served as the starting point of deliberations on Hans Bellmer's art and phantom presence within the project titled *The Other/The Alien/The Same* prepared by the Department of Theory and History of Art at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Katowice in the form of a conference and artistic manifestations on the 20th anniversary of launching the

independent Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice in 2021, which included the following areas as a problem map:

1. (re)construction of Bellmer's field/Bellmer's world,
2. poststructural and postpsychoanalytic topos
3. "rewriting" Bellmer,
4. epiphany of (non)presence.

In October 2021, there was planned a two-day conference, exhibition and film shows, the common denominator of which was the attempt to go beyond the existing canon of interpretation of Hans Bellmer's art. Due to pandemic restrictions, the intended project was then limited to the exhibition at the Rondo Sztuki Gallery titled *The Base Matter*, participated by Wiktoria Walendzik, Maryna Sakowska, Martyna Pinkowska. The project *The Other/The Alien/The Same* arose from the need for a careful look at the pupating protagonists of his works, not only as the form-eluding body, but mostly as the body marked with gender. The conference returned in October 2022, and its speakers included: Agnieszka Taborska, Roman Nieczyporowski, Magdalena Środa, Paweł Dybel, Natalia Kruszyna, Iza Kowalczyk and Oliwia Szepietowska. The performative part involved Karol Radziszewski with his Queer Archives Institute, and the exhibition, organised again at the Rondo Sztuki Gallery, was participated by: Aneta Grzeszykowska, Natalia Kopytko, Barbara Kubska, Justyna Smoleń, Małgorzata Szandała and Paulina Walczak-Hańderek, in the entourage of Hans Bellmer's 1947–1975 drawings and prints, rented from the Katowice History Museum.

As documents of the epoch, Bellmer's works confirm the misogynistic attitude of surrealists – proclaiming, in line with André Breton and Louis Aragon, that there was nothing they loved more than young hysterical girls – and provoke reflection on his art as the maker of the notorious *Doll*, also from the perspective of gender studies. They draw attention to his obsessively reiterated procedure of objectification of the woman's body. On the field of print, as well as drawing and sculpture, such a body was invariably decapitated, humiliated, chopped, bound with ropes, submissive, treated as a helpless dumb object under the colonising male gaze. This prepares a platform of deliberations on metamorphosis, transformation, and finally, the notions of transsexuality and transgenderism, against the oppression of heteronormative culture. In this context, the conference in Katowice and its accompanying exhibitions provided the opportunity to manifest statements and activities of contemporary artists, the symbolic heiresses and heirs of the master, similarly making attempts at taming the monstrous character of the body. Hence Bellmer, who was fatefully The Other, and therefore The Alien, can be once again revealed as The Same, since (after R. Nieczyporowski): art is always about negotiating reality.

This volume is not a simple record of conference papers. Not all of them have been included, and not all of the included ones are in the version presented at the conference. More texts have

been added, dedicated to this particular publication. Bellmer's *oeuvre* is like Lacan's mirror, which "consciously" reflects the artist's unconscious as an irrepressible visualisation of projection of desire. Since the disarticulated, fragmented *Dolls* and their permuted elements expose that only by means of a difference it is possible for the entire image of the urge to exist. As holistic, no physical representation will express the whole, it can only be a fleeting note on the annihilated whole. A. Taborska is absolutely right saying that it is difficult to write about Bellmer in every sense. He can be read, as he has been read so far, and as he probably will be, at will: psychoanalytically, historically, structurally, genetically, historicartificially, genderly, postgenderly, and from any arbitrary perspective. Because Bellmer is multi-appearing. Moreover, it is impossible to confine him nor his irritating art to any frames. He, himself, proved it a thousand times. Both by means of his most important artefact – *The Doll* in any co/reconstruction and subsequent iterations, and their accompanying conceptions. The mills of talking about Bellmer grind steadily and endlessly, while ever attempt of capturing him and his art in a synthesising form fails by default, since it eventually stalls at some catastrophic charade e.g. that Bellmer's art exteriorises the visibility of urge, or, in a less pompous form, endlessly emanates desire. N. Kruszyna in her text presents the toxic, and eventually pathological relationship, also in the realm of art, of Hans Bellmer and Nora Mitrani, one of the most important women of his life, who he could not live without, and surely could not live with. The authors' duo M. Baron-Milian and P. Bogalecki place the starting point of their narrative in a frequently quoted Bellmer's bon-mot that the body is comparable to a sentence, that it is actually an anagram, and as such it can be known only by discovering its real meaning in constant and, in the end, infinite (re)configurations – disassembly and reassembly of its parts like in classic linguistic anagrams, which he practised with Unica Zürn. P. Dybel addresses the phenomenon of anagrammed women's bodies, taken as painful art this time, from another perspective: Bellmer's fixation on the conception of physical unconscious, derived from psychoanalytic orientation, and then it is short distance to the anti-doll as an abject, negation of commonly accepted ideals of women's beauty. I. Kowalczyk and O. Szepietowska release onto Bellmer's overview the confusion as to how today's feminist scholars (art historians) should deal with oppressive images of women–dolls, resembling victims of sadistic operations. Indeed, unemotional observation of at least portion of Bellmer's works gives the impression of police crime records. Sometimes what is criminal is also fascinating, excitingly ecstatic, and becomes a subject of artistic articulation, why? R. Lewandowski takes another direction, and embeds the phenomenon of Bellmer's art in the classic 20th – and 21st-centuries thought of J. Lacan, J. Kristevej, R. Braidotti, K.A. Jeleński, and G. Bataille, using this context to report accomplishments of the artists of the Katowice exhibition, which conclude in the message that *textuality and iconography remain* (...) *a natural source and alliance for both the audience and the artist, who desire (The Other)*

body and allegory. A. Araszkiewicz, in turn, formats her narrative onto the contemporary contexts of sexual/gender revolution (if this is the case), engaging the voices of P.B. Preciado, I. Święch, B. Swoboda and E. Łojszyk, and in exposition to new stagings of the body and sexuality, like in M. Klassen's 2023 postpornographic film *A Body Like Mine*, arriving at the conclusion that corporality and sexuality turn out to be a performative phenomenon, i.e. they are naturally subjected to indelible transgression, elude norms, prohibitions, restrictions, and remain focuses on pleasure–knowledge of all bodies and all urges, regardless of any characteristic or distinguishing features.

The texts–voices included in this publication, while indexing the way of thinking about Bellmer "today", unexpectedly and disturbingly rhyme with Andrea Emo's phrase, borrowed by Anselm Kiefer as a motto of his exhibition in the Venice Palazzo Ducale in 2022, on the 1600th anniversary of foundation of La Serenissima: *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po'di luce/ These writings, when burned, will finally cast a little light*. After all, however, it is all about Hans Bellmer, who came from Katowice, and now he reappears and resettles here.





Hans, Unica and the Doll, rue Mouffetard, Paris ca. 1955,
photo: Franz Hermesmeyer

The Difficulty of Writing about Unica Zürn and Hans Bellmer

On 20th October 2022, we met at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Katowice to have one more conversation about Bellmer. I talked about his muse, model, partner, victim of his sadistic practices, brilliant writer and draughtswoman, whose drawings are exhibited in museums worldwide. I compared and contrasted his photographs of Zürn's rope-bound naked or half-naked body (it is hard to tell up from down, because the whole thing resembles chunks of ham) with self-portraits made, in response, by Francesca Woodman, an American photographer, renowned alumna of my school, the Rhode Island School of Design. In the 1970s, as she photographed her own body, fragmented with transparent tape cutting in her flesh, Woodman winked at connoisseurs of Bellmer's art: I can do the same thing, yet my agency is much different from Unica's twenty years before. My body belongs to me, I can do whatever I want with it, I can and want to laugh at it. I can shape it to imitate René Magritte's painting *The Rape*, in which the victim's face turns into erogenous zones: her eyes become breasts, her mouth – the pubis. I can put an item of clothing on my womb and laugh at surrealists, tormented by their obsession with the motif of a glove. Except that mine is made of wool, and has nothing to do with a sexual fetish! I can mock Bellmer's dear surrealist mannerism of chopping women's heads off to fully concentrate

HANS BELLMER

Unica, photo, 1958





on eroticism, to which the face and the thought would be an inconvenient dissonance. Man Ray, Ernst, Magritte, Boiffard, they all played that game. And now I, Francesca, play it perversely, responding to mansplaining with a giggle, the only weapon against it.

Zürn and Woodman committed suicides. Our conference was held on the 52nd death anniversary of Zürn, who on 19th October 1970 jumped out of the window of Bellmer's apartment in Berlin. She had described such an ending in *The Man of Jasmine*, in which subsequent patients jumped out of the window of the mental clinic. And in *Dark Spring*, in which a young girl, infatuated with her teacher and misunderstood by adults, throws herself out of the bedroom window.

On 19th January 1981, twenty-three years old Francesca Woodman jumped off the skyscraper in New York. The photographer, ahead of her times, unappreciated by her contemporaries, today – next to Claude Cahun – the artist quoted by photographers the most. Surrealists perceived the decision to take one's life as the ultimate expression of freedom. *Life's greatest gift is the freedom it leaves you to step out of it whenever you choose*, wrote Breton in his *Anthology of Black Humour* about the suicidal poet, Jacques Rigaut.

One of the main differences between male surrealists and female surrealists was that the men stopped at theoretical deliberations, while the women brought the assumptions of their movement to life (or death). Breton was fascinated with the madness gradually liberated from the philistine shackles; Nadja paid the ultimate price.

Bellmer brought Zürn's body down to a piece of refrigerated meat. In the name of what did the model subordinate to such practices? In the name of sadomasochistic fantasies, which she described in *Dark Spring*? Out of the conviction that they were making art together? In the name of the silent consent to the conditions imposed by the man of her life, who was looking out for her, after all, he retrieved her torn drawings (with the obsessive motif of the eyes) from the bin and glued them back together, intervened with doctors of the mental hospital to let her draw, brought in gallery owners, organised the January exhibitions, so that she had something to wait for and the Christmas depression wouldn't push her over the edge?

I wrote about Unica Zürn on numerous occasions, starting with *Spiskowcy wyobraźni* (Imagination Schemers), published in 2007 and reissued in 2024, on the centenary of Breton's first *Manifesto*. Then, catalogues, conference texts, afterwords, and the book: *Świat zwariował. Poradnik surrealistyczny. Jak przeżyć* (The World Has Gone Insane. Surrealist Guide to Survival, 2021). I gratefully welcomed *The Trumpets of Jericho*, *Dark Spring*, and *The*

Man of Jasmine translated into Polish by Małgorzata Łukasiewicz and Maryna Ochab (2021).

In the new chapter of *Schemers*, I was less radical when writing about the male-female relations in the surrealists' circles. Instead, I presented them from a more historical perspective. On the backdrop of other avant-garde groups (not to mention the rest of the world), surrealists were closer to our standards.

At the conference in Katowice, not much was said about Bellmer's muse. Regarding Bellmer himself, there are two voices in Poland: acceptance, owe, pride that he is ours, from here, a man of Silesia, and so famous worldwide, versus criticism of misogyny and cruelty, pointing out similarities between his photographs with the police photos of the victims of Jack the Ripper, so intriguing to surrealists. The demarcation line often runs along the age and geography: younger researchers tend to empathise with Unica's battered body, while older scholars sympathise to a lesser degree. The former reflect on Unica Zürn's drawings and her pioneering literary art. Which writer, before and after her, dared describe the mother's aversion toward her newborn child? And she did, in *The Trumpets of Jericho*. How many writers, male or female, recreated fateful mad love? How many noted down the clinical symptoms of mental illnesses? Who, other than her, had the courage to speak of their own obsessions, which the moral majority deemed abnormal?

Against the perspective of this art, Bellmer's photographs and his *Doll*, whose features resembled Unica's, do not stand so strong. His art fit with the epoch: it spoke in the same voice as the photos of Man Ray and Boiffard, also busy with chopping the body into pieces. Zürn's art was ahead of its time.

And one more thing. Ever since female surrealists were "discovered" in the 1990s, there has been an avalanche of books about artistic couples. Critics have been trying to answer the previously unasked questions: What would Max Ernst's paintings look like without Leonora Carrington? Claude Cahun's photos without Marcel Moore? Jan Švankmajer's films, collages and objects without Eva Švankmajerová? It is time to pose such a question to the creative duo of Zürn/Bellmer. How would he make his art without her passive, torture-submissive body? Without her tormented face, the doll's face?

In Katowice, it is especially difficult to take a critical perspective on Bellmer's art, since here, the memory of him lives on its own rights. The meeting in October 2022 gave rise to new conversations. I hope the rest lies ahead of us.

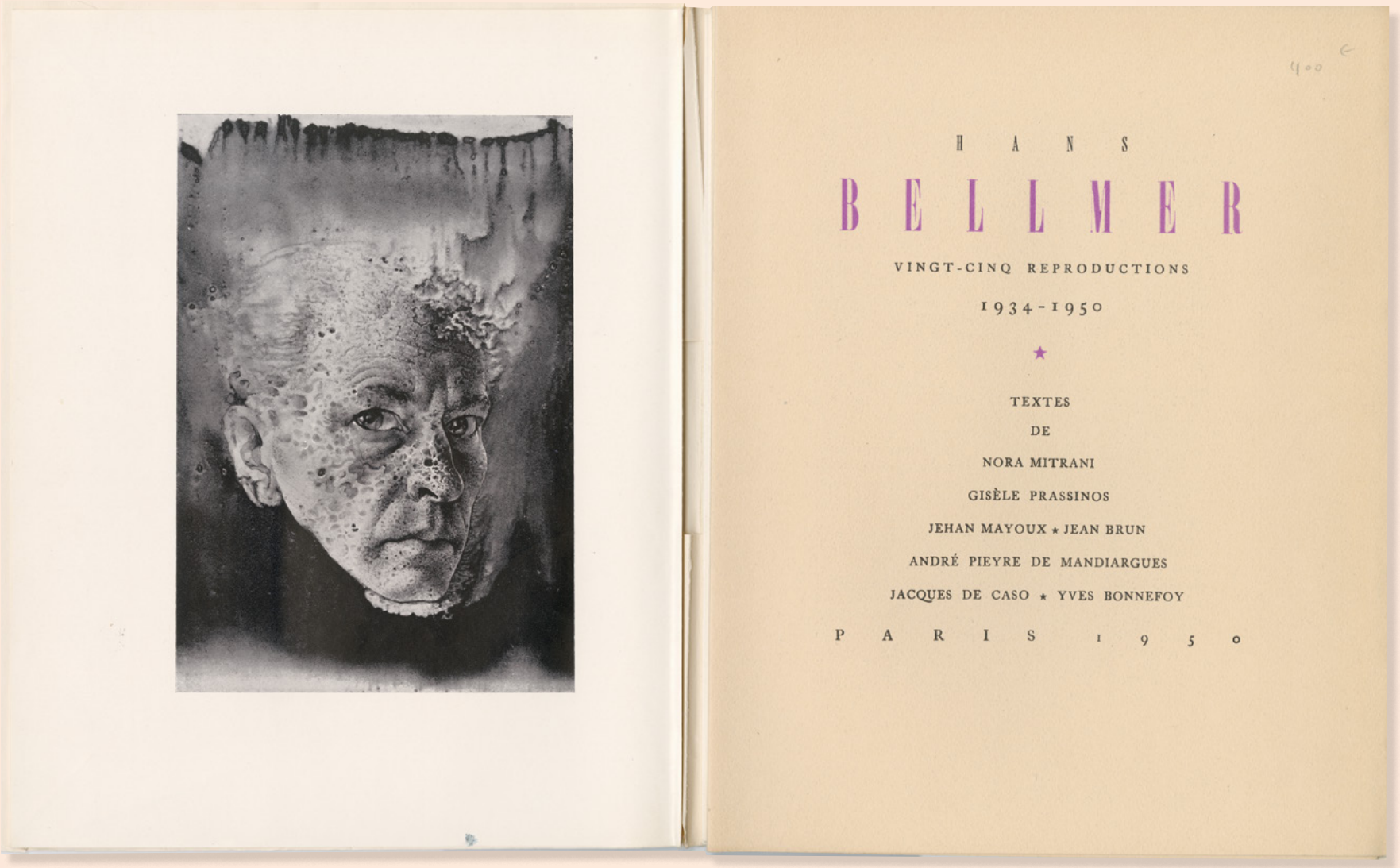


Deadpan Love. Hans Bellmer and Nora Mitrani

Deadpan Love.
Erotic fantasies, with no head spins or tears, are contemptible.
And the moment they cause head spins and scandal, they are suspicious.
Nora Mitrani

The title words and the motto of this article come from the text, which constituted the first in-depth attempt at capturing the conception of Hans Bellmer's art. They were published in 1950 in the book *Hans Bellmer. Vingt cinque reproductions 1934–1950*, released in Paris on the initiative and with the support of Christian D'Orgeix.[1] Defying the thesis about surrealists' misogyny, the collective publication is opened by texts of two women-authors: Nora Mitrani and Gisèle Prassinos. The latter was presented to the Polish audience i.a. by Agnieszka Taborska, who translated her charming surrealist stories i.e. *Face Sadness-brushed*. About the former one, however, Nora Mitrani, and why it was she who wrote a text so important to the perception of Bellmer's work and about the text itself, there is hardly anyone to ask. Few pay attention to the sporadic occurrence of the writer's name, barely mentioned,

1 *Hans Bellmer. Vingt-cinq reproductions 1934–1950*, texts: N. Mitrani, G. Prassinos, J. Mayoux, J. Brun, A.P. de Mandiargues, J. de Caso, Y. Bonnefoy, Paris 1950



HANS BELLMER

Vingt-cinq reproductions..., 1950,

frontispiece and title page with fragm. of 1942 self-portrait

as if in passing, as Hans Bellmer's partner, or his lover, to be exact, while even fewer actually read Alyce Mahon's article, *O Laughter under the Knife. Hans Bellmer and the Body as Anagram*[2], which includes references and quotations from the only Mitrani's monograph, released in France in 1988 titled *Rose au coeur violet*, with the foreword of Julien Gracq, edited by Dominique Rabourdin.[3]

The figure of Nora Mitrani and her selected articles or fragments thereof can be found in the anthology *Surrealist Women* by Penelope Rosemont – an American, participant of the surrealist movement. In her book, the author emphasises the fact that *unlike most twentieth-century cultural and political currents, the Surrealist Movement has always opposed overt as well as de facto segregation along racial, ethnic, or gender lines. From the very first issue of 'La Révolution surréaliste', movement publications have featured writings by women alongside those of their male comrades. Works by women artists were regularly included in surrealist exhibitions. As one perceptive commentator has pointed out, 'No comparable movement outside specifically feminist organizations has had such a high proportion of active women participants'. Moreover, until very recently most of the literature on women surrealists was written by other surrealists, male and female. If these women remain little known to the larger reading public it is because critics and scholars have been shirking their responsibilities.*[4]

To meet my obligations, this text is about Nora Mitrani and her work, as well as about phantom products of Hans Bellmer's imagination inspired by her persona, and their short yet significant relationship, the law of desire incarnate. Beside source literature, it is based on own research connected with my work for Katowice History Museum on the unprecedented in Poland, public collection of the artist's pieces, which consists of several tens of objects[5], including ones directly related to the writer. These are: a unique publication with the first monograph of the maker of *The Doll* and the above-mentioned text – the source of the quote, as well as three prints and a drawing, the both beautiful and symbolic portrait of Nora, which Bellmer carefully made in pencil and gouache – the newest item at Katowice History Museum, 2022.

Who, then, was Nora Mitrani? Why did Bellmer write about her, that she was his *sister of the impossible*? She was born on 29th December 1921 in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, as a daughter of

2 A. Mahon, *Śmiać się pod nożem. Hans Bellmer i ciało jako anagram*, [in:] *Gry Lalki. Hans Bellmer. Katowice 1902 – Paryż 1975*, Gdańsk 1998, pp. 147–166

3 The book is mostly unavailable in Poland, for the broadest account and information about Nora Mitrani see: S. Caron, *Nora Mitrani, surréaliste au si secret visage*, on-line http://melusine-surrealisme.fr/site/astu/Mitrani_SC.pdf

4 P. Rosemont (ed.), *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, London 1998, p. xxx

5 More about the Katowice History Museum collection and Katowice accounts about the artist: N. Kruszyna, *Hans Bellmer w Katowicach czyli prenatalne podziemie surrealisty* (part I), Witkacy! 2/2021 (11) and eadem, *Hans Bellmer w Katowicach czyli Terrain vague* (part II), Witkacy! 1/2022 (12); eadem, *Geneza i zaczątek kolekcji prac Hansa Bellmera w Muzeum Historii Katowic*, [in:] *Katowice jako ośrodek nauki i kultury w XX i XXI wieku. Sesja naukowa. Katowice w rocznicę uzyskania praw miejskich*, Katowice 2018; eadem (ed.), *Bellmer/Visat* [exhibition catalogue], texts: A. Jouffroy, N. Kruszyna, K. Łata-Wrona, A. Taborska, G. Visat, H. Waniek, Katowice 2015

Bellina Gueron and Albert Mitrani. The family was of mixed origin: Spanish, actually Jewish-Sephardic, and Italian. Her younger brother, Michel Mitrani – later a renowned filmmaker, was born in Varna in 1930, before they all moved to Paris. Nora graduated from a modern Secondary School for Girls in Paris named after Hélène Boucher, a famous and talented pilot, who was held as an example to students. Unfortunately, soon after Nora's world was destroyed. During the war, her mother and many relatives were transported and murdered in Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Nora was forced to hide her origin and studied under another name in the Department of Philosophy at Sorbonne. There, whether defiantly or to cover her marks, she was studying 17th- and 18th-century Christian philosophy, and focussed mainly on works by Nicolas Malebranche and Maine de Biran. At the same time, she found herself in the circles of Trotskyists – the anti-Fascist enthusiasts of permanent revolution. Allegedly, she claimed later that all these stages were necessary for her to discover and understand surrealism – the movement, the hallmark of which was defiance and social rebellion, even though expressed in different terms.

Most probably, Mitrani came across the surrealists' circles, and soon Bellmer, towards the end of the war, i.a. visiting the Paris home of her peer – Alain Gheerbrant. The latter, a member of a wealthy family, in 1945 founded the K-éditeur publishing house, which specialised in publications, not always official, of contemporary avant-garde, including works by Benjamin Péret, Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille. It also collaborated with Henri Parisot, a translator, publisher, friend of surrealists and Bellmer himself since the mid-1930s. Bellmer, in turn, was looking for the possibility of publishing i.a. the book he had finished before the war which contained photographs of the second *Doll* and Paul Éluard's texts, inspired by them. His effort was to no avail, however, and the famous *Jeux de la Poupée,* i.e. The Games of the Doll were released only in 1949, in Heinz Berggruen's Éditions Premières publishing house. Before that, Gheerbrant had a wicked idea. He decided to commission Bellmer with making illustrations for the new edition of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*[6], since, as he recalled years later, it was tempting *to establish a dialogue between a papist and a Lutheran based on their shared obsession.* The Nordic and surgical precision of one was made to provide a form for nocturnal and romantic impressions of the other.[7]

Hans Bellmer spent the war period in the south of France, first detained in the German residents' camp in Milles near Aix-en-Provence, and then in the foreign regiments of the French army; eventually released, he collaborated with the French partisans and drifted between households of his friends, living on the pencil portraits of the local bourgeois. In the meantime, he kept studying texts of his interest in the areas of history of science, anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, and even criminology. We

6 Lord Auch (G. Bataille), *Histoire de l'oeil*, Séville, 1940 [K-éditeur, Paris 1947] with six Hans Bellmer's prints

7 A. Gheerbrant, L. Aichelbaum, *K*-éditeur, Le Temps qu'il fait, 1991, p. 18 (all source texts retranslated from the Polish version of Natalia Kruszyna – trans. note)

was developing his conception of art, writing and making new compositions. In spring 1942, in search of stability, he married a native French woman, Alsace refugee. Their relationship was as necessary as it was random, and as fruitful, due to the birth of twins – Béatrice and Doriane, as it was disastrous, because of the complete lack of understanding between the spouses. It was Marcelle Sutter, his second wife, whom the artist called the woman-gendarme. As soon as August 1944, they were declared separated, and in 1946 a long and painful divorce case started. Under such circumstances, meeting a carefully educated and intelligent, anarchising and liberated, and at that beautiful 24 years old woman must have left 43 years old Hans properly impressed.

Nora had a great understanding of surrealism ideas, but also of the friend's art, which is supported by the fact that on the title page of one (?) of the copies of the French edition of *La poupée*, on 5th November 1947 in Carcassonne, Bellmer personally hand-noted her poem, guarded yet painful both in the context of *The Doll*, and the writer's own biography:

I loved my mother – I lost her
I loved a man – I lost him
I had a great friendship – I lost it
Nora Mitrani[8]

Despite their openness to experience, they were both introverts, very discreet ones as well. Thus, we know nothing about the actual beginning nor end of their relationship. We are left with artefacts – photographs, drawings, prints, texts, and scarce records in correspondence. Based on those, we try to retrace the sequence, sense and temperature of the events of this short romance, which is by no means easy, because the threads break and entangle, while information is often contradictory.

At that time, Bellmer's most serious problem, described in his letters to his friends and collaborators, next to the divorce, was his lack of experience in original artistic print, and organisation of technical issues around it. Before, only in 1938, he worked on heliogravures for a poetic book of Georges Hugnet's texts *Les oeillades ciselée en branche*; the medium he chose was laborious and costly, but made use of the possibilities offered by photography. Here, however, the commission required etchings. At first, the artist wanted to experiment with photos and their literalness, proceeding to drawing transformations in order to move toward a sign, symbol or metaphor. He needed models brave enough to impersonate Bataille's shameless and wild character, Simona. In Bellmer's letter to his friend, Toulouse publisher, Pierre Andrieu, dated 15th May 1946, we find the following words: *A young local girl, from a good family, student of philosophy and medicine – I know her only by sight – told me she would pose for my drawings (Story of the Eye). She is pretty*

8 *Collection André S. Labarthe. Littérature – Cinéma*, [auction catalogue] binoche et giquello, 13 May 2022, Paris 2022, p. 40

and elegant.[9] He probably did not mean Nora, who could not have been "local". Nor did she study medicine. Was is at work, after all, where their relationship started? And were they her photos that Hans mentioned in his undated letter to Hugnet: *I'm keeping photos and sketches for a series of prints, which I'm going to push to the extremes*?

In the available editions on the subject (e.g. *Hans Bellmer photographe*[10]), we find information, hard to verify today, that at the turn of 1945 and 1946, there were two sessions of this kind organised with Jean Brun's assistance in Revel. Peter Webb[11], in turn, writes that such sessions were held in Gheerbrant's Paris home in summer 1946, and includes a reproduction of Bellmer's drawing[12], which doubtlessly features naked Nora, seen from behind, lying on her side and glancing a little ironically at the audience from above her buttocks in the foreground. Notwithstanding its immodesty, this drawing is a beautiful classical woman's nude, while photographs associated with the above-mentioned sessions, are a totally different category. The most popular among them are those, which, despite their illusory randomness, and regardless of their evident scopophilic obscenity, are still unsentimentally and precisely composed. From the simplest one, illustrating the first scene of *Story of the Eye*, with breakfast/sitting on a plate of milk, through games with focus of the frame in his compositions of a naked woman's body, contrasted with a metal, technical bicycle from the scene of the protagonists' escape from the castle, to the expressive compositions with a lavatory, referring i.a. to the chapter describing Simona's illness. In the context of the artist's war experiences, what is especially memorable is the equilibristic version of a swastika, built of half-naked bodies, as if exposed in violent desire. In these photographs, the artist did not pursue any individual, personal impression, but rather tried to capture the all-human law of desire or patterns of passion, and so he was not interested in an individual image or portrait. He, therefore, provided for his models' privacy, consistently covering their faces, while the sessions were doubtlessly participated by at least two or three women.

Was Nora one of them? Maybe the only photos that should be associated with her are the little known, as if private, intimate pictures on the beach, when Nora and Hans spent holidays together in summer 1947[13]? These photographs feature the almost abstract, missing the rest of the body, near-spherical buttocks in the foreground. Bellmer left behind a trace, which is important also to our further deliberations: *She had allowed him to take obscene photos of her. The sight of these prints and the coincidental provocation supplied by an overly strong dose of cocaine caused the young woman's buttocks to become the predominant image, which*

9 F. Flahutez, *Bellmer illustrateur de Bataille*, [in:] *Nouvelles de l'estampe* [on-line], 227–228, 2010, http://journals.openedition.org/estampe/1347, p. 9, fn. 16

10 A. Sayag, *Hans Bellmer photographe*, Paris 1983, p. 148

11 P. Webb, R. Short, *Death, Desire & the Doll. The Life and Art of Hans Bellmer*, Chicago 2006, p. 125

12 Ibidem, p. 140

13 A. Sayag, op. cit., p. 116

became increasingly confused with the image of her heavenly face until the most fleeting expressions on that face became identical with the blind smile of the two immense eyes that were the hemispheres of her rectum opening on her anus. This is where his desire carried him exclusively, confusing the masculine and the feminine, and the self and the Other, and then sodomizing the self in the Other. This vision of this rectum-turned-face persisted until it inspired a drawing. The resulting image was masculine in nature (the eyes, the buttocks, and the testicles) and became juxtaposed to the other vision, to the extraversion – the simulation of the vaginal principle – that occurs, we emphasize this, under the same conditions. The masculine and the feminine have become interchangeable images, both gravitating toward their amalgamation in the hermaphrodite.[14]

Other photographs from the beach focus on the vagina. Should this, in turn, be their own version of *Sheela na Gig*, known from northern Spain all the way to Ireland, their own apotropaic anasyrma, driving away evil spirits of men, who had started the recently finished war?

Whatever their reasons, Sue Taylor's following remark seems accurate: *Posing for such sexually explicit photographs probably represented for Mitrani a political act; she defined surrealist scandal in the catalogue for Eros, the Eighth International Surrealist Exhibition (Paris, 1959), as 'the sudden unveiling, for purposes of provocation or defiance, of that which society and conventional morality tolerate only when camouflaged: the so-called shameful parts of the human body, the exploitation of man by man, the existence of torture, but also the too unbearable brilliancy of a person out of step with his environment'.*[15]

Among the head spins, caused by the radical and shameless activities of our protagonists, we sometimes forget that Nora was not a helpless young girl manhandled by a demonic artist, but rather an intelligent, well-educated woman, analytical toward contemporary world. She, herself, was bitterly aware of how such women are perceived, and in one of her last texts, she wrote the words, still accurate today: *What? You'll allow yourself to be pretty too? But of course, look at that mouth, those flamenco dancer's ankles... The president and the ideologue may prove that they are human beings and thus work toward 'destroying the infinite servitude of woman' and arrange it so that the all-knowing, abominable laughter of men freezes on their lips, but only on one condition: that they [women] wear their beauty as a challenge and a scandal, like a knight with his sword, that they endlessly fascinate hearts and senses at the same time as they charm the mind. But alas! In woman, the combination of extreme beauty and intellectual audacity still remains rather exceptional, for on the one hand, the clever man sees to it that the pretty woman cannot become liberated (let her thrive as his luxury slave, his beauty queen, his cover girl), and on the other, that the liberated woman cannot claim to be beautiful.*

14 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or the Anatomy of the Image*, trans. Jon Graham, Dominion Publishing, Vermont 2004, pp. 29–30

15 Actually, Nora's text is not included in the main body of the catalogue of the Eros exhibition, but in the attached lexicon/glossary *Lexique succinct de l'érotisme;* S. Taylor, *Hans Bellmer. The Anatomy of Anxiety*, London 2000, p. 271

The result, since the dawn of time, has been the infinite misfortune of being female, and today it is more so than ever to the extent that the poor things imagine liberation to be within reach, for their hands now hold ballots and checkbooks.[16]

When Nora Mitrani came to the south of France, she would visit in Carcassonne i.a. a friend of surrealists and Bellmer's, poet Joë Bousquet. The men would meet quite often and discuss their shared subjects connected with a man's entanglement with corporality, the essence of desire, and interpenetration of manhood and womanhood. The analysed and mutually inspired their ideas, and even their texts. Mitrani must have immediately found a common language with them. It was the time, when Bellmer was dealing with illustrations for *Story of the Eye*, but also working i.a. on prints for de Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir* and *The 120 Days of Sodom*, never released in this version, however, and only partially used in later publications, e.g. *A Sade* (1961) and *Petit Traité de Morale* (1968).

The collection of Katowice History Museum holds Hans Bellmer's print *L'Oeuf* (The Egg), based on one of the sketches from that series. In it, we find overlapping elements, used in illustrations for Bataille's book: a lying woman's figure with strongly abstracted buttocks and the leg in the foreground, overlain with a man's (?) hand, gently holding an egg/eggs or parting the vulva, and an outline of a woman's silhouette with an eye radiating from the womb. In contrast to his precursor, André Masson, Hans



HANS BELLMER, *L'Oeuf* (The Egg), 1971, dry point, aquatint

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16 P. Rosemont, op. cit., p. 235



HANS BELLMER, *Le Chapeau-mains* (The Hand Hat), 1947, lithograph dedicated to Nora Mitrani in Carcassonne

Bellmer decided to base his interpretation of this transgressive story not on the motif of manhood and phallus in the outside world, but rather on the matters of womanhood and the inside. Here, the protagonist is Simona and the motif of the egg/eye correlated with a seeing vagina or anus – a very important symbol in works of Bataille, Bousquet and Bellmer, since, as mentioned before, it is androgenic and levels a woman with a man.

Their discussions also oscillated around Bellmer's most important theoretic text, being written since the war, i.e. *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious* and it is often Nora who is the reference of these memories: *A woman from Paris had sometimes come to share my isolation in the province as friend, comrade, collaborator and, it seemed to me, sister of the impossible.*[17] There, we also find a fictitious or actual letter to the lover, in which the author suggests making hats out of her body parts during their next rendezvous: a tulip hat of her womb, a lookalike hat, a breast-hat, a hand-hat. Such an idea had appeared before in his 1941 drawing *Chapeaux paranoïaque avec les trois assasins de Lombroso* (*Paranoiac hats with three assassins of Lombroso*). Then, Bellmer drew the first versions of similar hats worn by elegant ladies walking the streets. Later, he worked especially on a form of the hand hat, abstracted from that work, of which he made different colour variations, from sepia to black to green contrasted with intense reddish pink, in various media. In Joë Bousquet's collection there was a version, in which the background of this unusual woman's image is

17 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy*..., op. cit., p. 29

made of lines of the above-mentioned letter. The Katowice History Museum purchased for its collection a colour lithograph *Chapeau-mains*, made back then as an illustration for a catalogue of the exhibition held in Paris at Galerie Maeght by André Breton and Marcel Duchamp *Le Surréalisme en 1947*. The presented charming yet disturbing image of a woman not only resembles the features of the artist's lover, but is dedicated to her. *Pour Nora* – To Nora – Hans wrote in pencil, adding also his name before the signature on the bottom left of the plate, and on the right he noted down the place and the date: *Carcassonne – Paris 1947*.

Nora's face is also visible on several gouaches, designed as illustrations for Charles Baudelaire's *Paradis artificieles*. The book was presented to Hans by his friend, an English writer, Joyce Reeves, when he was sent to the camp in Milles in September 1939. She inspired Bellmer, and the first compositions were already made during the war. In 1948, on the commission from Ms Dambrin-Sans,[18] running a publishing house and bookshop-gallery in Toulouse, the artist made gouaches combined with decal, and transferred them onto copper printing plates. Although Joë Bousquet even managed to write the introduction to the planned book, it was never published due to the publisher's death in a car accident. Nonetheless, the plates were returned to the artist years later, have been preserved in private collections, and sometimes appear on auctions, like the sample copies and individual prints made in the late 1960s in collaboration with Galerie A.F. Petit in Paris. At least three of those present Mitrani's face, and one of them is titled *Nora*. There, within a swirling cloud of decal, Bellmer carefully situated the death's head and several images of his lover in assorted sizes. According to Christian d'Orgeix's account[19] she should be also associated with the composition *L'embryon rouge*, featuring a similar cloud with a woman's figure in profile, holding out a dead (?) newborn by its heels. It could be these emotions in relation to the above-mentioned compositions that were the reference of Bellmer's letter to Jean Brun dated 7th March 1948: *Your friendly letter... does me good but it is immediately destroyed by a parallel letter arrived from Nora, which opens a wound, for Nora herself is only a wound.*[20]

What seems especially important to the further course of this story, is a gouache known under a double title *L'ange déchu* (Fallen Angel) or *Pauvre Ann* (Poor Ann). A print based on this gouache is in the collection of Katowice History Museum. It represents an irregular patch of decal with a seated young woman, her arms and legs spread wide apart, of which hangs a cloak resembling spread angel's wings. She is wearing a tight chequered dress, which seems like the second skin and emphasises the woman's body more than covers it. The profile of the girl's face and her frizzy hair are strikingly similar to Nora's. At her head level, we notice a separate, round, as if random blot of a different colour.

18 F. Flahutez, *Hans Bellmer: l'anagramme et l'estampe au service d'un rêve surréaliste*, [in:] Histoire de l'art, N°52, 2003, p. 90, fn. 4

19 Ibidem, p. 94

20 P. Webb, *Hans Bellmer*, Quartet Books, London–New York 1985, p. 205



HANS BELLMER, *La pauvre Ann* (Poor Ann), 1968, heliogravure based on 1948 decal

The main part of this composition is the hues of ochre and dark brown, while the additional, surprising spot is nude-pink. At a closer inspection, however, it is not a matter of chance, it resembles a rose! A rose, after all, is a known symbol of love, womanhood, virginity, even vagina as such, and it often appears in Bellmer's art (cf. i.a. photos of the first *Doll* or a drawing and later print *Rose ouvert la nuit*).

In 1948, when the first gouaches were made, Nora Mitrani had already written the initial version of her text about Hans Bellmer's art. They wanted to publish it together also in Toulouse, in a book with a hand-drawn sketch (in 10 first, most expensive copies) and reprints (in 40 subsequent ones) or close reproductions of the artist's works (in 500 copies). Mitrani suggested as a title a fragment of a poem by Gérard de Nerval, a poet of French romanticism they both adored. The phrase, famous today, *Rose au coeur violet* (Rose with a Purple Heart), is half a verse of a sonnet *Artemis* from *The Chimeras* cycle. The poem, dedicated to Artemis, the goddess of the night and underground forces, is a dark image of love and death. Bellmer, however, presumably decided that such a title was too pretty, too cute, too florid. During their conversation, one of them had an idea to try and transform this verse into an anagram. Years later, they both recalled that what happened after, was like a fever, their passion of forming new sentences out of these 17 letters was all-consuming. Bellmer even claimed that anagrams

are written best in pairs.[21] The game was joined by Joë Bousquet, who made up another four verses. Thereby, they formed the famous 18-verse anagram, usually attributed to Bellmer only, the meaning of which revolves around sexuality, eroticism, destruction, and death. Even more so, since in French the word *violet*, which stands for a colour or a flower, sounds very similar to *violer*, that is: violate (rape). In the end, the title of the anagram and the title of Nora's article remained unchanged. Hans designed the layout of verses, and later the titles of other texts in the book *Vingt cinque reproductions*, within the space of margins, individually above and below the author's text, in all caps and meaningful pink-violet hue, used nota bene also for Bellmer's surname on the title page.

The Katowice History Museum collection includes a very interesting work made by the artist in two stages, partially back in Berlin in 1936, and then in Carcassonne in 1948. The work is in pencil with small lumen of gouache, and its left (earlier) side of the composition features a naturalist-style meticulously drawn violet flower on a stem, with leaves and buds. On the right side, twelve years later, Bellmer used the same medium and style to add an impressive, realistic portrait of beautiful, charismatic Nora Mitrani. This event might seem random, a result of economising on paper or comparing the woman's beauty to a flower. It is worth, however, recalling Nerval's verse – *Rose au coeur violet*. In French: *violet, genre Viola, famille des Violacées,* in Latin the family is named *violaceae*. Moreover, the common French name for violets is *La pensée*, that is: a thought! A rose, obviously, was not the only flower that reminded Hans of his attractive and intelligent lover.

On the other hand, it is very difficult to account for Mitrani's, merely eight pages long, poetic essay about Hans Bellmer's art.[22] Clearly, it effects from long and in-depth conversations between the writer and the artist, as well as from her empathy for problems contained in his work. The essay, dense with meanings and philosophical references, written in the language of metaphors, excellent images and rhythmical repetitions, is neither easy to translate nor analyse, even though it offers very accurate and widely cited representations. The most popular sentence, quoted in various publications, characterises the artist himself: *this murderer of good conscience lives on his persistent dream of the childhood love, regained by means of the two constantly threatened images: a woman, disturbing and accurate projection of his own narcissism, and a child, Doriane, his little daughter, who once stroke his forehead.*[23]

A proper translation of the entire text into Polish would require experience of a Romanist with poetic gist and knowledge in the areas of philosophy of surrealism, Freudian psychology, and mostly, of Hans Bellmer's art. Aware of my deficits in this matter, and faced with the impossibility of replacement, I will attempt to translate several arbitrarily selected fragments. Such work is made

21 B. Noël, *La langue du corps*, [in:] Les Cahiers Obliques, N° 1, numéro spécial Bellmer, 1975, p. 37

22 N. Mitrani, *Rose au coeur violet*, [in:] *Hans Bellmer. Vingt-cinq reproductions 1934–1950*, op. cit., p. 7–14

23 Ibidem, p. 8



HANS BELLMER, *Portrait of Nora Mitrani with Viola*, 1936–1948, Berlin-Carcassonne, pencil, gouache, paper

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difficult not only by the syntax of original sentences, but also by surrealists' enthusiasm for word play. For instance, Bellmer, and after him Mitrani, sometimes use the phrase *milles filles*, which simply means a thousand girls – yet in French, it sounds a little similar to *milles feuilles* – a thousand flakes, and is the name of a sweet dessert made of puff pastry and delicate vanilla custard cream, known in Poland as *napoleonka* or *kremówka* (cream slice). Then, by default, a thousand girls constituting the one should possess sensitive fragility and delightful sweetness, since Bellmer *is longing for the time to come, when liberated imagination rediscovers bodily impressions and destroys contradiction between the inside and the outside to present the girl with a gift of her one thousand girls, wild, dreamy, impossible.*[24] In the fragment about destroying contradiction between the inside and the outside, presumably also between the mental and the physical, between dream and reality, in turn, we instantly find the fundamental postulate of surrealism, the goal of which was not to come up with fluid clocks, burning giraffes, apple-peel dresses or other *trompe l'oeil*, but a utopian social revolution with the element of liberating people from the Eros taboo!

In her text, Nora accurately characterises Bellmer's passionate yet cold and intellectual pursuit of understanding corporal desire, as she compares the social image of eroticism, both the crude and the modest one, or the one liberated from the disdained, ignored beggar noticed by the artist, who is *suddenly illuminated like never before with the ice-white light, composed of 120 colours of human passions. The same disturbing passion for the truth drives Hans Bellmer's hand and images.* (Needless to say that the number of human passions is not random).

As accurately, she finds the sources of his art: when you are in contact with engineer's geometry and precise tools since your childhood, practising rigour becomes a pleasure. *But if you also love dreaming in the arms of a young woman in a long skirt, also sensuality is either fun or your sweet disposition.*[25] (...) *Then, let the calliper and the triangle serve solely the purposes of passion, and open the brick underground, where the woman is constructed.*[26]

Mitrani describes Bellmer's *method of codependency and transposition*, which feeds on emotional conflicts in order to solve them by means of triple contradiction. Firstly, the contradiction of nature which, according to the artist, is not *a gentle and warm child of desire, but a brutal blind man*, and so he reconstructs it *backwards, following the laws of the wonderfully structured and calculated*. Secondly, the contradiction of geometry, not to be compliant with its principles, but to *use them reasonably and interchangeably to negate the uncertainty of love*. Thirdly, the contradiction of *love itself; seen not as exaltation of improper feeling, but as defensive reflexes, constant temptations to escape*. According to his friend, Bellmer forces love, *by means of tools, a formula, a cold line, to recompose from the provocative simulacrum of 'ready-made object' to the real*

24 Ibidem, p. 7

25 Ibidem, p. 9

26 Ibidem, p. 10

and tangible anatomical image of intimacy, burning to impossibility. Hence, from *The Doll* to *Story of the Eye*. Further, Nora Mitrani claims: *All his pursuits are directed toward explaining, perfecting and expanding this manner of dependency from physiological to mental, and from mental to objective.*[27]

The author also finds a reference between art and the artist's life: *visual solutions might become Bellmer's way of overcoming the tragedy of the sensitive conscience, wounded by social lie and betrayal, which the 'woman–gendarme' brings to love. Such overpowering is a transposition of a mental drama onto the drama of matter, form, and line. The more intense and unbeatable the internal drama, the more it has led the man to the impossibility of life, the more brilliant the visual solution will be. And the more scandalous it will be.*[28]

Mitrani observes that by means of such a process *every object can be made similar to any other, and even more so, on the condition that pleasure will reveal a common character of the two concepts.*[29] A little further, however, she issues a warning, that a human is not only about harmony and delight: *in order to maintain balance, life seems to require a progressive sequence of such solutions, which, at all times, are themselves in danger of a breach open to despair, disgust, and recurrent challenging of all references. A living balance is a shaky one, after all.*[30] The subject of transience, unfortunately often omitted in analyses of Bellmer's art, the writer addresses by referring to the fabulous character of Beauty: *one day, as times goes by, such Toute Belle will become a tree, a flower, or a chair: is the poetic power of metamorphoses rooted anywhere else than in presenting, in extreme brief, this mortal transformation? In order to anticipate and ridicule the horror, we must break through the resistance of rigid forms and anachronistic anxieties, from imagination to gestures, and use every new success to push the impossible to more remote places, into more exciting spheres.*[31] As we know, *The Impossible* is another essential category in Bellmer's art.

Finally, Nora directly quotes Bellmer talking/writing? about the conception of expression as displaced pain (later known from *Little Anatomy...*), great importance of imagination, and his emphasis on surrealists' dear conceptions of chance and intuition, which allow us to actually understand things beyond logic: *the question of the irrational is finally screened from all the confusing speculations, whether aesthetic, moral, mythical, mystic, religious or para-religious ones.*[32] (Bear in mind they were both i.a. signatories of surrealists' manifesto *A la niche les glapisseurs de dieu!* – Get Back Into Your Kennels, You Yelping Dogs of God!).

In Nora's text, we also find a vivid explanation of the abstract conception of imminence of surrealist chance, derived from an image of lovers' common activity on the beach, from a sudden need for playing, which brings about a sense of deep tenderness: *ephemeral yet painful, unnamed tension separated a man and*

27 Ibidem.
28 Ibidem, pp. 12–13
29 Ibidem, p. 12
30 Ibidem, p. 13
31 Ibidem, p. 12
32 Ibidem, p. 11

a woman on a sandy beach. Suddenly, nobody know why, they start digging holes in the sand some distance apart. Soon, their fingers become more eager, and their gestures seem purposeful. The sand below becomes moist and cool; and then, in the long dark tunnel under the sand, their hands meet. And now, with a quiet squeeze of hands, the man and the woman have found each other. Transforming a mental deficit, a shapeless obstacle into an adventure of a child, who would reinvent such an obstacle over and over to fight it; such a game proves to what extent categories of the subjective and the objective can be mutually negated when faced with the third, universal and controllable projection of one's own image, the key solution of agony and painful desire.[33] Here, we find a thought, later expressed by Bellmer: *What is not confirmed by chance has no validity. One would like to think a projection screen exists that extends between the ego and the outside world, upon which the subconscious projects the image of its predominant excitation, but which is only visible to the conscious mind (and objectively communicable) in the case where 'the other side', the outside world, projects the same image on the screen at the same time, and if these two congruent images are superimposed.*[34]

In the end, Nora concludes: *His discoveries on the psycho-physiological level, included in The Games of the Doll and Little Anatomy of Physical Unconscious are also an illumination, a clear explanation of all head spins, and thereby a translation of both social and metaphysical drama of love.*

We do expect, however, that The Doll will organise her wardrobe, furniture, items, world according to the requirements of her body. Therefore, Bellmer's work, regardless of the solutions it offers, remains irritating. Mystery or question wander the faces of some of his goddesses. It might be the disturbing and desperate certainty that love remains perversely hidden, forever incapable of forming a coherent vision of the universe for itself.

But let a scandal come!

Despite all the policies of the world, we will always turn our hopes to people capable of illuminating the drama with brutal light, while presenting us with practical means not of solving it, but of displacing it. Poetry, the one and only, is a pragmatic verification of such truth, so simple, that everyone must reveal it over and over on their own account; there is one world, but correspondences between its layers, multiple.[35]

Before Nora Mitrani's poetic essay was published as an individual book, it was announced in a special bulletin to encourage subscription – to cover the costs. Bellmer sent it to many people, collectors, publishers etc. In his letter to Maurice Nadeau – a writer, critic and publisher, as he recommended Nora's work, he also asked for advice: *I was hoping to publish a small book (bulletin attached), written about Sade and I. It includes a print and two drawings (for Sade). The text is fiery; and I was able to contain its inclination to occasional mysticism and secure myself against any mistake in this direction – and emphasise its revolutionary value. I would like*

33 Ibidem pp. 13–14
34 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., p. 65
35 N. Mitrani, op. cit., p. 14

to publish this book. But material conditions have since become such, that there is no a chance of starting of subscriptions. Could you give me any advice? (publisher etc.?).[36]

One of such bulletins was preserved in the collection of Geneviève and Jean-Paul Kahns put up for auction in 2020. Here, the empty space on print was used by Bellmer as additional place for a passionate, informal letter, addressed probably to his friend, Jean Brun. There could have been another, unpreserved page of this correspondence, on which Hans wrote about his problems with Nora. There is only one emotional fragment left, in which the artist from sentence to sentence grew more agitated and outraged, and words became less and less legible, while the text broke in uncontrollable avalanche of his thoughts and feelings:

All this makes me sick. Nora's treacherousness is beyond imagination. I find only one proper attitude: refuse sleeping with her in her 'available' moments, and: 2) refuse making this book. This refusal, however, should involve her treacherousness, so that she sees, what treacherousness is for once. I will make it take its course till the end – only to say 'no' at the last moment! But to make it more efficient, the book should not stop appearing. I mean: I should have the text ready, to replace hers. In this case, everything goes.

Yesterday, she told me: there was never anything like love between us. Sleeping, which leads to the book.

I am against everything, what is done without love, also love.

I'm wondering: shouldn't we blow up this Nora's brochure? And, to fill the void, immediately make our own? This is feasible! The terms will be the same. What do you think? Life is disgusting, indeed.[37]

The sentence: *I am against everything, what is done without love, also love* – Bellmer even put in a rectangular frame, for emphasis. For complete understanding of his entire outburst, it should be added that in French, as much as in Polish, the words *sleep* (with somebody) and *love* (make love) are equally ambiguous.

His problems regarding his friend and the necessity of breaking up the relationship are also mentioned, though anonymously, in the final version of *Little Anatomy*, published w 1957: *Despite sensible forebodings and an honestly admitted 'cynicism', it is certain that the charm, the dangers, and the colorful complicity of this inconsistent and intermittent liaison had totally bewitched me. There was no reason at all for me to derive happiness from it; to the contrary I had the most serious reasons of self-defense for breaking off this connection.*[38]

According to the previously quoted Nora's conclusions, Bellmer tried to overbear his drama by transposing it onto art, displacing it onto the clash of matter, forms and lines. He made a series of drawings *Dedoublement* – Doubling. Starting from the conception of a union between a man and a woman in a sexual act, from the idea of complete penetration and immersion in the other person, as well as presenting such a situation as wearing the lover's body,

36 A letter from H. Bellmer to Maurice Nadeau 26th February 1948 from Toulouse, [on-line] https://www.librairie-faustroll.com/librairie-en-ligne

37 Auction catalogue DA Pierre Berger et associés 9th October 2020, on-line https://www.pba-auctions.com/en/lot/107761/13143564

38 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy*..., op. cit., p. 62

Bellmer would draw subsequent versions of self-portraits, in which his entire figure, like an enormous phallus, is inside Nora's torso, as if in the skin of a white bear used for photographs. Whereby, in the first drawings, the artist's face expresses pride and power, while in the following ones we read more and more anxiety, fear, and pain. The last version of this composition *Déshabillage* (Undressing) was turned into a bicolour lithograph and published in 1951 in only 47 copies, the 9th of which is included in the collection of Katowice History Museum. The structure of two bodies developed in the drawing was precisely written into an irregular decalc patch, making the impression of internal movement and trembling. Special attention, beside the portraits of both partners, is driven to expressive arms and hands, which seem to contradict one another, dressing and undressing Nora's "skin" at the same time, as if the artist could not decide if he actually wanted to emerge from it. Or as if they were fighting each other as well as their fears and urges. On top of that, there are five arms, most probably to emphasise the irrationality of this vision. It is an incredibly expressive image of melting into another person, and even addiction and inability of quitting the "habit". Such an interpretation is underlined by the complete, extended title of the print: *Se déshabiller, à perpetuité, de l'image de la femme aimée* – To Take off Forever the Image of the Loved Woman.

Indeed, this *inconsistent and intermittent liaison* did not last long, the break-up probably came already in 1949, even though Bellmer finally, after a decade in the south, managed to move



HANS BELLMER, *Déshabillage* (Undressing), 1951, lithograph

☛

back to Paris. Nora Mitrani, however, left to Portugal for a while, where in January 1950 she took part in a conference about surrealism. There, as well, she met a poet, Alexandre O'Neill, one of the founders of the Lisbon Surrealist Movement, with whom she had a short yet intense affair. She also dealt with works by Fernando Pessoa, whose art she popularised on her return to France.

After 1953, Nora established a close relationship with an excellent French writer, Julien Gracq. She is said to have influenced his art as well. At that time, her circles of friends included also Bona and André Pieyre Mandiargues, and Eliza and André Breton, who wrote her a dedication in one of his books: *To my dear Nora Mitrani, who knows, how I love the dark passion of her voice* (...).[39]

Since 1949, Nora also collaborated with all surrealist magazines: *Néon*, *L'Almanach surréaliste du demi-siècle*, *L'Age du cinema*, *Medium*, *Le Soleil noir*, *Le Surrealisme même*, and even *Bief. Jonction surréaliste*. There, she published more than texts, attesting to a wide range of her interests: from Marquise de Sade, through Dior and Marylin Monroe, to the matters of nuclear energy, and even revolution, while her radical appeal, broadcast in BBC London, remains painfully accurate today:

Surrealism ignores the stale wisdom of those who pretend to know how to live. Naturally, we want individual revolt to flourish and to develop into revolution. But if it is a matter of political and social revolution as defined by the Marxists, let us say that it falls far short of what surrealism wants. This type of revolution is not enough, and it will never be enough. All the conquests of the proletariat in recent years, from a higher standard of living to leisure and vacations for all, have been won through reformism, not revolution... This promotion of the masses is in fact a betrayal: class consciousness is replaced by the struggle for security and by bureaucratic types of organized irresponsibility. It is true that there are more and more workers with clean hands and white collars. But what does that change for us, for each human being?... In this mass civilization, humankind has struck a miserable bargain: it has exchanged its independence and the mind's freedom for a higher standard of living and the consumption of 'token appearances'... And even on this level, by the way, there is much more to do and to gain. But for surrealism, such a bargain is pitiful, and no bargain in the world can satisfy us. There is no other choice but solitude, or the company of the few human beings who share our spiritual values.[40]

In the early 1950s, Nora Mitrani started also her collaboration with Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), where she was one of the six women among 35 scientists. She published in the sociological magazine *Les Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, undertaking comprehensive research regarding various technocratic groups in France, she also prepared a doctoral thesis on this subject. Unfortunately, in the late 1950s, she was diagnosed with cancer. Depressed, she confided in her friend: *I wish I could end up like a torrero at the arena, to make my death meaningful, but*

39 S. Caron, op. cit., p. 20

40 N. Mitrani, *In Defense of Surrealism*, [in:] P. Rosemont, *Surrealist Women*, op. cit., p. 294

what is awaiting me, is unbearable.[41] A promising scholar, about whom it was written that she *was gifted with rare versatility and exceptional ability of inquiring into the fundamental problem, she was always interested in,*[42] died prematurely on 22nd March 1961 in Paris, a few months before her 40th birthday.

Nonetheless, her own conviction, most probably shared by Hans Bellmer, included in the text *Rose au coeur violet* seems to have come true: *More intense than a dream is reality, created thanks to a woman led away from the role of sanctuary of usability, toward her rebirth to her own experimental destiny.*[43]

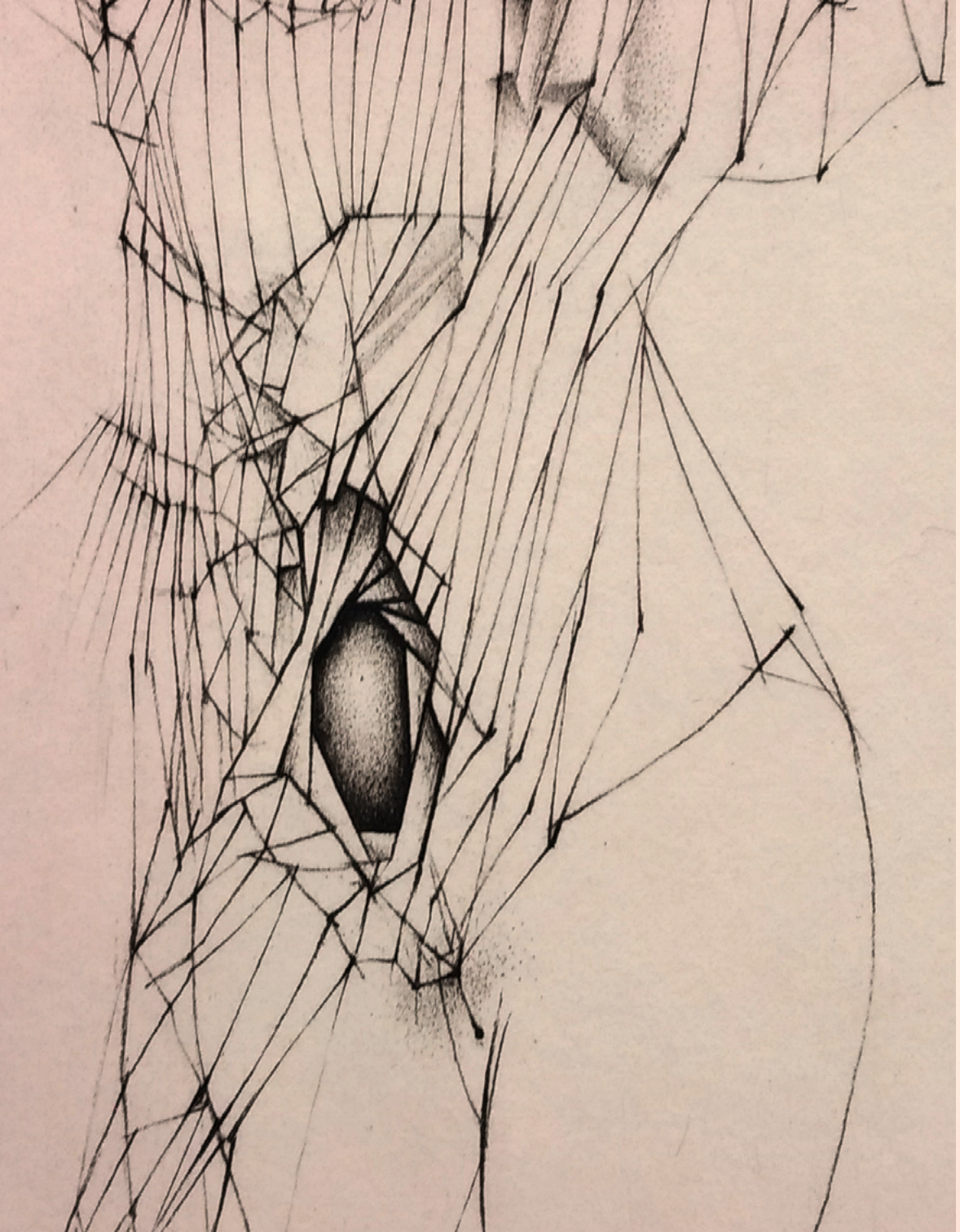
HANS BELLMER, *Bas monde*, 1973, lithograph ☛



41 N. Mitrani, fragment of the letter to Julien Gracq of 13th September 1960, [in:] SURRÉALISME Bibliothèque Julien GRACQ Fonds Henri PARISOT, [auction catalogue of 22 March 2022, on-line www.tessier-sarrou.com]

42 *Notices nécrologiques. Nora Mitrani*, [in:] Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie, nouvelle série, T. 31, 1961, p. 185 [on-line] www.jstor.org/stable/40689143?origin=JSTOR-pdf

43 N. Mitrani, op. cit., p. 10



If a Body Is Like a Sentence… Hans Bellmer's Poses and Proses

The game belongs to the category 'experimental poetry'[1].
Hans Bellmer

1.

So boring!, probably thinks the girl posing at the edge of the chair. The intricate pig tails tucked behind her ears fall symmetrically on her bolt-straight back, her still hands obediently clasp on her lap. Vertical stripes of her dress direct our sight upwards, where, at the atelier door, there already hangs a portrait of another, a little older girl – her hair parted, she is wearing a dress of a different cut, but surely made of the same fabric. Now, she is probably having a great time with her orphanage mates, her hair dishevelled, sweaty dress sticking to her back as it will when she is running all the way to the park and back, over the bridge. The eyes of the pig-tailed girl automatically go to the easel, which supports her portrait, still unfinished; she would like a peek how much longer it will take, but Herr Bellmer has positioned the canvas to face away

1 H. Bellmer, *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint*, [in:] *The Games of the Doll*, Paris 1949, unpaged

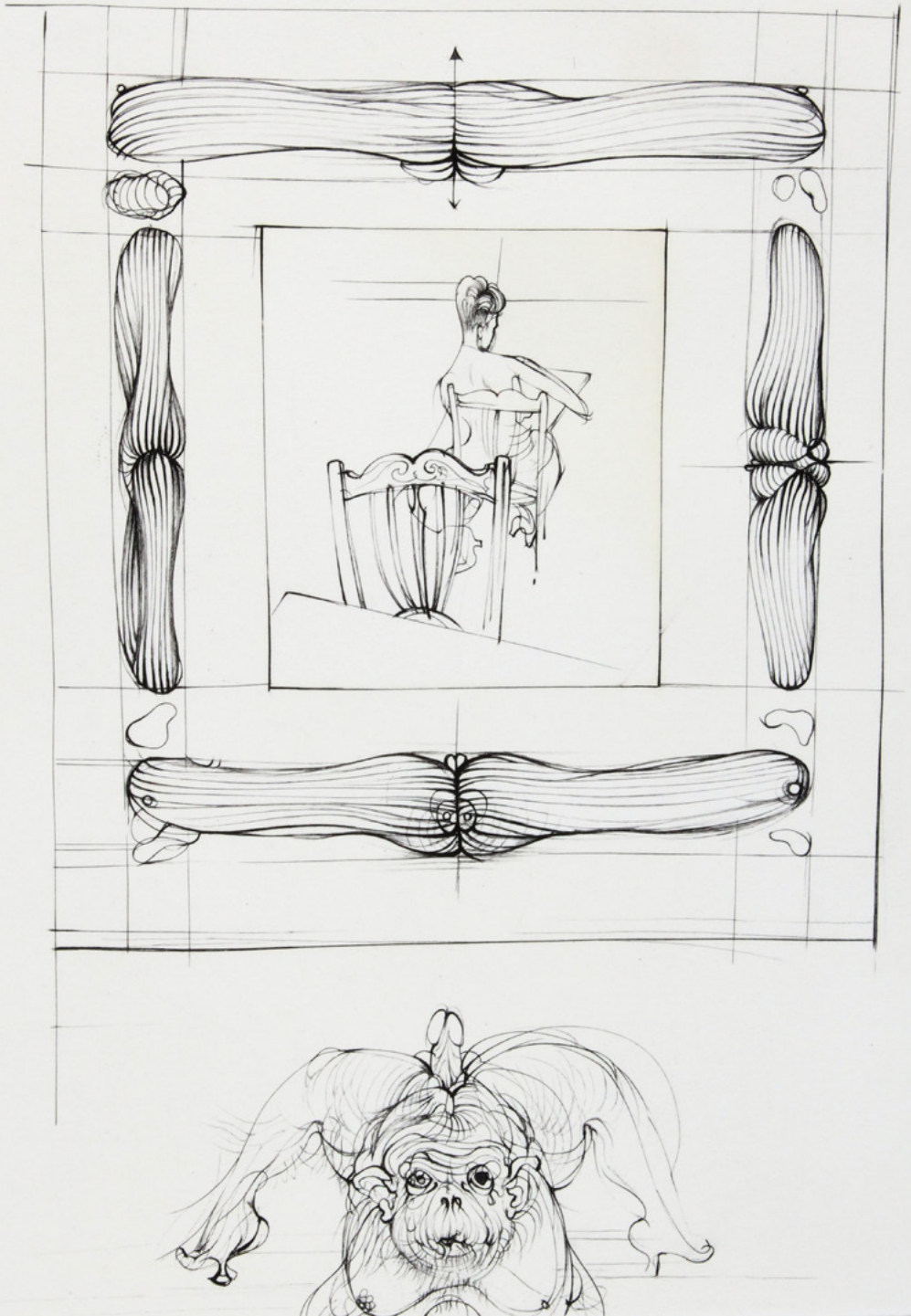
from her. From the way he is eagerly looking at his work, steadily moving the brushes from hand to hand, she can tell there will be no playtime for her today... Have patience, Little One – it seems like there is not much left to do, the canvas already features your head, arms and hands, only the dress is still white, as white as your face with these narrowly pursed lips.

The photograph of Hans Bellmer working on the portrait of a nameless resident of the orphanage, which neighboured his family's summer cottage in Carlsruhe in Opolszczyzna region, documents the process of him painting young and older girls at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s. The works visible in the photo were not preserved, as well as the major part of his pieces from that period; the ones we do know appear to be – as Sue Taylor admits – "modest, straightforward, and sober"[2], void of the erotic dominant and dramatic nature characteristic of Bellmer's later art (as if it were for a reason that the Polish name of Carlsruhe is Pokój – Peace). Also the artist's monographers, who tend to settle for general constatations and pay little to no attention to his early works, are not in agreement on when the photograph was taken and by whom. According to Peter Webb and Robert Short, it must have been made around 1930, to when they also date the reprints in their book: four pencil drawings of fed up and sulky little models[3]; Pierre Dourthe, in turn, claims the photo was taken five years earlier.[4] Nonetheless, the photograph doubtlessly captured what was crucial to Hans Bellmer's imagination – the tension between staticity of posing and dynamic of creative process, between stillness of the body and activity of fancy, between the pose and movement. Thoughts of the posing pig-tailed girl cannot go beyond the atelier – toward her carefreely playing peers. Thoughts of the artist, captured from a suggestive sharp profile, in turn, seem to cut through the intuitive proximity of boredom and stillness – the principle of his game is distance, which can be provided only by the sublime gravity of prose. Living children neither enjoy posing nor can pose. Their permanently scattered thoughts unapologetically resist gravity. The mere living is no fun.

And so, in Peace, must be born *The Doll* – a perfect model, whose "fabulous distance" will turn out (as Bellmer writes in his essay *Memories of The Doll Theme* included in his famous début publication) *could be a necessary component of any super-sweet thing, and deteriorates when it is no longer unattainable.*[5] Apparently, it was *the doll, which lived solely through the thoughts projected onto it, and which despite its unlimited pliancy could be maddeningly stand-offish*, that offered him *the desire and intensity sought in it by the imagination.*[6]

2 S. Taylor, *Hans Bellmer. The Anatomy of Anxiety,* London 2000, p. 29
3 P. Webb, R. Short, *Hans Bellmer,* Quartet Books, London 1985, p. 22
4 See P. Dourthe, *Bellmer. Le principe de perversion*, Paris 1999, p. 24

5 Cf. H. Bellmer, *The Doll,* 1936, p. 40
6 Ibidem



HANS BELLMER,
Body Anagrams,
1973, etching

2. ANAGRAM

(...) *the body is comparable to a sentence*[7] – repeats Hans Bellmer, when he wants to write about what happens to the body in his art. The body like a sentence – this uncomplicated analogy transforms the indivisible organic whole into a syntagma of reversibly interconnected parts. The body-sentence *invites you to disarticulate it, for the purpose of recombining its actual contents through a series of endless anagrams*.[8] The body-sentence combines language and body, image and word, seeing and writing.

We have domesticated the thought about the body as text or text of the body, but Bellmer is interested neither in tissues-fabric nor in inscriptions, nor materiality of characters, nor visions of textual incarnations. The nature of his linguistic-corporal fascination is syntactic in nature, wrapping around the manner of arrangement and rearrangement of morphemes, around what we would call "sentence dissection". Above all, however, Bellmer is fascinated by the possibility of subjecting the body-sentence to anagrammatic operations – transformations by means of rearrangement. He wants to experiment with anagrammatic practices on the body-sentence, so to speak, "bilaterally". Before – with his subsequent partners, Nora Mitrani and Unica Zürn – he dedicates himself to the maniacal production of linguistic anagrams, he would seek for such a form of the body, which could

7 H. Bellmer, *The Anatomy of the Image*, trans. Jon Graham, Dominion Publishing, Vermont 2004, p. 37
8 Ibidem, pp. 37–38



HANS BELLMER, *Femme avalant un serpent*
(Woman Swallowing a Snake), 1972, etching

be experimented with, like a sentence. Therefore, rather than organic, he needs a syntactic form, which – just like with linguistic operations – could be freely transformed by rearrangement of elements. A perfect form of the body-sentence, a perfect incarnated form of the anagram, is the doll. The "games of the doll" might involve much more of the "linguistic game" or the "word play" than expected.

When we apply the prism of anagrammatic operations to the photographed poses of the doll, her disarticulated body, which Bellmer tries to transform by rearranging, shifting and exchanging parts, she will appear to be a visual anagram. Its most capturing quality, however, exposes itself in repetition. Due to the right of series, the potential of subsequent transformations is constantly updated, and each iteration produces a new form and sketches out a new figure, while revealing in photographs of the doll – like in the theoretical concept of the body-sentence – her anagrammatic and metaphoric capabilities. With each permutation, Bellmer creates a new whole in order to – as written by Alyce Mahon – *reveal what is hidden*, and further, *open people's eyes to new realities*.[9]

Bellmer's fascination with anagram in literary form is equally strong. On the pages of his sketches, the artist writes down his deliberations about anagrams, which, in his take, by no means boil down to a rule-based, transparent linguistic game, enabled

9 Cit. after and trans. from A. Mahon, *Śmiać się pod nożem. Hans Bellmer i ciało jako anagram*, [in:] *Gry lalki. Katowice 1902 – Paryż 1975*, Gdańsk 1998, p. 154

by the effort of the mind. On the contrary – they expose their incredible nature balancing on the border between the conscious and the unconscious, the visible and the invisible, and above all: the planned and the random. Bellmer presents his original, nearly surreal theory of anagrams in the foreword to the 1954 book of anagrammatic poems and drawings, Unica Zürn's *Hexen-Texte*: *At a closer look you can see that an anagram emerges from a violent and paradoxical dilemma. It requires the highest possible willpower to provide form, along with intentional exclusion, purposeful shaping due to the counterproductivity of the latter. The effect confirms the belief – in a little bizarre way – that it owes more to the assistance of some 'other' than to the work of consciousness.*[10] Bellmer perceives anagrams as next-to-impossible operations, resulting in magically "multiplied", "multidimensional" linguistic objects, which establish sudden, unexpected, random relationships, looped in incredible chains, in order to make up *a completely new unity of form, meaning and emotion.*[11] Such principles seem to underlie the magical anagrammatic connection between: LEIB, the body, LIEB, love, and BEIL, the axe.[12] Can you imagine a more Bellmer's anagram?

His answer to Konstanty A. Jeleński's question about the role of anagrams in his art, however, is quite unexpected: *The lurid pessimism, in which I live, and which is becoming increasingly black with time, assumes, as counterweight, abundance of real sensory and imaginative miracles. Transfers, transformations, absolute shifts, seemingly impossible, raising shock and astonishment, somehow compensate the bitterness of being forced to live. Departing from the words ROSES AU COEUR VIOLET, and arriving through simple rearrangement at the sentence O, RIRE SOUS LE COUTEAU – this borders on the miraculous!*[13] The wonderful metamorphosis of "the violet-hearted roses" into "the laughter under the knife", just like BEIL-LIEB-LEIB, in this anagrammatic procedure situates both love and the body under the axe. One might add – both the word and the sentence. Bellmer's black anagram – the first figure of his experimental poetry. CIAŁO-ZDANIA – body-sentences. Z DNA CIAŁA – from the bottom of the body.

3.

How many times Hans Bellmer sets a course on *The Doll*! He circles around it, initiates departures and returns, allows approaches and detachments, movement back and forth, treads paths, always takes new steps, tries different ways, both by image and by language. *The Doll*'s course and dis-course – a bizarre movement, shared by the author of her shattering photos and the author of her methodological yet passionate literary descriptions. In his paintings as much as in his words, Bellmer makes *The Doll* freeze in unnatural poses, motionless in forced arrangements,

10 H. Bellmer, *Nachwort*, [in:] U. Zürn, *Hexen-Texte. Zehn Zeichnungen und zehn Anagramm-Texte*, Galerie Springer, Berlin 1954, unpaged

11 Ibidem

12 See ibidem

13 K.A. Jeleński, *Bellmer albo Anatomia Nieświadomości Fizycznej i Miłości*, Gdańsk 2013, p. 19



Hans Bellmer with the first *Doll*, 1934

in which he enchants her mobility and the potentiality of another supervised moves. The language of *The Doll* is the language of figures – drawn in the space of geometric shapes which she assumes in subsequent poses; visual forms, such as modelling in clay, where figure takes its etymological root (Latin *fingere*); forms solidified like gypsum, of which *The Doll* is made; forms mobile like the mechanism of the ball joint, which makes it, what it is; form ephemeral like the memory of a grasp of *The Doll* this and no other way, and above all – forms metamorphic like her shape-shifting body.

Every pose assumed by *The Doll* is also a figure, but the impression of these peculiar figures – both cartoonish and painterly, still and mobile, approachable and metaphoric – in Bellmer's courses and discourses of the doll seems to go far beyond the poses that we admire in her famous photos. Beside them, there are texts, in the literary form of which Bellmer attempts to play the games of *The Doll* again – capturing, posing and figuring her differently, this time by means of language, its figures and tricks, in a firm belief that *the game belongs to the category 'experimental poetry'*.[14] Undoubtedly, traces of similar experimental game of posing can be found both in paintings and in texts, the paths of which seem to be crossing not elsewhere than in figures and poses.

In order to see the connection between text figures and poses of the body, let us refer to Roland Barthes and the notion of

14 H. Bellmer, *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint*, op. cit., unpaged

discourse, which here could be described as the discourse of the doll. His "scenes", "sudden blasts", which *we can recognize, in passing discourse*, (...) *outlined (like a sign) and memorable (like an image or a tale)*,[15] are what we call figures. Although they refer also to words, those cannot be reduced to the role of rhetorical figures. They would rather be described as Barthes writes about his figures in *A Lover's Discourse*: *These fragments of discourse can be called figures. The word is to be understood, not in its rhetorical sense, but rather in its gymnastic or choreographic acceptation* (...); [it] *is not the 'schema,' but, in a much livelier way, the body's gesture caught in action and not contemplated in repose: the body of athletes, orators, statues: what in the straining body can be immobilized*.[16] Choreography of Bellmer's figurative parade situates the body and text in a similar position, following his repeatedly stated belief that "the body is comparable to a sentence". If the modular body of *The Doll* allows for carrying out syntactic operations similar to these conductible on a sentence, figures are their perfectly shared property.

Nonetheless, the "captured body" is still *The Doll*'s body, whose movement will not include the memory of motion and action, as it would in gymnastic or dance figures, it will rather be the memory of the grasp – the trace of operation of the one, who has arranged the body in a bizarre, unnatural pose. On the one hand, Bellmer's discourse *The Doll* will be similar to *A Lover's*

15 R. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard, New York 1978, p. 4

16 Ibidem, pp. 3–4



HANS BELLMER, *La demie poupée*, 1971

Discourse, where [e]*ach figure explodes, vibrates in and of itself like a sound severed from any tune – or is repeated to satiety, like the motif of a hovering music.*[17] On the other hand, the art of *The Doll* in all its creative manifestations will expose the rule of the grasp, which imposes fanciful shapes, arranges unusual figures, and stands behind all these studied poses.

4. ELLIPSE

Its domain is deficit. We sense it painfully, looking at photographs one by one, tracing emptiness in place of legs, spots, where we would expect hands, a crack of omitted neck, a void of the lost head, a gap of the absent torso. From the syntax perspective – the structure is incomplete. From the body perspective – it is mutilated. It exposes the absence of an element in the place where it should be. Still, it is recognisable only in reference to a complete structure, which we know and we could reconstruct, if we wanted. The figure of deficit and negligence. Figuratively responsible for the deficient body-sentence.

Ellipse is similar to a magic trick, a game of disappearance. Like in a circus show of the illusionist, who fearlessly saws through the body of his assistant in the box, only to spectacularly separate the halves, presenting the yawning gap between her head and her feet to the petrified audience. Or, when a juggler's agility makes something vanish before our own eyes. *Until one day the miracle of magic and jugglery arts possessed me entirely. The great magician was surrounded with such splendor and secret knowledge and mastered tricks*[18] – Bellmer intentionally uses such a praise of magic plays to introduce the audience to his world of *The Doll* and as if illusionistic artistic practice, with no regrets of all his *obsessive efforts, when, amid the smell of glue and wet plaster, the essence of all that is impressive would take shape and become a real object to be possessed.*[19] It seems that he feels best in the role of a magician, reigning and dabbling in artistic rarity, capable of conjuring up horror, delight, and shock altogether: watch me snap my fingers and make... your head, neck, hand, leg disappear, your eye roll down the bedding, your breast hang on the tree, and now you have four legs.

It's a girl! – Where are her eyes? – It's a girl! – Where are her breasts?[20] So Paul Éluard starts one of his prose poems, using its dashed construction to emphasise Bellmer's elliptic figures, revolving around absence. There is no doubt that such spectacular ellipses become a tool facilitating Bellmer's visions, which he expresses both in his drawings and photographs of *The Doll*, as well as texts about it. They serve as figurative articulation of *various possibilities of integration and disintegration according to which desire crafts the image of what is desired* by means of elliptic bodies-sentences, fabricated from shocking, misogynistic

17 R. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse...*, op. cit., p. 6

18 Cit. after: S. Taylor, *Hans Bellmer...*, op. cit., p. 52

19 Cit. after: ibidem, p. 32

20 Trans. from P. Éluard, *Mgliste gry lalki*, [in:] *Gry lalki. Hans Bellmer...*, op. cit., unpaged

inter-anatomical dreams.[21] It could be said that these elliptic figures work horizontally as well as vertically, at surface level and at deep level. Every incarnation of the mutilated doll lacks something, the drawings squirm with women, in whose images we futilely search for all body parts, while in texts we happen upon such figures as: *the loveless love of the heartless young girl whose only being is a head and the inner parts of her body.*[22] If the body is comparable to a sentence, the principle of the ellipse allows for cutting out any of its parts, after all. Éluard attempts to capture this surface-level ellipticity in his unanswered questions. *The Doll*'s "deficits" open up also in other places – in inward holes, cracks, and slits, maybe only seemingly erotic. They expose also the deficit inside, which appears to haunt Bellmer more than anything else, when in his embellished and fanciful text description of "young girls" as seen by a boy, amid all the frills, flourishes, and pleads, we find the bare sentence, contrasting with the wavy text: *They were empty inside.*[23] Is it the ruthless power of a male gaze and attempt at dominance? – It sure is. Is it not, at the same time, the projection of the painful narcissistic emptiness from within "self"? Next to Eros, the urge of death? His work, indeed – as written by Julia Kristeva – *can be spotted precisely in the dissociation of form itself, when form is distorted, abstracted, disfigured, hollowed out: ultimate thresholds of inscribable dislocation and jouissance...*[24] Bellmer's hollow experimental elliptic forms seem to be all that at once.

21 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or The Anatomy of the Image*, trans. Jon Graham, Dominion Publishing, Vermont 2004, p. 67
22 Ibidem, p. 37
23 H. Bellmer, *The Doll*, p. 44

5.

In the suggestive beginning of Bellmer's *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint* – the statement *The game belongs to the category 'experimental poetry'* (*Das Spiel gehört zur Gattung Experimental-Poesie*) – attracts attention by its contrastive combination of the near-Arcadian pair "game" and "poetry" with the scientifically-connoted noun "category" and the adjective "experimental". When game "belongs to the category" (*Gattung* also means genre), does it not cease to be game – the domain of the uncategorised and carefree? Not to Bellmer, for whom study and arrangement almost seem like underlying conditions of creation. Little wonder that the only poetry he accepts is "experimental poetry", while his understanding of experiment appears to lock him up in the laboratory rather than swoop him up to the sky on the winged words. After all, to Bellmer experiment is a repetitive procedure, which enables methodological exploration of intriguing issues. Planned and carried out according to the assumed "method" (this word is not random in the second sentence of *Notes*), Bellmer's experiment is not only a tool to discover the laws of sexuality, but also a way to develop perfect and the most adequate practices of its presentation, or else – as Konstanty Kot

24 J. Kristeva, *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia*, Columbia University Press, New York 1989, p. 21

Jeleński would have it – discovering the rules of *visual transcription of mental images, phantasms, and sensations born from desire*.[25]

As it turns out, this ambition seems to be served by the majority of Bellmer's texts; the ones relatively unrelated might be only the two retrospective childlike narratives about growing up, using literary conventions *Bildungs* – and *Künstlerroman*: the suggestive *Father* (*der Vater*) and above-cited *Memories of The Doll Theme* (*Erinnerungen zum Thema Puppe*). The emphasis on experiment and scientification is recognisable as a dominant of the artist's two longest literary works: the "pseudoscientific treatise"[26] *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint* (*Das Kugelgelenk*) and, similar in form, *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or The Anatomy of the Image* (*Petite Anatomie de l'inconscient physique ou l'anatomie de l'image*); it is also an important component of the above-cited foreword to Zürn's *Hexen-Texte* and the laconic, yet methodologically sound, *Striptease*. As stated by Kot, in his texts Bellmer would consistently "study the discipline of the irrational", using "reductions", "generalisations", and "conceptual categories" to discover its "mechanisms".[27] In his seemingly metaphoric pursuits, the artist by no means avoided physics and other sciences, constantly referring to their accomplishments. In *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint* these are as follows: the Cardan joint, the ink pot attributed to Philo of Byzantium, Henry rifle described in Karl May's novel, and Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs* – and each of these devices was demonstrated with Bellmer's technical drawings. Next, the artist presents the results of his own "experiment with the mirror" placed perpendicular to a photo, as well as analyses "the pose of the little girl"[28] printed in his memory. According to the logic of experiment, the "experiment with the mirror" will be repeated some time later in *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious*, in which he will also revisit the interpretation of a specific position of a fed-up child, asking himself once again: *How can one* (...) *describe, without depreciating its value, the physical posture of a little seated girl while she is 'dreaming'? She is leaning forward with her left shoulder raised* (...). *This conceals the instinctive caress of her chin between her armpit and her breast* (...).[29] This time, Bellmer's answer will be much longer, and his process will come even closer to a scientific procedure; when read, another scientistic-style sterilised sentences of *Little Anatomy* give the impression of being written by a scholar, rather than an artist: *The domain to explore would seem to be that of the internal perceptions we consciously or unconsciously have of our physical body, and the migrations away from its predominant center of excitation* (...). *For this reason I suggest we verify the same mechanism in a rather exceptional* (...) *case* (...); *we begin to sense a principle in which the opposition of real and virtual elements appears that can only be a condition of a natural law – a law that still requires more precision.* (...) *This experiment is definitive. A demonstration is*

25 K.A. Jeleński, op. cit., p. 20
26 S. Taylor, op. cit., p. 12
27 K.A. Jeleński, op. cit., pp. 24, 25, 26

28 H. Bellmer, *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint*, [in:] idem, *The Doll*, op. cit., pp. 57, 60
29 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., pp. 7–8

made of an incomplete reality to which its opposing image is given (...)[30] – and so on, *quod erat demonstrandum*. Procedure, reliability, precision – such are modalities of Hans Bellmer's experimental operations.

What about "poetry" in the cluster *Experimental-Poesie*? How would the poetry of Bellmer's texts, as described here, be demonstrated, also in relation to their scientific style? Unless we resist the temptation to seek literariness outside of scientification, we will be unable to discover its function in the artist's work. Drawing attention to the rational inaccessibility and ambiguity of the artist's essay, imposing its rejection by commentators as "unconvincing" and "rationalization" of his art, Taylor suggests: *instead of bracketing 'Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint' into a separate 'scientific' category incompatible with Bellmer's art, why not treat the essay precisely as a poetic creation*, and thereby *open it up, that is, to literary and psychoanalytic interpretations*.[31] In her interpretation, the author takes the latter approach, reading the "troublesome" pseudotreatise as *an allegory of castration anxiety and dread of female sexuality*.[32] What is intriguing, however, is the very way of how *Notes* were written and how they expand the possibilities of our language – which, elsewhere, Bellmer described as outdated, incapable of pleasuring or surprising anymore (*The languages we speak today attained their maturity long ago*.)[33] Although the scientificised style of artistic auto-commentaries is not a singularity in itself (it is still familiar from many Neo-Avant-Garde pursuits), Bellmer's consistent combination of scientificity with "poetry" seems to have plotted its last new path. Inconceivable?

30 Ibidem, pp. 6, 9, 17, 20
31 S. Taylor, op. cit., pp. 110, 111
32 Ibidem, p. 112

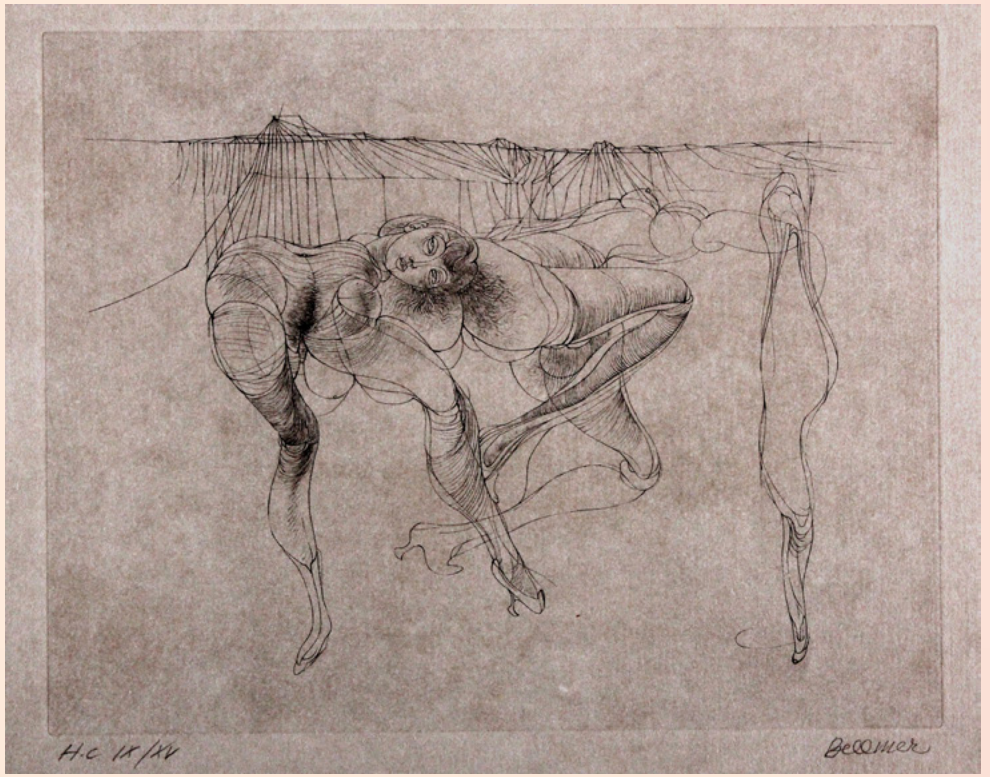
6. CONCEPT

Be it with reservations (*While the terms... hardly lend themselves to being misunderstood... there is... the need to take precautions*[34] – warns the author of *Little Anatomy*, when approaching the unknown), in Bellmer's texts a concept serves mostly to "overlay": scientificity over sex, discourse over passion, grid over the body, but also grid over retina, line over the eye. The effects of overlaying have much in common with estrangement, which formalists accepted as a principle of poetic language – a body throbbing in ecstasy, of which the artist starts speaking with scientific distance and terminological precision, becomes a body estranged, unusual, new. The overlay, characteristic of Bellmer's drawings (a sketch of a penis over the outline of a head, womb over armpit, breast over knee etc.), is also present in his "pseudotreatise" texts, making them into a peculiar genre of "experimental poetry". Concepts included in those (such as: extraversion, structure, projection), even though combined with incompatible language of desire, maintain their properties associated with scientific discourse.

33 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., p. 14
34 Ibidem, p. 24

There, concepts are used mostly to relate: referring to studies, articles and monographs, in which they have occurred, they situate the emerging text on the background of research tradition; they organise argumentation and constitute a privileged element thereof; they take effect by consistency of theories and methodologies, from which they derive and which they represent. At the same time, as emphasised by Mieke Bal, *developing relations with other concepts situated on the same plane*, concepts in themselves do not cease to be "miniature theories", "centres of vibrations", each of them can be seen as "a point of reference, a condensation, an accumulation of its own properties".[35] Extraversion, therefore, remains a personality trait, even though in *Little Anatomy* it *determines the limits of an absolute exhibitionism that's impossible to uproot, which could summarize everything belonging to man's curious desire to see and scandalously reveal the interior – an interior that will always remain hidden and simply sensed.*[36] Although structure maintains the memory of structuralism, in the analysis of another of Bellmer's experiments we can read about *a singular interconnection of the antagonistic 'male-female' principles, which has a shade of the hermaphrodite, but in which the female armchair-plate structure is predominant.*[37] Transference is still Freudian when, combining scientific and literary styles, the artist claims: *It has been clarified that the 'image' is engendered in acute points*

35 M. Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, University of Toronto Press, 2002, pp. 22, 51, 52
36 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., p. 31
37 Ibidem, p. 30



HANS BELLMER, *Les danseuses* (Dancers), 1969, etching

of transition or conflict, which is to say in a particular atmosphere, with a heightened temperature and pressure, which all the evidence shows is located under the constellation of chance.[38]

The double status of concepts in Bellmer's discoursive texts causes them to function similarly to ball joints in *The Doll*, combining the non-combinable and non-obvious, they actually serve as artistic tricks, used to estrange the accessible figures of love discourse. Regardless of substantive assessment of insights presented in Bellmer's "anatomy of desire",[39] it must be admitted that it managed to refresh our outlook on sex, how we speak and think about it. If the body is like a sentence (in his discourse), it is so because its parts behave (in the course) like concepts – they become vibrant centres of meanings.

7.

While Hans Bellmer was developing the French version of the treatise *Das Kugelgelenk*, he introduced a significant change to its initial part.[40] In the German version, written before the war, which starts with the words: *Das Spiel gehört zur Gattung Experimental--Poesie; das Spielzeug könnte auch 'Poesie-Erreger' heissen* – in the very first sentence, separated by semi-colon, the artist situated the toy (*das Spielzeug*) in order to define it as a pathogen of poetry, its germ, a poetrogenic agent; the neologism *Poesie-Erreger* was constructed in imitation of such lexemes as *Grippeerreger* ('flu pathogen') and *Krebserreger* ('carcinogen'). Thereby, the toy would *cause* poetry: the moment it fell into our hands, as if by a touch of a magic wand, it would infect reality with game, transforming us into children at play (the magic wand metaphor, *Wünschelrute*, is used by the artist in one of the following sentences of the text). In the 1946 French version (*Le jeu appartient à la catégorie 'poésie expérimentale'. Si l'on en retient essentiellement la méthode de provocation, le jouet se présentera sous forme d'objet provocateur*), causing becomes provocation – which appears as a change even more significant, since the word is used twice: for a method, and for an object. Such duality was retained by Grażyna Szymczyk-Kluszczyńska in the Polish translation of the initial part of *Notes*, later divided by the artist into verses and under the title *Note au sujet de la jointure à boule*started to function as an individual poetic text: *The game belongs to the category 'experimental poetry'./ If one remembers essentially the game's method/ of provocation,/ the toy/ will present itself in the form/ of a provocative object.*[41] Although we apparently have not departed far (*provocare* means as much as 'cause, produce' after all), it is hard to resist the impression that we have, for once and for all, left the world of child-like belief in the magic powers of play, "a carefree paradise without limits"[42] that we know from

38 Ibidem, p. 63
39 Ibidem, p. 32
40 See S. Taylor, op. cit., p. 98

41 H. Bellmer, *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint*, op. cit., unpaged. All citations from this location come from this source. Cit. after: S. Taylor, *Hans Bellmer...*, op. cit., p. 19
42 See S. Taylor, op. cit., p. 19. This phrase was allegedly used by Bellmer in his letter to Jeleński.

Memories of The Doll Theme and his still innocent portraits of girls made in Peace. Tellingly, the French text is deprived of the magic wand – it probably vanished, broken in half and lost in the fortunes of war... Defined as provocative activity, game had lost its innocence after all.

Nonetheless, Bellmer never resigned from "the toy" – the ideal he described in his *Notes* as "the most worthless/ of rag dolls" and characterised it in a manner resistant to any social and educational obligations. The toy was intended to remain free from "previously assumed" images and goals, from the mimesis of and "prescribed functioning"; instead, she should be characterised by "spontaneity" based on "incessancy/ of her unknown continuities", from "abundance" of new "unpredicted uses and/ possibilities", and finally from susceptibility to change, typical of it as "the personified thing,/ mobile, passive,/ adaptable, and incomplete." Such a flexible and adaptable to the broadest uses doll-toy became Bellmer's ideal research instrument: open to subsequent applications and usable in constantly reiterated experiments. At the same time, however, according to the categorisation initiating *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint*, it remained the object of poetry, allowing the artist, as he wrote in *Memories of The Doll Theme*, to "make everything pretty" – even if the list might seem like a register of removed spells: *Adjust their joints one to the other, arrange childlike poses by using ball joints to their fullest extent, follow very gently the contours of the hollows, taste the pleasure of the curves, wander in the labyrinths of the ears.*[43]

8. ORNAMENT

Pulp writers, magicians, and confectioners had something mysterious and delightfully sweet called nonsense, and meant joy. They cleared resentment, which in my experience was usually combined with some useful goal, and indicated more side roads to imagination[44] – such a praise of mysterious powers held by these, who ornament life by serving impractical goals, was Bellmer's introduction to his *Memories*. Affirmation of joy resulting from nonsense, and with it, curiosity connected with redundant and side practice, plots areas of surprising neighbourhood in his writing. Within, the main routes of methodical treatises unexpectedly branch out into meandering, labyrinth-like, entangled lines of ornaments, while clear, grounded and static concepts establish unsuspected relations with manneristic maze of wavy decorations and embellishments. Side by side, we find symptoms of methodical purposefulness and extreme uselessness, spare economy of discourse and rhetoric excess, accuracy of meanings and panache of nonsense, precision and mannerism, and finally – concept and ornament.

The non-functional ornament has its evident background in Bellmer's art. His great offence against usability is connected,

43 Cit. after: S. Taylor, op. cit., p. 83
44 H. Bellmer, *Memories...*, op. cit., unpaged

on the one hand, with radical rebellion against his father, a pragmatic engineer, dictating his son to do "something useful", and on the other – with radical objection against Nazism (in his imagination, associated with his father). In 1933, Bellmer resigns from any form of professional activity, convinced, that every useful work supports the Hitlerian state.[45] Another form of the same resistance was supposedly his creative work on the weak, deficient, crippled torso of *The Doll*, diametrically opposite to the ideologically proper, healthy and strong "fascistic" bodies.[46]

In the 1934 photographs of *The Doll*, the asceticism of empty rooms, coldness and hardness of wooden surfaces, where the doll was situated, neighbours the decorative ornamented background, the lavishness of pleated fabrics and lace, draped netting, fancy applications next to wavy rose petals. *The Doll*'s naked and rough skin surface, grooved and holed, is tucked, in turn, in soft fabrics and their elaborate patterns. In the literary introduction to *The Doll*, before we are presented with her image as a "device", gradually filled with technical details, we can read descriptions of young girls, demonstrated among "pink sugar curls", "rounding of pleated lace frills", "white pigeons", "knitted embroidery and loose folds".[47] The intensity of ornamental, decorative forms occurs on many occasions, deluding with complex and complicated fancy figures, multiplied in seemingly meaningless series.

45 See K.A. Jeleński, op. cit., p. 8
46 See e.g. H. Foster, *Armor Fou*, October 1991, vol. 56, p. 86
47 H. Bellmer, *Lalka*, op. cit. pp. 44–48

In this specific variation on manneristic decorative style and its flashy excess, Bellmer might give another expression of the *rotten form*[48], along with the frisky need of making forms that are fancy, but their usability and *craftsman's material vanish*[49], replaced by *a mixture of swirls, snail shells, bulging cartilages and body parts*[50] suggestive of the labyrinth construction material of monstrous dream-like landscapes. There is no common language between a useful concept and a useless ornament – they are paranoiac hybrid creations, which cannot be enjoyed like nonsense or a successful application of a method. They are purposefully purposeless.

9.

The beginning of *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint* may be intriguing due to the Bellmer's characteristic of "the ideal toy" conducted from the perspective describable as interpersonal or relational. Although the doll itself is spoken of in the third person, but its most important function has been defined in a close reference to *you*: *to provoke in it,/ here and there,/ passionately, those responses/ to any anticipation: the sudden images of the* YOU. The significance of the used apostrophe is emphasised by Bellmer's decision to write the world YOU in small caps – which are only applied in the text on one other occasion, when he arrives at

48 G.R. Hocke, *Świat jako labirynt. Maniera i mania w sztuce europejskiej w latach 1520–1650 i współcześnie*, Gdańsk 2003, p. 280
49 Ibidem
50 Ibidem, p. 281

JOINTS. Various positions and arrangements assumed by *The Doll* are clearly not the goal in itself – they are meant to provoke, call up the other, summon their presence. Was it not the goal of the 1937–1938 photographs of the so-called second *Doll*, to which Paul Éluard wrote his prose poems? As much as the dominate of the first one –1934 – could be determined as dialectics of parts and the whole, the second *Doll* seems to be defined by excess. The use of the ball joint makes *The Doll* assume poses unattainable to a living model. In such a perfected version, it can not only pose ideally – with endless patience and obedience – but also she is capable of making unprecedented figures, motivated solely with whims of fancy: two pairs of connected legs, two attached torsos, multitude of breasts... *Positions he forces on The Doll astonish even Bellmer himself*, noted Kot Jeleński.[51] Even though they appear to be merely a one-sided male projection, a perverse game of greedy artistic imagination, *provoking* must summon the other – the provoked one: the recipient looking closely at photographs, studying *Notes*, the reader, You. There is no way to provoke oneself, no way to call up ones own *self*; vocalising, I can maybe call myself to order – and this surely is not the case with Hans Bellmer's restless, haunted art.

The YOU summoned in *Notes* is also written into *The Doll*'s photos, provoking both in their strangeness, fancy, mannerism, and in monstrosity, defectiveness, deficiency. Bellmer's photographs will not allow us to pass by: they forbid contemplation, go beyond conventions of aesthetic reception, burst the frames of eroticism, mock the principles of pornography. They want to tease, summon, unnerve – similar to the unexpected poetic apostrophe in scientistic *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint*. By no means in this YOU a one-time thing; the second person singular occurs at the beginning of the treatise again, when Bellmer emphasises that in order to lead *The Doll* past subjectivity and confirm its existence, he must saturate the outside world, in which he embeds it, with what he has received: *it is necessary, besides,/ that this external world,/ the tree, the staircase,/ or the chair,/ suspected of being only perception,/ demonstrate what the me/ has gathered there of the you*. The structure of reality is, therefore, conditional on the experience of the other, whose presence leaves a mark on the way I perceive the world. Objects, listed in the text and visible in subsequent photos, at and on which Bellmer situates his supine model – tree, staircase, chair (one could also add: carpet, bed, sofa) – account for the effect of *The Doll*'s authenticity. At the same time, however, by representing what is familiar, homey, bourgeois, they introduce uncanniness to the world of daily matters. It would seem as if the unexpectedly chatty doll might be encountered – like You – in the park, in the forest, in the staircase.

10. AMPHIBOLIA

In rhetoric, amphibolia is a purposeful syntactic ambiguity, allowing for dual understanding of a sentence. According to Heinrich

51 K.A. Jeleński, *Bellmer albo Anatomia*..., op. cit., p. 9

Lausberg, this figure *is a special kind of 'obscuritas', since it not only leads into the dark, but leaves a choice between two meanings.*[52] A statement *we support the criticism of Bellmer's art* can mean both that the speakers agree with the criticism of bourgeois society expressed by the artist, and that they share the criticism aimed at his art. It appears that amphibolia is one of the more important figures used in his texts, presenting *difficulty in reading* and posing *the problem of interpreting.*[53] We encounter it, for instance, in the initial sentence of one of the love letters included in *Little Anatomy*: *My pretty one, your passion scrupulously breaking you apart in pieces before my eyes, yesterday evening, your confusion could not be anymore victorious* (...).[54] One might think that "confusion" as much as "passion" was "scrupulously breaking apart in pieces" the addressee, even though the continuation seems to consider them both "victorious". Amphibolia is also present in *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint*, when Bellmer writes about "the provocative object": *Whether it occupies any place at all on the nearest or farthest see-saws of the confusion between the animate and the inanimate, it will be a matter of the personified thing* (...). Again, we might feel confused – the expression "of the confusion" might refer both to the place, in which the see-saws were hung (the nearest or the farthest of the confusion between the animate and the inanimate), and to the conjunction "whether" (whether the confusion is between the animate and the inanimate). Amphibolia sways meanings for good, leaving us with ambiguities. Little wonder that it turns out particularly useful when evoking "low" content of sexual or scatological character; as noted by Lausberg: *A special kind of amphibolia* (...) *is obscene ambiguity, which is deliberately created in certain literary genres and in the 'vulgus'*.[55].

Due to its defining ambiguity, amphibolia could present itself as a perfect response to Bellmer's problem we have diagnosed: inaccuracy of semantically-limited words in the rich world of *the internal perceptions we consciously or unconsciously have of our physical body, and the migrations away from its predominant center of excitation.*[56] *It is obvious at first glance* – he writes in *Little Anatomy – that it is quite difficult to adapt our ordinary vocabulary to the world revealed by these perpetually mobile interoceptive diagrams, each traced atop the others and whose simultaneous description has scarcely been cultivated.*[57] Hence the composite – both scientific and poetic – form of Bellmer's treatises and their stylistic peculiarity. Hence, as well, the simultaneous "ambiphilic" style of his drawings, so characteristic of the artist that it could be acknowledged as *differentia specifica* of his art. *Drawing allows Bellmer to gift a creature many poses simultaneously. The Doll he would have to bestow with them individually* – notices Alain Jouffroy, indicating the 1939–1941 work *A Thousand Girls*, presenting

52 H. Lausberg et.al., *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*, Brill, 1997, p. 466
53 S. Taylor, op. cit., p. 112
54 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., p. 42
55 H. Lausberg, op. cit., p. 466
56 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., p. 6
57 Ibidem

a woman composed of a monstrous agglomerate of women's bodies; a true erotic Arcimboldo a real Arcimboldo would never think of.[58] As a matter of fact, Bellmer-mannerist is not only an enthusiast of ornament, but also a perverse continuator of Arcimboldo's grotesque, whose line mysteriously doubles and even multiplies meanings of his drawn figures – and the expression of memorable drawings composed of them. Jouffroy lists as follows: '*The Hand Hat' (1946), with hair turned into fingers, 'Cephalopod Reversible' (1950), whose head replaces 'The Doll's' stomach ball, and the unusual 'Articulated Hands', in which small round stomachs almost lay over finger joints. (...) In 1952 'Drawing on the Black Background' in the hollows of the open body we recognise overlaying pair of ears in place of a woman's love instrument.*[59] If the body is like a sentence, then – like in amphibolia – its parts start playing a double role, turn into another, spark with multiplicity. Such manneristic imaging offers Bellmer-draughtsman unlimited possibilities of multiplying desire, which he consistently pursued by taking subsequent photographs of the permanently deficient *Doll*, posing in front of his lens – and which he laboriously attempted to describe in his hybrid texts, struggling with the resistance of words and rigidity of syntax. It is also this effort that makes Bellmer's drawings speak more about desire than any other.

Etymologically, amphibolia is "hitting on both ends". Bellmer's images and texts affect us with double excess: hitting the eye and

58 A. Jouffroy, *Hans Bellmer,* [in:] *Gry lalki. Hans Bellmer...*, op. cit., p. 112
59 Ibidem, p. 113



HANS BELLMER, *Deux personnages à l'armoire*, 1969, etching

the mind, making a claim the senses, adding on dreams, multiplying poses.

11.

In the beginning was the ball. By no means was it the ball referring to a classical ideas of perfection and symbolising the completeness of a geometric figure, but "the glass marble" turned "in disrepute" in the fingers of a boy, to whom the fascinating world of the "young maidens" he observed, was inaccessible.[60] *But in fact, turning away from the baroque confections, one saw that a single colored-glass marble sufficed to stretch the imagination towards something clearly unsettling*[61] – Bellmer wrote in *Memories of The Doll Theme*, directing us not towards ideal smooth spherical surfaces, but toward the "unsettling" one. The coloured marble *offered a view of its interior that allowed one to observe the frozen ecstasy of its spirals. It was riveting. Thoughts were enlivened by its tensions. The sphere took on supernatural powers until it floated transparently through the room.*[62] Bellmer's marble – "turning away from the baroque confections" – is ostentatiously manneristic: we look inside to find the "mysterious and troubling"[63], "riveting" and "supernatural"[64], the place, where swelling internal tensions freeze in the ecstasy in the form of a spiral, where the "hieroglyphicity of being is forced into objects", and *figura serpentinata releases the static form. Space is stretched by the axes of depth. Peace and balance are neglected.*[65] They are replaced – once again – by mannerism and mania, complication and intricate movement, simultaneous excess and deficit. With the marble fast-gliding in the room, the world begins to "float in the air".[66] A true magic trick, indeed.

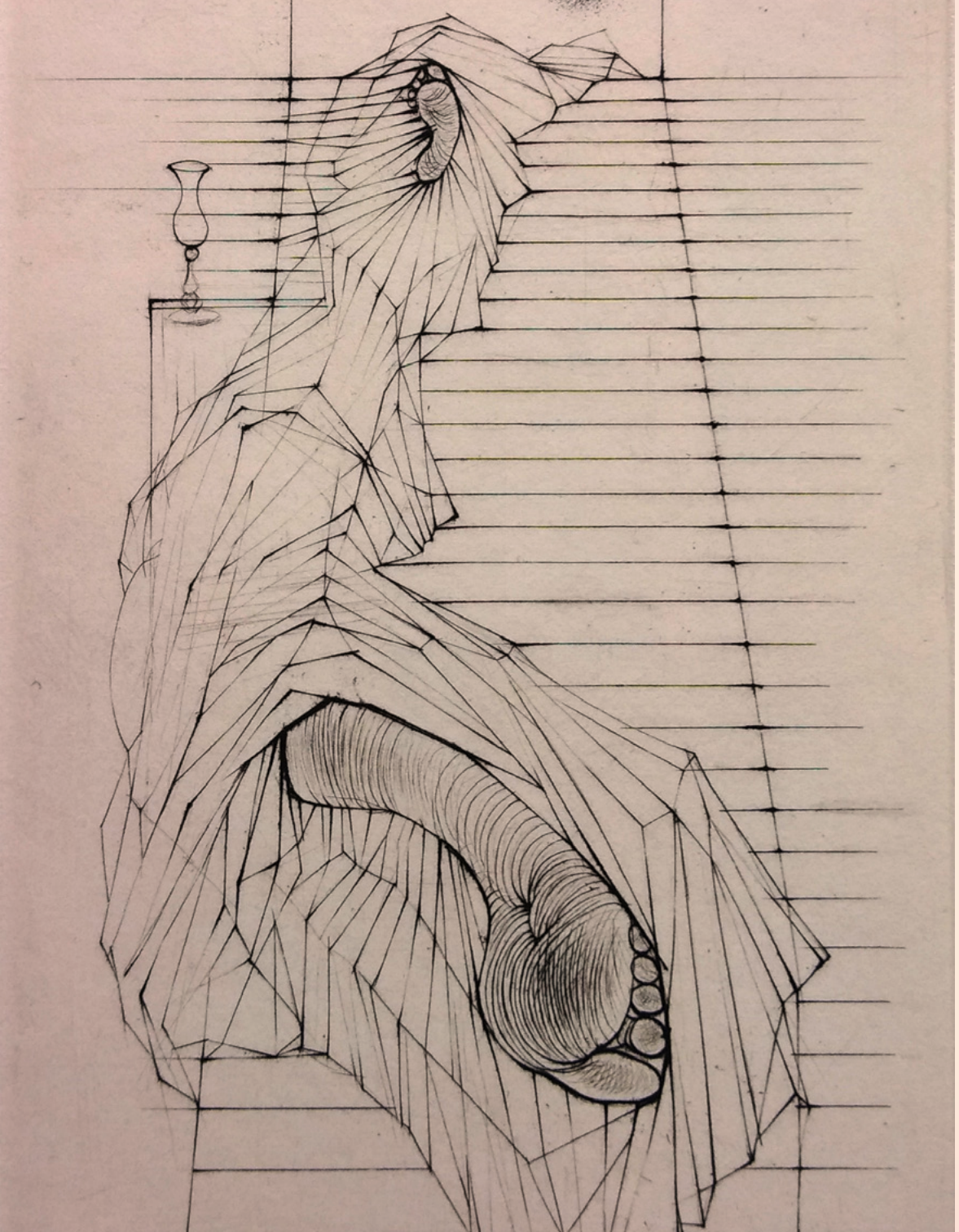
Is it magic art – or more like the conjurer's arts? Balls and juggling are much closer, at least etymologically, to a conjurer than to a magician. The juggler and conjurer derive from the German word *gaukler*, which, in turn, has much in common with Romanic *jongleur* (French) and *juglar* (Spanish). The old Polish skill of "kuglowanie" (swindling) probably relates the conjurer with all games involving balls (German *Kugel* – ball)[67], from bowling to gambling, hazardous and suspicious. Could there be a conjurer better at juggling than Hans Bellmer, not only swindling like any artist and playing tricks, but also fascinated with balls and playing especially risky and unsavoury games? Little wonder that – as he remembers – *The Doll* was born on the day, when he was "totally taken over by the miracle of magic – the conjurer's arts."[68]

60 S. Taylor, *Hans Bellmer...*, op. cit., p. 28
61 Ibidem, p. 40
62 Ibidem
63 G.R. Hocke, op. cit., p. 41
64 S. Taylor, *Hans Bellmer...*, op. cit., p. 28
65 G.R. Hocke, op. cit., p. 41
66 Ibidem
67 See A. Bańkowski, *Etymologiczny Słownik Języka Polskiego*, v. 1, PWN, Warszawa 2000, p. 847
68 Ibidem, p. 43

From this moment on, however, Bellmer's conjurer's tricks, his texts and artistic practices, including *The Doll*, have been departing from wonderland. Although they never abandon it entirely, they more and more move toward *techne*. Still, also in the engineering dimension, *The Doll* is unquestionably ruled by a marble, or maybe the ball – the idea and form of the "ball joint", which gifts the doll with desirable mobility. The ball joint combines the mechanism of a device, a toy, and a prop – a magic trick, game, and scientific engineering. *Kugelgelenk* is a partially magical and partially technical keyword to Bellmer's art, in which Sue Taylor sees the reflection of dread of female sexuality and castration anxiety[69], thereby unlocking one more anagrammatic game. After all, *Kugelgelenk* includes *Kugel*, and *Kegel*, and the ball, and balls, female and male, joined at the joint. *Thus the role/ of the provocative object/ becomes clear. Whether it occupies any place/ at all/ (...)/ it will be a matter in the end – within the quite broad limits where the principle of the doll or the articulated object seems to fit these requirements – of the mechanical factor of its mobility, of the* JOINT.[70] In *Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint*, the JOINT is the very thing that – by means of a typographic "trick" of small caps, bringing the two words together in the text – provocatively summons YOU.

You are also called up by all Hans Bellmer's provocative poses and experimental figures. If the body is like a sentence, then its parts are ruled by figures: anagram disassembles and reassembles, ellipse deducts, concept privileges, ornament attires in delight, amphibolia doubles, leaving us with obscene ambiguity. If the body is like a sentence, its syntax is ruled by the joint. And the ball.

69 S. Taylor, op. cit., p. 112
70 Ibidem



Anti-Dolls as Abjects. Bellmer's Theory of the Physical Unconscious and Painful Art of Anagramming Women's Bodies

Just as the seeds of desire will come before the creation, the hunger will occur before the self, and the self before the other – the narcissistic experience will feed the image the self (I) has of the other (you).
A man self-infatuated with a woman rarely despairs of his ability to polish the leaden mirror the woman places before his self-exultation in which she too may view her own exultation. For her to be truly provided with a tongue, two hands, four breasts, a thousand fingers, it has to be clearly understood that such a multiplication must first be experienced within the physical organism of the person looking, and that she belongs to his memory.
Hans Bellmer[1]

1.

Hans Bellmer belongs to a group of these contemporary artists, in whose art we can find a number of affinities with Freud's theory. They are connected with the crucial meaning that the founder of

1 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or the Anatomy of the Image*, trans. Jon Graham, Dominion Press 2004, p. 23

psychoanalysis assigned to dreams as such phenomena within human psyche, whose form, absurd as regards images and language, indicates basic urges of the dreaming subject, which usually remain repressed. This aspect of Freud's theory inspired – as we know – surrealists as well, who referred to it directly in their programme statements. Also not insignificant to Bellmer's art was Freud's new approach to human body, especially his conception of sexual difference and indication of polymorphic nature of sexual urges, which can be fixated on various types of objects, and easily combine with death drive.

In the case of the artist, born in Katowice in 1902, attention is drawn mainly to the way in which he engages in a discussion with the founder of psychoanalysis to draft his own conception of the "physical unconscious", treating it as a starting point toward creating his *Doll*'s installations, drawings, and gouaches. In this conception, we can find a transformation and certain type of "extension" of the Freudian concept of the unconscious. According to the latter, the unconscious is composed of repressed (and primarily repressed) instinctual representatives, which in indirect and camouflaged manner resurface in dreams, slips and symptoms. This usually manifests in bizarre, sometimes absurd, forms of relations between elements during such phenomena. According to Bellmer, in turn, there also occur unconscious experiences of the body, in which relations between its individual parts do not coincide with its anatomical structure. At times, a subject attributes them with capabilities, which from the point of view of knowledge about properties of particular organs of the body and common sense, seem absurd (e.g. seeing with one's fingers). Nonetheless, such experience of the subject's "physical unconscious" also reveals some truth about their attitude toward their own body, of which they remain completely unaware on the level of consciousness. Bellmer presents the example of a seated little girl's pose, while: *she is 'dreaming'. She is leaning forward with her left shoulder raised and her arm casually stretched out on the table. This conceals the instinctive caress of her chin between her armpit and her breast* (...).[2]

The artist suggests that this characteristic pose of the girl is connected with an unspecified dream of some award, hopes for experiencing someone's feeling with a sexual subtext. Since such dreams are socially controlled by prohibitions and treated as reprehensible, in the girl's experience of the body there occurred the unconscious "amputation" of her womb and leg. As a result, the hope for pleasure is assumed by the above-mentioned arrangement of the arm and hand. The effect is a peculiar overlay of these two experiences of the body in the girl's unconscious; stimulants connected with her womb and leg are transferred to her arm and hand. In the girl's psyche, therefore, occurs a specific configuration composed of her body parts, in which their mutual relations appear much different from reality.

2 Ibidem, pp. 7–8



HANS BELLMER, *Anatomie del'image* (Anatomy of Image) 1967

Drawing 1[3]

Bellmer arrives at the conclusion that if the absurd dream world, discovered by Freud, became a source of artistic inspiration to surrealists, then such as source could be also the above-described manner of experiencing the "physical unconscious" by the subject, in which relations between individual parts of the body are established while ignoring its anatomical structure. These two ways of experiencing the unconscious and drawing consequences to understanding the act of artistic creation are closely related and in a certain way mutually complementary.

While the specific world of dreams could have been artistically presented by surrealists in the medium of language and image, Bellmer's representation of choice for experience of the "physical unconscious" was dolls' "bodies", treated as prototypes/incarnations of women's bodies. It was also a medium of a specific type, already associated with particular perceptions inherited from cultural tradition. It is dolls, after all, the manner they are dressed, how they bodies are formed, and what appearance is given to their faces, that provide meaningful expression for common ideas about the "ideal" of womanhood/girlhood, brought down to its basic determinants. The world of dolls, therefore, in a form that it assumed in the existing European tradition, served Bellmer as a useful negative point of reference, against which he could – in a manner as subversive as surrealists did – create his "own"

3 Ibidem, p. 7

anti-dolls, as a violent breach of conventions and patterns, thus far typically applied to making or mass-production of dolls.

All that was enabled by his conception of the "physical unconscious", in which he indicated experience of the body ignoring its anatomical structure, as of yet completely neglected or treated as marginal and even pathological. Referring to them, he could conduct his own artistic "psychoanalysis" of the woman's body, exploring endless possibilities of creating atypical relations between its parts and organs. Such an endeavour could be carried out especially with the "bodies" of dolls, whose parts he was able to easily reposition and deform. Thereby, the unconscious experiences of the body, described in *Little Anatomy* on the example of how they take course in human psyche, found their expressive "material" incarnation in his anti-dolls. It was in the dolls' "bodies" that he recognised the distinctive material, similarly to other artists, who choose words, paint on canvas or stone to be creatively processed and turned into their opposites. His elaborate procedures transformed dolls into anti-dolls.

As much as his childhood toys, boxed and sent by his mother in the 1930s – I will refer to that later – were recognised as embodiment of all his fantasies they had once evoked, now, by tuning into women's psyche, he started projecting his fantasies onto the anti-dolls of his making, materialising and constructing them on their "bodies". Since the starting point of these fantasies, in turn, was his conception of the "physical unconscious", assuming that in human psyche occur experiences of the body defying



HANS BELLMER, *Body Anagrams*, 1973

its anatomical structure, he was encouraged to subject the dolls' "bodies" to increasingly fancy deformations, multiplying their parts, mutilating them, replacing their missing parts with metal and wooden prosthetics etc. As a result, model "pretty things" of mass culture, in his studio turned into repulsive **abjects**, defying the commonly accepted ideals of woman's beauty.

Therefore, these once scandalising works of his artistic imagination in which he violated and parodied the existing rules of making/manufacturing dolls, here are called **anti-dolls**. Based on the experience of the "physical unconscious", Bellmer used their "bodies" to play an elaborate artistic game, by his own rules. This game, founded on unconscious experience of one's own body and the other's body by the subject, allows him to fully indulge his fantasies. He creates peculiar configurations of women's/dolls' bodies as a free variation on the attainable relations between their elements.

2.

The second theoretical reference point of Bellmer's creative operations on the anti-dolls' "bodies" is the anagram "method" he derived from poetic tradition. It is a method of writing poems based on a characteristic word play, in which a word or expression is first noted down, and then another word or expression, made of the same letters in a different order, is added. Bellmer presents i.a. such classical examples of anagrams known from literary tradition:



HANS BELLMER, *The Doll*

L'AME DES UNS JAMAIS N'USE DE MAL
Victor Hugo

EIN LEDERGURT TRUG REDEL NIE
Anonymous[4]

Although each of these anagrams consists of words actually present in French and German, and their phrasing is grammatically correct, the resulting sentences seem to have a completely abstract meaning. The first anagram translates into English as: "The soul of some are never worn away by evil", and the other: "Redel never wore a leather belt". If these sentences were used in a broader context, they would presumably have some valid meaning, but when read solely on their own, their expression seems bizarre, to say the least. In this case, however, what is important is that as a previously mentioned word play of symmetrical reversal of letter order, these anagrams make up grammatically correct sentences.[5] Another important aspect is that in such automatic word structures *seek less to communicate something than to experience the pleasure of their own birth, to give free play to an instinctive impulse and to 'create thought in the mouth' (Tristan Tzara)*.[6]

4 Ibidem, p. 16
5 Even though in the word Redel in the second sentence Bellmer searches for an allusion to redlich, i.e. honest, and to Radel, i.e. a small bendable wheel, but his interpretation seems far-fetched. Cf. ibidem, p. 16
6 Ibidem, pp. 14–15

Thus, anagram-makers do not seek to express a particular sense and communicate it to others, but to play with possibilities of saying something by appropriate sequence of letters. All it takes is reverse or change the order of letters in a given word and we obtain a word of another meaning. This is the basis of the linguistically distinctive character of *the predilection for reversibility that is present in the origin of words and confers upon them their vibrant ambiguity*.[7]

Based on this art, it can be expressly demonstrated that meaning is not fixed to the sequence of letters of a particular word, but rather the effect of the play of differences between various sequences, to which given meanings are assigned arbitrarily, as if *ex post*. In other words, anagram is a pure game of differences in the language and therefore can serve to demonstrate how words come to being before they are attributed with sense, which is secondary. By this logic, the latter, i.e. thoughts – as announced by Tzara's beautiful metaphor – are born "in the mouth", in the language as it is spoken, rather than in the head, in thought intentions that precede the language.

The specific character of this linguistic game "in the mouth" relies upon its being pure play. As such, it is utterly motiveless, oriented solely on enjoying itself. It is a pure play of simply reversing the order of letters in a given word, and thereby revealing a completely new word of a different meaning. Whereby, it is not entirely clear if the speaker had the other word/meaning in their

7 Ibidem, p. 14

unconscious mind, while uttering the first one, or the connection between the two is random.

Several dozen years earlier, the art of anagram was attributed with a similarly crucial meaning to revealing a little of the way the language is born by the founder of structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure. Interestingly, his notes on the subject were published by Jean Starobinski only several dozen years after his death.[8] It is worth emphasising, however, that Bellmer could not have been familiar with said notes, because his fascination with the art of anagram was inspired by a Greek poet, Nora Mitrani, with whom he had a relationship some time after the war. His *Little Anatomy*, in turn, was released in 1957, that is seven years before publication of Starobinski's work.[9]

Moreover, he was interested in the poetic art of anagram mainly as a certain "method" or technique, by means of which he could create ever new forms of his anti-dolls, elaborately rearranging their body parts. Further in his essay, this act of creation is presented as the effect of contraposing the division of body parts and their multiplication, wherefore: *the leg, solitarily perceived and appropriated by memory, to begin triumphantly living its own life and dividing itself freely, if only for the purpose of borrowing from symmetry the illusion that justifies its means to exist. It is free to cling to a head, to sit down, cephalopod-like, on her divided breasts by stiffening the back that forms their thighs thus creating an arched bifurcation of the double bridge leading from the mouth to the heels.*[10]

Similarly to anagram, then, words are treated as independent wholes composed of subsequent letters in particular order, and this order is changed to form new words, establishing new, bizarre relations between these words at the same time; the same "method" applied to a woman's body allows, in the area of imagination, to treat the "leg" (but also any other part of the body) as "separate" and establish its strange, "direct" relation with the head while ignoring the breasts, torso and hands. Thereby, the "anagrammed" woman's body in drawings is capable of forming unlikely configurations consisting of curiously connected parts, bypassing the basic principles of their anatomical structure.[11]

This way, in the process of creating the anti-dolls' bodies or drawing them on a sheet of paper in the form of bizarre women "cephalopods", the Truth of such a body is tested as a specific experience/reception of its anatomy in imagination, and creating fantastic configurations.

8 J. Starobinski, *Les mots sous les mots. Les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure,* Paris 1971. It should be indicated that fragments of these notes had been published several years before [in:] J. Starobinski, *Les anagrammes de F. de Saussure, textes inédits*, Mercure de France 1964, no. 1204, pp. 243–262.

9 An interesting article about Starobinski's publication was written in Poland by A. Dziadek, *Anagramy Ferdynanda de Saussure'a – historia pewnej rewolucji*, *Teksty Drugie* 2001, 6, pp. 109–125

10 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., p. 36

11 The word "anagrammed" is a neologism I have proposed. It ideally reflects the way of Bellmer's artistic operations on women's "bodies" of the anti-dolls and such bodies in drawings.



HANS BELLMER, *Anatomie del'image* (Anatomy of Image), 1967

Drawings 2[12]

Drawing 3[13]

At the same time – like in the above-mentioned example of the dreaming girl – the women cephalopods presented in drawings refer to how women with strong libido experience their bodies – or how they are perceived by men, reduced to the role of sexual objects. This is suggested by the following Bellmer's commentary: *No one will be able to painlessly disengage from this synthesis of a hurtful Eve, suffering from her own impossible formulation, a formulation of the loveless love of the heartless young girl whose only being is a head and the inner parts of her body.*[14]

"A hurtful Eve", who suffers, is also "the heartless young girl", incapable of real love, which she brings down to a mere "formulation" of sexuality. She is, therefore, a "cephalopod", as she only appreciates her head and "inner parts of her body". The art of anagram, transposed onto how she experiences the body, allows for presenting it in this very manner, as reduced practically to these parts: *But even before being engendered by subtraction and division, she is produced by several intermingled methods. One of these is what mathematicians call 'permutation.' In order to give a clear and precise picture of this, we will say: the body is comparable to a sentence that invites you to disarticulate it, for the purpose of recombining its actual contents through a series of endless anagrams.*

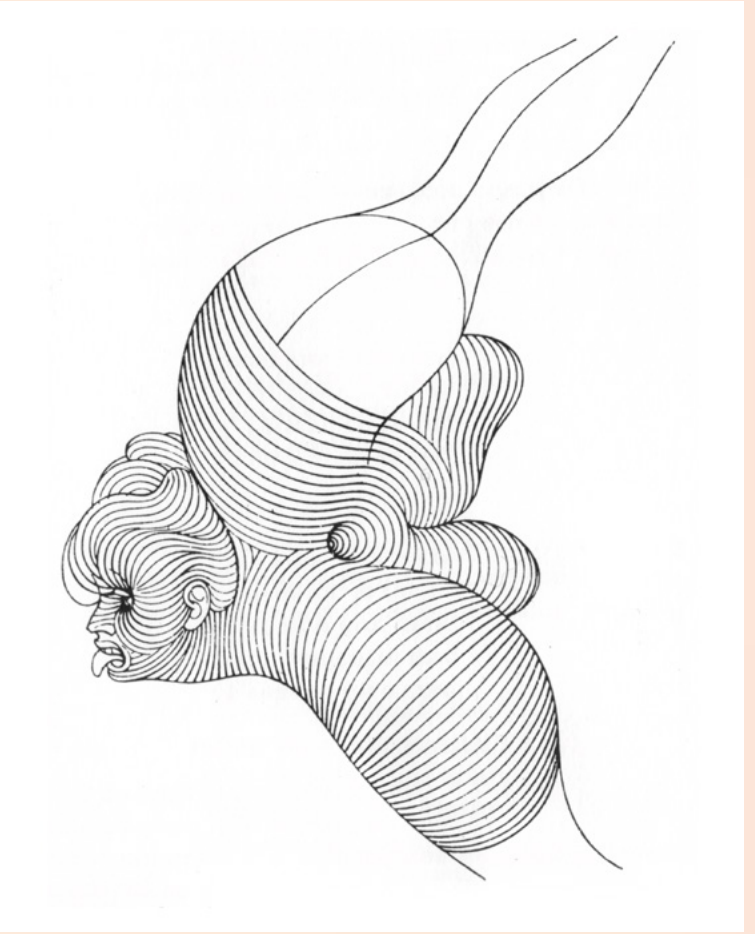
12 Ibidem, pp. 33–34
13 Ibidem, p. 37
14 Ibidem, p. 36

What follows are several permutations of the phrase:

ROSE AU COEUR VIOLET
Se vouer a toi o cruel
A toi, couleuvre rose
O, vouloir etre cause
Couvre-toi, la rue ose
Ouvre-toi, o la sucree
*
Va ou surreel cotoie
O, l'oiseau creve-tour
Vil os ecoeura route
Coeur viole osa tuer
(...).[15]

These anagrams, authored by Nora Mitrani and Hans Bellmer, are meant to demonstrate different variants of sequences of the letters in various French words. Although individual words used in them are assigned particular meanings in this language, sentences and verses, in which they occur, have a sense that is abstract, "detached", vibrant with natural ambiguity. Also, oscillating between a given meaning and nonsense. These poems seem to be a pure game of possibilities of semantic expression, using in the creative process words composed of different sequences of the same letters, rather than poetic expression of a particular

HANS BELLMER,
Anatomie del'image
(Anatomy of
Image), 1967
☛



15 Ibidem, p. 38

semantic intention. Hence the incredible "linguistic" charm of such poems. They are a pure joy of creation in the language, in which the effect of meaning (or maybe "multi-meaning") comes as a natural consequence, added value.

An ideal final point of such poems is what Bellmer, borrowing this concept from mathematics, calls permutation, i.e. using all possible sequences of letters of a given language, which count in thousands. In other words, an ideal anagram is a poem, in which the author uses all possibilities of rearranging letters to make new words. Such a poem would realise the function of a "closed system", using all possibilities of this type of language game.[16]

It would embody the metaphysical "circuite de parole", with nothing more to add or take away. Except that, as much as there is a hypothetical possibility of creating such a poem, it is actually impossible to make in poetic practice. It would function as a certain unattainable ideal, to which a poet could come more or less close, artistically demonstrating possibilities offered by his language of writing – French, German, Polish.

3.

Bellmer's fascination with the poetic art of anagram/permutation is crucial to understanding his approach to "bodies" of his anti-dolls, created by liberally establishing new types of relations between their parts and organs while violating the anatomy of the woman's body. Still, his "methods" of anagram/permutation cannot be taken literally, if only due to a different type of "material" he used to actualise it. After all, parts and organs composing the woman's body are in a different kind of mutual relations than the relations between letters of individual words, which can be reversed and resequenced to make up new words or word-like formations.[17] Consequences of such a "presentation" of woman's body parts in relation to one another, practised either in reference to "bodies" of the anti-dolls, or in drawings on sheets of paper, are of a completely different kind than in the case of poetic linguistic games.

In this last case, the reference point is a particular finite number of letters of a given language, which can be rearranged to make either words that exist in this language or words that do not, but they could occur in it. Although there are thousands of possible configurations, their number is finite after all. Therefore,

16 This idea underlies also structuralist conceptions of the language, perceived as a system of differences and allowing a finite number of relations between its phonemes/signifiers.

17 Many of such word-like formations compose Bellmer's anagram cited below, which is a specific linguistic variation in German. It consists both of words actually present in this language and words that are not. Those are often a sort of linguistic caricature of the former, and they have no meaning:

ROSEN MIT VIOLETTEM HERZ
Hortensie reitet zum Olm
Sie loht im Zorne, meutert
Hoer' Untier, Mimose lenzt
Entroete sie im Holzturm
Lunte her, zittere im Moos
Turmotter ziehe mein Los
Immer zeitlose Totenuhr
H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy*... op. cit., p. 39

potentially, it is manageable to realise the ideal of language as a "closed system" by using all possible arrangements of letters. Such was de Saussure's understanding of language, as a system of differences allowing for forming individual words and assigning them with meanings, even though, naturally, every language only partially makes use of these possibilities.

However, in the case of the approach to the woman's "body" as if it were letters, the order of which can be freely rearranged and resequenced into particular configurations as with individual words, realisation of such an ideal impossible. The reason is that Bellmer's anti-dolls are composed also of items of clothing and prosthetics, moreover, every part of the woman's body – unlike letters – can assume various shapes and poses, can be multiplied, or significantly absent etc. In a word, the number of elements of the artistic game of constructing "bodies" of the anti-dolls is practically unlimited. Additionally, while a poet needs to follow the general rules of the linguistic game to create a poem/an anagram, Bellmer arbitrarily makes new rules of his artistic game every time he creates "anagrams" of women's/anti-dolls' bodies. As a result, we are looking at the "open system" of inherently unlimited possible permutations within.

What makes it similar to the poetic art of anagram/permutation, nonetheless, is that if in this art the negative reference point are the existing principles and conventions as well as phraseology, which become parodied by atypical arrangements of letters to make "bizarre" words, often not present in a given language, Bellmer's "anagrams" of the female anti-dolls' bodies are a comparable parody and denouncement of conventions and imaging, previously underlying the ideals of womanhood and woman's "beauty". By the same token, as a poet needs to refer in their anagrams to linguistic principles and conventions, even when parodying them, so Bellmer in the process of creating his anti-dolls and drawing "anagrams" of women's bodies must account for the experience of the "physical unconscious" – apparent from his drawings of a dreaming girl, and women "cephalopods". This bestows on his artistic creations with the taste of "realness", embedding them in particular mental experience of the body, in which relations between its parts and organs are established unconventionally. Although these relations ignore the anatomic structure of the body, they – like with Freudian relations between unconscious associations – are all but random. On the contrary, they are mentally determined, which we frequently fail to notice.

Therefore, if Bellmer, similarly to a poet exploring the possibilities of language by means of anagram, tries to study the possibilities of forming atypical configurations of "body" parts of his anti-dolls or women's bodies in his drawings, his endeavour is limited to what is imposed by the above-mentioned unconscious experience of the body. On the other hand, these configurations are freely "programmed" according to his own artistic ingenuity and fantasy. These are expressed in his installations of multiplied parts of dolls' "bodies", bizarre combinations of their bottom halves, presentations of torsos only, replacing missing limbs with



HANS BELLMER, *La demie poupée*, 1971

prosthetics etc. In a word, the scale of creative possibilities of making entire sequences of "anagram" anti-dolls, which often include several versions of the initial configuration, composed of selected "body" parts, is incomparably broader than in the case of a poem/anagram.

If, therefore, the unattainable goal of a poetic anagram is to exhaust all rearrangement possibilities of letters of selected words and by that presumably actualise the ideal form of language as a "closed system", then – as I wrote before – achieving a similar effect as a result of "rearranging" relations between "body" parts of anti-dolls, their clothing and prosthetics, is inherently impossible due to the potentially infinite number of these parts. They can be used to arrange only quasi-anagrammatic sequences, composed of individual dolls installations, each of which is yet another possible variation on the subject of the initial arrangement of the doll's "body".

It should be noticed as well that the mutual relation of these anti-dolls "bodies" is meant to be read not only in the linear order of their sequence, but also in the vertical order of their specific "cumulations", overlays. Each of these dolls configurations taken separately constitutes only one aspect of experiencing the "physical unconscious" of the woman's body, while its final reference point is the inherently unachievable idea of this body experienced as a Whole.

The expression of the art of anagram, therefore, is different than of poetry. Even though the goal of this art is the impossible

idea of penetrating all "mysteries" of the woman's body and experiencing it as a Whole – as a counterpart of the language experienced as a Whole in a poetic anagram – it does challenge this art with an inherently inaccessible horizon.

What, then, is the woman's body to Bellmer, if he metaphorises/substitutes it with "bodies" of his anti-dolls? Is his approach to the body based on some specific philosophy? If so, what are its primary components? What did it effect from?

It seems that one of the key factors, underlying the specific form of Hans' fascination with the woman's body and sexuality was his relationship with his parents, described in his memoirs. In other words, it was a specific form of the "Oedipus triangle" developed in the Bellmers family – to use Freud's expression – the "family romance".

4.

As mentioned before, Hans Bellmer was born in Katowice in 1902, when the city was still under German rule. In the 1920s, when Katowice became the capital of the Polish part of Upper Silesia, he and his wife moved to Berlin, while his parents moved to Glywitz (now Gliwice – trans. note), which in the inter-war period belonged



HANS BELLMER, *The Doll (La Poupée)*, 1937–38

to the German part of Upper Silesia.[18] In that period, what stands out is his conflict-ridden relationship with his strict and authoritative father, a typical representative of the German middle class holding nationalistic views. His father was a typical domestic tyrant, who tried to make decisions about Hans' and his brother's education, and their professional future. His relationship with his mother was completely different, as she was empathetic, warm and affectionate. Her emotional support was crucial to Hans at the time. Another important relationship was with his brother, his spiritual ally in the rebellion against their father, and assistant in his work on creating the first dolls installations.

A similarly Oedipal inter-family relationships, typical of the traditional European patriarchalism, can be recognised in different versions in biographies of many European authors and artists of the period. It resembles, for instance, the relationship between Franz Kafka and his father and mother. One major difference is, however, that as much as the author of *The Trial* passively and guiltily subordinated to his father's despotic will, Hans reacted with rebellious and aggressive attitude. It was expressed in various ways. First of all, he rejected the world of philistine values, trenched in narrow pragmatism, preached by his father. Secondly, he defied his father's will and chose artistic career, which the latter despised, trying to force the son to take up a "useful", well-paid technical profession. Moreover, Hans' created world of gouaches, dolls installations and drawings, in which he presented elaborately deformed figures of the woman's body and exposed their sexuality, did not fit within the frames of his father's aesthetic ideas. Last but not least, Hans possessed leftist and liberal views, and was critical toward Nazi ideology, which his father, who took pride in his "Aryan" background, eagerly supported.

His rebellion against his father's world was based on Hans' feeling that otherwise his father would spiritually destroy him. He would form his in his image, crushing his artistic personality. Bellmer described his conflict-ridden relationship with his father in a short memoir text *The Father*.[19] Therein, he writes that in defiance of their father's dominance at home, he and his brother developed elaborate defensive strategies. These relied on diversionary subordination to their father's commands, then deceitfully undermined and ruined: *In sadness, we had the hurtful mocking laughter of broken glass shards; in a night mist, the foreboding of acidulous irony; in simulated excitation, we vomited and defiled everything.*

The civilization of the grace of the paternal principle had awakened us opportunely with its kiss. It was time. We studied our strategy.

18 Although he spent several years in Katowice, the city taken over by the Polish administration, little is known about this period. The only information, unconfirmed in any documents, is that he was arrested for a short time by the Polish authorities on a charge of public indecency. Most probably, it was related to a demonstration or assembly, the participants of which demanded more tolerance in sexual matters.

19 H. Bellmer, *The Father*, [in:] S. Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, MIT Press, 2009, p. 20

There remained to us still one last chance. We attacked tirelessly until he had his first apoplectic fit. We were unassailable.[20]

These subversive strategies, however, were underpinned with helplessness. The two could not oppose their father directly, after all. Their defensive strategies resembled behaviours demonstrated by inmates, incapable of open rebellion, and therefore simulating certain activities, entertaining various forms of sabotage etc. Yet another of the brothers' strategies was intrigue, which in one case turned to be the perfect revenge. They suggested to their father that one of his great-grandmothers had probably been Jewish. This strike was especially painful, because it hit a chord of the father's racist believes. Planting a doubt about the "purity" of his origin made their father rage out and spend fortune on official retracing of his family tree.

5.

When Hans graduated from his studies, he started working in the advertising office as a draughtsman, which paid quite well. Nonetheless, he was always interested only in artistic work, unacceptable and unappreciated by his father. Moreover, even the first artistic attempts exposing sexuality of women's bodies were an outright provocation against his father's aesthetic taste and values. They were – in reference to the above-mentioned essay – like the son's kiss of death, deeply hurtful. In return, his father would hurt him with his disdain of Hans' artistic interests and severe restrictions and punishments (physical violence was probably a daily occurrence).

In such an outline of Bellmer's personality, we recognise the character of a contemporary Oedipus-artist, who "kills" in his life endeavours and works whatever his Father and his symbolic representatives, like school, state, the Church, try to impose. It is, therefore, with sheer satisfaction that Hans hits his father in his face with the gross insult of the world of deformed and crippled women's bodies. This world is a challenge tossed not only against bourgeois likings, but also against the Nazi's ideas of "beauty" of a Aryan-woman's body, who should give a birth to the race of future Masters. It is a blasphemy shouted out in a hateful rage against his father, his philistine aesthetic tastes and political leaning.

The sadistic demeanour of the despotic Father, in turn, came with a price, leaving permanent lacerations on the son's psyche (and his body). In his eyes, such a father figure rose – like in Kafka's case – to the symbol of all forms of oppression experienced by an individual from state and public institutions, whose goal is to indoctrinate them with particular views of morality, the Church, the state, and subordinating them to the commonly accepted norms of sexual life. Hans responded with the above-mentioned violent and uncompromising rebellion against these institutions and views. There was, however, the other side of his rebellion. It was his fascination with the "forbidden" womanhood that his father despised, and onto which Hans directed

20 Ibidem

all his libido. This came with his unconscious identification with the position of a "woman" with masochistic traits. It was the underlying factor of his hermaphroditism, described by the critics. On this ground, there later sprouted his obsessive fascination with women's "bodies" of dolls, as much as his strongly erotic drawing and photographic art, striking the bourgeois recipients with its immediacy and radicalism.

It seems that formation of Hans' hermaphroditic sexual identity had a course similar to the one observed with the work of another renown Silesia artist – a poet, Rafał Wojaczek. Incidentally, he was born in a town near Katowice, so not far from Bellmer's birthplace.[21] Although in his case the inter-family relations were completely different, his art is also saturated with obsessive fascination with womanhood, whose "secrets" he was trying to unravel in poems written towards the end of his life in a "woman-poet voice". It appears that the elusive element of femininity he penetrated and abused, became an immanent identity component of the "male" subject of these poems, and ended up dominating it.[22] The astonishing familiarity of both processes is indicated by Bellmer's description of the experience of the "physical unconscious" of the man's body seated in the armchair, when he has a dream about a beloved woman who has put a plate in his hands: *Its smooth, cold surface strikes him intensely. He awakens, gets up, and notices that the imprint he left in the upholstered seat resembles a plate. In other words, having opposed the virtual, feminine image of the plate to his physical position's real focal point of excitation (the contact of his buttocks with the armchair), the man makes the astonishing realization of the relationship between both the image of the self: the imprint, and the image of the other: the plate. Now that this fact has been clarified, all that remains is to note that the image of the woman is connected in a more complex fashion to the posture of the seated [ASSIS] man than the simple shape of the female plate [ASS/ette] would allow one to grasp at first glance. Because when inspected closely, the man who adapts to the shape of the armchair and is holding the plate (seat) between his two arms (armrests) has himself become the armchair, which he by imitating has made him female. On the other hand, the man, seen in his male role, is holding the woman by holding the plate. What is involved here is a singular interconnection of the antagonistic 'male-female' principles, which has a shade of the hermaphrodite, but in which the female armchair-plate structure is predominant. The main thing is that the man must have lived the image of the woman physically before he can actually visualize her.*[23]

What Bellmer describes is a specific mental process, in which, on the one hand, the man unconsciously identifies with a comfortable armchair he is sitting on and becomes a woman, and so

21 Described here is Mikołów, a charming Silesia town near Katowice, with a particularly vivid post-Wojaczek poetic tradition, cultivated by Rafał Wojaczek's Institute of Mikołów.

22 I wrote about these motifs in Wojaczek's poetry in the essay: P. Dybel, *Miłość i ciało: dwa sprzeczne zeznania,* [in:] *Ziemscy, słowni, cieleśni,* Mikołów 2019, pp. 382–400

23 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., p. 24

he feels like a "passive" object-woman to sit on that offers the delight of comfortable seat. At the same time, however, as he is holding a plate presented by a beloved woman, he seems to be holding this woman-plate herself, and thereby, as a male subject, he controls her. Meanwhile, the woman assumes a passive role, and becomes ready for the man to sit on her.

The man presented in this situation experiences himself both in the "female" and "male" role, and only on the ground of this experience, he forms his image of the woman. He knows what it means to be in the woman's position of the ecstasy-offering object, because he has "lived the image of the woman physically". Such an specific type of hermaphroditism, i.e. empathising with both woman's and man's roles, allowed Bellmer to expose the "secrets" of the woman's body with great sensitivity in his dolls installations and his drawings. This seems to be the key to his obsessive fascination with the body and artistically-outstanding manner of presenting its Truth.

In this context, it is astonishing how very similar impression of experiencing the woman's body in one's own organism is recognisable in Rafał Wojaczek's late poems:

Now, the Body was like a woman's body
But only "like", Despite bleeding regularly
Despite being fed and washed
Despite being mine, I only dreamed it

With no real weight The Buttocks
Never pressed on the mattress
Flying in the dream Free as a bird indeed
I myself couldn't weigh it down

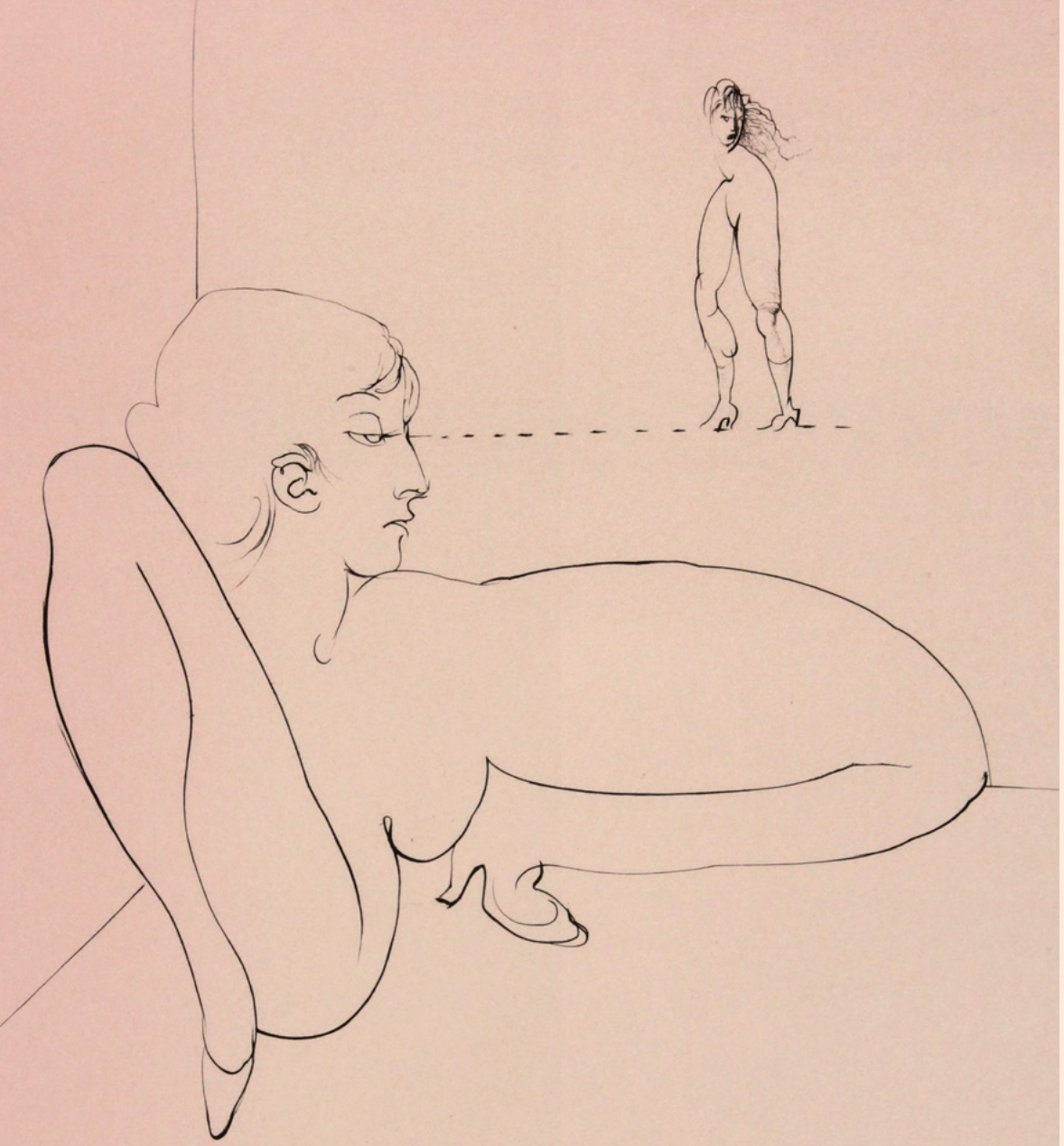
And then the Archer hunted me
Put a ring on I felt his load
When he Fed me Greasy semen
With heavy hands of my bare breasts
(The Myth)[24]

24 R. Wojaczek, *Wiersze zebrane 1964–1971*, Wrocław 2008, p. 384

Here as well, the poet's body is experienced "like" a woman's body. Only this body is dreamed, not real. Therefore, it has not real weight, flies like a bird, leaves no prints on the mattress while it sleeps. Nor on the armchair while it sits. It is a body-woman, a dream. Yet, the woman in the dream does not place a plate in the beloved man's hands as a gift. She is like a captured bird, overpowered and subdued with a ring. A different story, equally tragic ending.



HANS BELLMER,
Anatomie del'image
(Anatomy of
Image), 1967



Bellmer and Crimes

Hans Bellmer's works are often interpreted in the context of political climate of the time, when the artist made them, that is Nazis growing to power in Germany. His *Dolls* are treated as an expression of rebellion against National Socialist discipline, and against the Nazi ideal of beauty and perception of the body as a machine.[1]

At a conference dedicated to the artist,[2] his art should not be presented in a negative light. Nonetheless, a research question we would like to ask in this essay is: How should feminist art historians deal with oppressive images of women-dolls, who look like victims of sadistic operations? A portion of Bellmer's works give the impression of police documentation of crime. Next questions follow, then: Why do these works evoke associations with criminal records, provoking inquiries about affinity of art and crime? What makes them so capturing? And foremost: Do women always have to be victims?

Hans Bellmer's *The Doll* is a series of sculptural installations in various configurations, presented as a photographic cycle. The artist made his first *Doll*, "an artificial girl of many anatomical possibilities" in 1933 in Berlin, inspired by Jacques Offenbach's

1 H. Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, MIT Press, 1997, p. 215

2 Conference and exhibition organised by the Department of Theory and History of Art at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Katowice within the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the Katowice Academy's independent operation on 20th October 2022 – ed. note.

opera *The Tales of Hoffmann*, and provoked by a sentimental delivery from his mother – a box of toys she had found while moving houses. In 1934, Bellmer anonymously self-published the book *Die Puppe*, composed of ten black-and-white photographs, featuring *The Doll* in staged spaces and configurations. The photos of *The Doll* found their way into the hands of French surrealists, who enthusiastically welcomed this unprecedented expression of their postulated "convulsive beauty" and in 1935 published eighteen photographs in the *Minotaure* magazine under a controversial title: *Variations on the Assembly of a Dismembered Adolescent Girl*, while the first French edition of *The Doll* was released the next year. Then, Bellmer constructs the second, improved, more flexible doll, to photograph it dismembered and in various provocative poses. Another photos illustrate Paul Éluard's volume of prose poems titled *The Games of the Doll*.[3] Scholars assumed that these transformations of *The Doll*'s figure were an artistic counterpunch against the image of a perfect body, popularised by the German Nazi propaganda of the 1930s.[4] In parallel, there is an indisputable affinity of the various presentations of *The Doll* with the utterly different, sadistic current of surrealism, represented by Georges Bataille, in which reflection over pursuing passions and crossing boundaries led to fascination with crime and theoretical legitimation of cruelty.

3 See K.A. Jeleński, *Bellmer, albo Anatomia Nieświadomości Fizycznej Miłości*, Gdańsk 2013, pp. 8–11

4 H. Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, op. cit.

The circles of surrealists internally distributed drastic photographs of Jack the Ripper's victims: Catherine Eddowes and Mary Jane Kelly by using them to illustrate Maurice Heine's text in the *Minotaure* magazine.[5] The photo featuring Kelly is a crime scene record, while the most famous photo of Eddowes demonstrates her massacred body after autopsy. When the investigation was suspended in 1897, these photographs remained in the files of the British Police, and after the case was closed, they were released for review of the public. The images became a sort of historical curiosity, icons of unsolved crimes. In France, a brilliant medical examiner and professor of forensic medicine, Alexandre Lacassagne, used the most notorious of the above-mentioned photographs to illustrate his criminological academic work titled *Vacher-L'*éventreur *les crimes sadiques* (*Vacher-Ripper and Sadistic Crimes*), a 1899 book addressing sexual sadism and mass murders committed by a French counterpart of Jack the Ripper – Joseph Vacher, who terrorised Gallic villages in the last decades of the 19th century. Photographs of the crippled women illustrated the definition of a sadistic sexual predator as monstrously abnormal, blood-thirsty, and utterly inhumane individual. Thereby, the figure of a sexual sadist was no longer a subject of the 18th-century literature of Marquis de Sade, but a type defined in medical and legal discourse.[6] The photos of Jack the Ripper's victims reprinted in

5 L. Steer, *Surreal Encounters: Science, Surrealism and the Re-Circulation of a Crime-Scene Photography*, [in:] *History of Photography*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2008, p. 116

6 Ibidem, p. 114

Minotaure reveal a considerable difference between the same images being perceived and contextualised by a forensic expert and a surrealist writer, referring to de Sade's works. While Lacassagne used crime records to illustrate the profile of a sexual sadist as an extremely disturbed criminal, in Heine's art it serves to specifically redeem the controversial character of Marquis by euphemistically representing sadists as libertines, and Jack the Ripper as a type of artist.[7]

Let us return to Bellmer's art and his works of the late 1950s and 1960s, made in collaboration with Unica Zürn. The artist met this artist-writer in 1953, while she was visiting the exhibition of his drawings at Maison de France in Berlin. It was love at first sight; Zürn followed Bellmer to Paris a year later, and then his art moved to the higher level of literalness. His partner's openness to experiments influenced the artist to make a series of photographs, which embodied his phantasmagorical *Doll*. They feature Unica, usually faceless, whose body is cramped with ropes, marking it with innumerable skinfolds. Although the image of the model's body treated like meat evokes associations with an intercourse based on submissiveness and dominance, it was first and foremost a fulfilment of visions that Bellmer noted in *The Anatomy of the Image*: *According to the memory I have accurately retained of a certain photographic document, a man, to transform his victim, had tightly bound her thighs, shoulders, and breasts with crisscrossed*



HANS BELLMER
Tenir au frais,
Collage of gelatin silver prints and gouache on Masonite, 1958

7 Ibidem

wire haphazardly causing bulges of flesh, irregular spherical triangles, stretching into folds, unsavory lips, multiplying never before seen breasts in outrageous locations (...).[8] According to Agnieszka Taborska, Unica's appearance in their photos together shows that the relationship with Bellmer was a source of her suffering, while reading her novel *Dark Spring*, iconic to feminists of the 1970s, puts their sadomasochistic relation in a completely different light.[9] Taborska emphasises the ambivalence of this relationship: Zürn perceived the artist as her father, and wanted to gain his approval. Bellmer, in turn, despite using her body in his art, as the scholar writes, was a devoted friend and saviour in difficult situations, who encouraged her to work and glued her torn drawings back together. Unica tried to become independent and move our from her partner's, but she usually ended up in hospital. Their relationship was eventually broken up by Zürn's suicide, which she committed when half-paralysed Bellmer wanted to leave her.[10]

In her afterword to *Trąby Jerychońskie* (The Trumpets of Jericho), Taborska quotes the artist's words: (...) *It is my fate to be an eternal victim*[11] and dissects the entanglement which binds Urica to Bellmer: *are her masochistic inclinations a response to his eroticism toward underaged bodies? Could her descriptions of sadistic games in Dark Spring be an attempt of speaking in a voice similar to Bellmer's?*[12] The woman who assumed the role of *The Doll* eventually committed the act of auto-annihilation, while Bellmer's work remained as a type of crime record.

The phantasm of absolute subordination of a person, especially a woman, turning her into a passive object of urges of the other is a recurrent subject in art, literature, and popular culture.

Artists of the surrealist circles were fascinated with the 1947 murder of Elizabeth Short, known as Black Dahlia. The course of Short's murder might have inspired Duchamp to make his famous work *Étant donnés* (1946–66). Another important reference are also surrealistic photographs of Man Ray, Jacques-André Boiffard and Raoul Ubac, in which enigmatic poses of models, specific cropping, dismembering women's bodies, resemble visual torture, suggest strong erotic connotations and incapacitation of photograph characters. The matter of objectification of women and visual legitimation of such practices is also apparent in performances of Yves Klein, who employed naked models as living brushes, thus acknowledging a woman as *ready-made*[13].

At this point, it is worth referring to José Carlos Somoza's crime story *Clara y la penumbra*, which introduces a new current in art called hyperdramatism, consisting in making art with human bodies. The "canvas", as the body is defined, is rented by the artist and over that time loses the status of a human, becoming a material, on which art is made, then exhibited at an art gallery

8 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or the Anatomy of the Image*, trans. Jon Graham, Dominion Publishing, Vermont 2004, p. 32
9 A. Taborska, *Spiskowcy wyobraźni*, Gdańsk 2013, p. 124
10 Eadem, *Posłowie*, [in:] U. Zürn, *Trąby jerychońskie*, Okoniny 2021, p. 212
11 U. Zürn, *The House of Illnesses*, trans. Malcolm Green, Atlas Press, 1993, p. 29
12 A. Taborska, *Posłowie*, op. cit., p. 211
13 L. Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 1992, pp. 72–79

or sold to collectors. Models, often very young ones, are permanently fearful of ageing, which means losing required properties behind their popularity and high remuneration. The nature of canvases is best summarised by one of their statements: *We are what other people pay us to be.*[14] In the novel, art is presented as a syndrome of sick, commercialised society, fed up with everything ordinary, and seeking excitement by breaking the extreme. In the case of hyperdramatism, the boundary of inviolability of the body fades, and tagging the substrate makes a given person property of the other, bringing them to the role of an object: a painting, a sculpture, or a piece of furniture: a table or a chair. Within such a degenerate world, human canvases become also objects of crime, since at the very beginning of the story, one of the women is murdered.

Somoza's living paintings seem to have a common denominator with Bellmer's. They, too, oscillate on the border between an object and an animated being. *The Doll* imitates a living person, while real Unica underwent the process of dollification. At the same time, posing of *The Dolls* gives the impression that they are living their own life, or else are victims of a crime.

What is fascinating is the previously mentioned affinity of crime and art. The English title of Somoza's Spanish-language novel (*Clara y la penumbra*) is *The Art Of Murder*. We could also mention Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, the protagonist of Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume. The Story of a Murderer*[15], who has perfect smell and is obsessed with the idea to reproduce the aroma of the woman's body. This obsession leads to him murdering young women to extract the smell from their skin. These operations are intended to create a perfect perfume, a work of art.

Although the popularity of thrillers, true crime programmes, crime stories and series inspired by notorious serial killers is not new, it is worth asking a question: Why is crime the object of fascination? Why are so many of us interested in the course of criminal investigations, solving cases, and especially – the visual side of such events? The image of a crime, after all, consists of predictable elements: the victim's body, blood, traces left by the murderer. Watching crime stories, beside getting involved with a mystery, we also expect images, particular effects of culprits' actions, while similarities between them make up a reservoir of our imaging of the crime. The distinct impression that crime is aetiologically close to art gives us a disturbing thrill when we realise that the only line between the two operations is a moral awareness of inviolability of the other's body without their consent. In the drama *The Square,* directed in 2017 by Ruben Östlund, we can see how easy it is to cross this line in art. Popculture is swarming with characters of charismatic psychopaths and disturbing weirdos, capable of cruelty inconceivable to any sane person, while fictitious serial killers are often presented as virtuosos of their vile actions. Also

14 J.C. Somoza, *The Art Of Murder*, trans. Nick Caistor, Abacus, London 2005, p. 137

15 P. Süskind, *Perfume. The Story of a Murderer*, trans. John E. Woods, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1983

in the history of criminology we come about the culprits' belief in completing their "work", and its underlying indeterminate "necessity", pressing need for accomplishing the goal, and the resulting satisfaction. The codependency between genius and insanity was described in the 19th century by Cesare Lombroso, who indicated the possible strong correlation between cognitive abilities and madness[16], while such characters as Hannibal Lecter (created by Thomas Harris) and Jean-Baptiste Grenouille (the protagonist of the previously mentioned Süskind's *Perfume*) are the embodiment of this double teratology.

Murder has its specific visuality, in which between the subject and the object of action, the abjectional composition and referential trace of the culprit, are revealed. The body, the envelope filled with blood, like with paint; staged and bound in a cruel performance, exposed to the view like a sculpture at the art gallery, photographed by the investigator to lands in the files, like in the album, and the entire event, described in detail along with the culprit's profile (biography), become the matter of analysis.

Such connectivity of art and crime refers mainly to sexual assaults, the victims of which are women. Victimology research indicate that the majority of murders of women are committed under circumstances, in which the culprit is overwhelmed by emotional states usually resulting from erotic motifs (although men are killed by murderers two times more often, in the case of erotically-motivated murders, 88% of victims are women).[17] Objectivisation and violence against women have found, often symbolically, reflection in visual arts, starting from mythological scenes depicting rapes committed by gods on women. Efforts to recognise and describe these phenomena were undertaken by feminist artists and art historians. In the late decades of the 20th century, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer and Guerrilla Girls used the visual language of advertising to expose gender – and race-related discrimination in the world of art, but also to indicate violence against women directly. Cindy Sherman, for instance, appropriated "male gaze" and, referring to cinematographic films, introduced a strategy of regaining narratives about women. Moreover, in one of the photographic series, she presented a woman (herself) as a crime victim (*Untitled #153* and *#155* from the cycle *Fairy Tales*, 1985). In her other works, featuring mannequins or fragments thereof, the artist seems to refer to Bellmer's *The Doll* (e.g. *Untitled #302* and *#312*, 1995). Marina Abramović, in turn, in her 1974 performance *Rhythm 0* demonstrated that making her body available to the audience provokes offensive reactions, connected with crossing the boundary of body inviolability. Therefore, her action quickly turned into a series of abuses toward the artist, the "small crimes" against her body in the space of art gallery. Offences against female artists were also elicited by a TV performance of the group Sędzia Główny (*Rozdział XL*. Tele Game, 2005 for TVP Kultura), in

16 C. Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, London 1891

17 B. Hołyst, *Ofiary zabójstw*, Poznań 1966, p. 66

which some viewers formulated aggressive, but also erotically-tinted commands toward the artists.

Does it then suffice to provide others with proper tools, for them to turn into potential culprits? Referring back to the beginning of this paper, we could risk a thesis that Bellmer was actually striking at Nazism, revealing its hidden patriarchal violence, creating a symbolic image of the victim of such violence, and suggesting: everyone can become the culprit. In this context, the affinity of art and crime also assumes a different meaning in reference to Hitler himself – who committed a crime against humanity, and who was an unfulfilled artist, after all. Bellmer's works, sometimes interpreted as images of trauma, at the same time are based on misogyny, objectification of women, and fascination with violence.

Why, in contemporary art, also feminist art, are women still victims? In the works described above, do women artists release themselves from the assigned role of victim, or do they rather reproduce patriarchal clichés? Do they manage to reconstruct the rules governing society, in which women are so often cast as victims, while power is demonstrated by sexual submission? And, above all, why do women artists themselves so easily assume the role of victims? Theoretically, it is said that they demonstrate the repetitiveness of pattern, in which a woman is most commonly a victim of crime, and eventually "reclaim" their images, shifting the dominant perspective of binary opposition based on male, active gaze directed at a passive, female object. Reproducing these mechanisms of violence, do they contribute to subverting or to legitimising them? Finding answers to these questions would require separate analyses, though.

History of art discusses expressions of visual culture, art – is the pursuit of the truth. Hence, let us not speak of any valuation or judge – reckoning of reality is best left to artists. Bellmer's reckoning, carrying a pessimistic message and social criticism, which have puzzled analytic minds for decades, does relate to feminist subject matter, which is the reference of this paper. The phantasm of a woman – victim of crime, is embedded in our cultural imagination and connected with real power dynamics in patriarchal societies, in which crimes against women are still committed. Today, we should mainly address Russian war crimes, including – mass rapes on Ukrainian women (but also on Ukrainian children and men). We must shape another perception of sexual relations, which should be the area of freedom and joy, rather than humiliation and pain. We need, therefore, new images and new visuality, breaking up with sexual submission of anybody, and treating others as passive dolls.



The Other as the Body and as Allegory

Man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other,
not so much because the other holds the key to
the object desired,
as because the first object of desire is to be recognized
by the other.
Jacques Lacan[1]

There is no doubt that, in the area of contemporary psychoanalysis, one of the founding myths of the discipline has been the ambiguous construct of Self/Other/(Not)The Same. This phenomenon actually established identity grounds and attributes, the role of which is invaluable to the subject. It is especially apparent at the early stage of psyche formation, and even more so during the advanced process of self-identification. The formation of Self is connected with articulation of the economy of difference in relation to such components and factors as i.a. gender, race, ethnos, sacrum or the (other) human, because it is within all established intersubjective relations, as proven by Rosi Braidotti, *difference or otherness* admittedly *played a constitutive role, marking off the* (...) *other,*[2]

1 J. Lacan, *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, [in:] idem, *Écrits. A selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Routlage Classics, London–New York, p. 43

2 R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 27

even though they obviously do not need to fulfil *a mirror function that confirmed the Same in His superior position*.[3]

The meeting and dialogicality of "otherness" is, therefore, a grand field for imagination, and it is not a coincidence that it is successfully accomplished also in the area of broadly taken culture, which is confirmed by a plethora of works and artefacts representing this particular aspect of human reality. All this was widely exemplified at the exhibition in Katowice and its accompanying conference: *The Other/The Alien/The Same – Hans Bellmer's Ghostly Presence and the Inalienable Right to Desire*.[4]

Although the project of this endeavour, by default, referred to the above-mentioned subject matter, the intention of its curatorial team was to focus especially on the artistic activity of Hans Bellmer. The artist, in turn, presented from the perspective of gender studies, was intended as a starting point of critical overview and deconstruction of parallel motifs, demonstrated also in works of other artists. From this point of view, the exhibition became an opportunity to present contemporary artists who, similarly to Bellmer, the maker of *The Doll*, address the subject of domestication, transgression or hybridisation of both the body and corporality.

3 Ibidem, p. 28

4 Conference and exhibition organised by the Department of Theory and History of Art at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Katowice within the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of Katowice Academy's independent operation on 20th October 2022 – ed. note.

Obviously, the indisputable *clue* of the project was the display of Hans Bellmer's authentic prints and drawings, which the organisers rented from the Katowice History Museum. It should also be explained that works presented at the exhibition were made in the mature period of his activity, after the Second World War, when the artist decided to permanently reside in France. These works – one might say – are the culmination of a certain iconographic dictum of Bellmer's work, even though we must be aware that his drawing and illustrative activity was an apparent repercussion of the aesthetic pursuits, initiated back in Berlin, soon after he had left Silesia.

Presumably, it was this very period of living in the German capital between 1923 and 1938, that finally determined Bellmer's further fate and artistic choices. Since it was then that he came in contact – as a relatively young man – with the decadent Bohemia of Berlin, especially with artists originating from the circles of the so-called New Reality, like George Grosz, John Heartfield, Otto Dix and Rudolf Schlichter, to name a few. Most probably, it was their advice he took and tried his hand at drawing. Nonetheless, contrary to the circles of familiar artists, Bellmer eventually makes a decision to express himself as an artist with completely different means. Moreover, it will soon be apparent, that the genealogy and context of his art digress from them as well. Without a doubt, his art – in contrast with artists gathered around Neue Sachlichkeit, die Brücke and der Blaue Reiter – was consistently free from social conditioning and political determinants. Bellmer

explicitly leaned toward the aesthetic and poetic of surrealism, even though he was not a stranger to rebellion against the principle of reality, while such contestation was motivated both ontologically and oneiricly. In consequence, he found the sphere of subconscious and metaphysical experience essential to his being. Little wonder, therefore, that to the artist the "image" – as we read in his notes, published in the book *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious – is engendered in acute points of transition or conflict, which is to say in a particular atmosphere, with a heightened temperature and pressure, which all the evidence shows is located under the constellation of chance*.[5]

Meanwhile, the circumstances and times were very particular, indeed. When Adolf Hitler takes over the reign in the Weimar Republic, the artist characteristically protests against the Nazi doctrine of work and in 1933 stops working whatsoever, to manifest his social disutility. Bellmer focuses intensely on his drawing activities, and relentlessly searches for new tools and media, capable of transposing and articulating his fascination with the doll, which occurred in the artist in the beginning of the 1930s. Such an inclination, sometimes bordering on obsessive passion and erotic aberration, presents itself quite early, and one of its triggers could be the story of Oskar Kokoschka, who was riding around Vienna with a puppet, representing his former lover, Alma Mahler.

5 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or the Anatomy of the Image*, trans. Jon Graham, Dominion Publishing, Vermont 2004, p. 57

Another of the artist's lasting impressions was a visit to the opera to see Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*, the protagonist of which falls in love with a mechanical doll, Olympia.

It should be added that around this time, Bellmer leans toward critical auto(reflection), which soon effected in his first theoretical text *Die Puppe* (*The Doll*), inspired by the topic and iconography of the doll. In 1934, he self-publishes his deliberations with ten photographs in a small printing house in Bad Carlsruhe (now: the Polish village of Pokój – Peace). It is also significant that the essay is dedicated to his mother's young niece, Ursula Naguschewski, who left for France to study at Sorbonne, and handed Bellmer's photographs over to the editorial team of the *Minotaure* magazine. The material must have been appreciated, because the photographs were published on 5th December 1934 in the sixth issue: *Variations on the Assembly of a Dismembered Adolescent Girl*. Bellmer's early work undoubtedly raised an owe of French surrealists, and Paul Éluard – inspired by the subject matter – wrote a cycle of poems *The Games of the Doll*, which he published in the *Messages* magazine.

It is hard to resist the impression that the Katowice artist's work as well as his interest in psychoanalysis were in line with surrealists' inclinations. Admittedly, their shared goal was a specific "eruption" of the repressed and the subconscious on the one hand, and subversion of the identity of the fetishised object on the other, which also coincided with deconstruction of the identity of the represented body (or the subject).

The late 1930s is a very intense period in the artist's life, as he is working on the second of the series of dolls, when a family tragedy strikes. In 1938, Bellmer's first wife, Margarete, dies of tuberculosis. The artist manages to leave for France and settles in Paris. He adapts fast, and his circle of friends includes Jean Arp, André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Man Ray and Yves Tanguy. When the Second World War breaks out, however, Bellmer escapes to the south of France, and after certain perturbations due to his German citizenship, is drafted to the 3rd Regiment of Dragoons. Over the same period, he remarries, and then shortly joins the partisans and waits till the end of war. Unfortunately, soon after liberation, his second marriage falls apart. The artist lives in Revel, Toulouse, and Carcassonne for a while, to return to Paris permanently in 1949. Then, however, he acknowledges that his art is not as popular as it was before the war.

Bellmer focuses his work mainly on the human and – in contrast to the instantly developing non-figurative movements in painting – his early pieces might seem a little anachronistic. Obviously, he remains resistant to fashion and new artistic trends, therefore he trusts – not blindly though – in the sense of his way and beliefs. In the silence of solitude, he submerges in his aesthetic world, the subject matter of which – generally speaking – results from penetration and exploration of the human body. His art at that time is surely the outcome of deliberations on psychoanalytic discourse, even though he found the accomplishments (literary and anthropological) of Georges Bataille equally significant. The

HANS BELLMER
print from the book *Bonjour Max Ernst*, 1976, copperplate engraving, etching, aquatint
☛



artist is said to have met the author of *The Story of the Eye* in 1945, which resulted i.a. in his work on illustrating the famous short story *Madame Edwarda*. Then, Bellmer focuses mainly on artistic print and drawing. It is apparent that drawing domain is incredibly important and poignant to him, because – as emphasised by Konstanty Jeleński: *Bellmer's drawings reveal his existential project, his philosophical conception at the first sight. On all planes, everything is consistent; this visual work unveils the falseness of alternative between form and content.*[6]

Focusing art on typically anthropocentric topics leads to specific meditation on the mysteries of the body and deliberation on signs written in it, because *the body* – as he explains in *Little Anatomy – is comparable to a sentence that invites you to disarticulate it, for the purpose of recombining its actual contents through a series of endless anagrams*.[7]

Treating and perceiving of the body as sentences and phrases, which can be freely combined and separated, subjected to deconstruction, while feeding on "the narcissistic experience"[8] does not seem to be a singular phenomenon in today's art. This domain is strongly present in Aneta Grzeszykowska's art, wherein we find numerous examples of the iconography of fragmentation and segmentation. In this context, it is worth mentioning her photographic cycle *Selfie* (2019), in which the artist carries out selection

6 K.A. Jeleński, *Bellmer albo Anatomia nieświadomości fizycznej i miłości*, Gdańsk 2013, p. 14
7 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., pp. 37–38
8 Ibidem, p. 23



HANS BELLMER
Madame Edwarda
etching, 1966





and abstraction of components of the body. The procedure seems to recount and reflect, be it a little grotesquely, the idea of beauty, described by Lautréamont in his *The Songs of Maldoror Six*[9], as *the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella*. To achieve that, Grzeszykowska extracts and abstracts elements of the body, which become designators of both death and life, as well as bewildering coincidences of what is alive and natural with what is artificial and – maybe – non-human or unnatural. Although collage operations on parts of the body, interpreted as a metonymy of Self, is a *sensu stricte* artistic procedure, the fact of articulating organicity and corporality is deeply human and traumatic. The remnants and remains, presented by the artist, move the accent onto therapeutic mechanism and, eventually, sublimation, which makes us overcome the reflex of disgust and control.

Aneta Grzeszykowska manages to achieve an even more parodic effect in her videoart *Ból głowy* (Headache, 2008). In this work, similarly to the *Selfie* cycle, the artist still reports her corporal fascinations. In its narrative and visual layers, the film is an attempt of visualising first decomposition and then reconstruction of a woman's body. The applied theatricalisation and spectacularity of means evokes associations with the tradition of Baroque anatomical theatre. Not without irony, the artist impersonates famous pathologists, who – like doctor Nicolaes Tulp, portrayed by Rembrandt – used the formula of the "live" theatre of death. The convention balances the border between a spectacle and clinical discourse. The artist skilfully applies her assembly competencies in order to stage for the audience a type of surrealistic dance macabre, a genre popularised – for instance – in the famous Paris theatre Grand-Guignol. It is worth adding that the visual layer is supported by "deadly" serious music of Krzysztof Penderecki from his sonorous period of the 1960s.

The apparent affiliation, annexation and entanglement of worlds allow for proximity and even, at times, contamination with alternative, subcultural, devalued or discredited elements, which dazzle the audience with the camp aesthetic and retroactivity of discourse. This aspect was also emphasised by Bellmer himself in his notes: *It seems only when everything which is not man combines with him, that he can then be himself. He seems to exist, including his most singularly individual elements, independently of himself in the universe.*[10]

Here, the artist evidently anticipates the aesthetic and ethics present also in (post)modernistic reality of bricoleurs, to whom bricolage[11] remains only and as much as a tool, which serves both to play a provocative intellectual game and to make artistic artefacts. At the Katowice exhibition, Justyna Smoleń refers to them with her spatial objects, which are an impressively successful attempt at combining porcelain and ceramic objects of s into a type

9 See C. Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror. Chant 6*, Paris 1868

10 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., p. 66

11 Read more about bricolage and bricoleurs [in:] C. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfield and Nicholson Ltd, University of Chicago Press 1962, p. 11

of spatial collage. As far as their construction is concerned, they are an alloy of unwanted porcelain knick-knacks and ceramic waste that the artist's incredible manual skill integrated with her original hand-made components. As she explains in a description attached to her works, they resemble *sculptures of grotesque-macabre character. By means of collage, decapitated porcelain figurines of human figures, fragments of animals and plants, according to a new assumption combine into hybrid organic creations.*[12]

It is highly symptomatic that the very construction of an artefact demonstrates the transgressive character of violations committed by the artist, who decontextualises the "identity" of objects, which also makes it possible to situate these works in the semantic field of surrealism. Justyna Smoleń's art is interesting due to the fact that despite certain postmodernistic inclinations, in her artistic practice she also continues the traditions of *arte povera*. Admittedly, in the case of poor art, artists usually reached for worthless and primitive materials, because the aesthetic of their art was determined by philosophy of deep ecology, which assumed propagating the idea of recycling. It seems that in that respect Justyna Smoleń has gone a step further, since the boxes, mostly used for transportation of works, in the exhibition circumstances have the function of pedestals, and interestingly *were made of the material obtained from the institution of culture as a museum exposition waste.*[13]

12 The source of the citation above is e-mail correspondence from Justyna Smoleń.

13 Ibidem

The exemplified technological and referential cycle facilitates, on the one hand, emphasise the aspect of transformation and transgression of materials, and on the other, evokes the memory and fate of the used objects and their former owners and makers, who over the long-time perspective applied and stored them for diverse and not necessarily artistic purposes.

From the formal point of view, a similar strategy of appropriation and procedure of hybridisation is used by Natalia Kopytko in her artistic practice. Both her *Bezoary*, and *Fotelak,* are fetishist artefacts (of *ready-made* type), in which the artist violated the identity of objects and thereby caused their semantically significant modification. To this aim, the artist first attempted to transform the objects, and then carried out their symbolic derealisation. As a result of these operations, the works surprisingly coincided with works associated with the current of so-called eccentric abstraction. It is worth recalling that the term was introduced to art discourse by an American scholar and curator, Lucy R. Lippard (who in the 1970s was dealing with Eva Hesse's art). In both cases, artworks are undoubtedly characterised by relative (post)minimalism, while dazzling with eroticism and vivid organicity, which, in turn, resonates with broadly taken abject. As we know, Julia Kristeva proposed this term for all forms violating the taboo of corporality, sexuality and indecency, and it is represented i.a. by degraded, organic, and physiological images. These can be accompanied by ambivalent impressions, to say the least. The sphere of abject concentrates all that remains impure or repulsive, despite the

frequent event that the subject subconsciously desires and lusts after this very thing. Abject, therefore, is an evident capitulation of *symbolicity* in favour of *semioticity*.

On the other hand, as rightfully noticed by Anglo-American critics of the second half of the 20th century, artists unexpectedly started to appreciate the potential of disgust and, in fact, abject art does have the unquestionable appeal today. It is also unsurprising that at certain moments of life, especially under traumatic circumstances, art plays an important role as therapeutic and subliming tools. This quality of art is also indicated by Bellmer himself: *Faced with an incurable affliction or a forbidden desire, man moves into a particular defensive attitude that is not dictated by reason. He summons a solution feverishly and continues to seek it by blending the impossible and the possible, the virtual and the real, laughter and terror.*[14]

Similar emotional registers were probably a reference for Barbara Kubska, who at the Katowice exhibition presented her assemblage *She Feels Thin – Like a Sheet of White Paper* (2022). This multi-element work, composed of a showcase, photographs and collages, and continues topics long-standing in the artist's practice – including traces of presence and the subject matter of existential trauma. This time, Kubska decided to reinterpret the story of a German artist and writer, Unika Zürn (*nota bene* Hans Bellmer's last life partner). Her persona was summoned at the exhibition with the photograph titled *Self-portrait as Unica*, in which Kubska, inspired by the portrait made by Man Ray in 1951, impersonated the author of *The Trumpets of Jericho*. Another component is a board with a quote from the short story *The Man of Jasmine*.[15] The passage comes from the prose, in which Zürn dazzles the readers with great emotiveness and imagery of the body trembling with compulsive fears and hallucinations, making each of the protagonist's organs "swell in its meaning". Kubska illustrated this rhetoric with a series of photographic collages, based on photos featuring women in the state of hysteria. The patients were recorded against their will during clinical sessions, organised by Dr Jean-Martin Charcot in the Paris hospital Salpêtrière (in the 1870s). Barbara Kubska appropriates this psychedelic panopticon and, within its structures, builds her own intimate narrative about the body stricken with expressive rites of symptoms of a disease, bleakly confirmed by Urica Zürn's suicidal death in 1970.

Here, it is worth mentioning that affinities and mutual implications of literature, art and corporality had already been emphasised by Sigmund Freud and numbers of his successors. Julia Kristeva, in her very beautiful book *The Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia* writes directly that artistic creation is actually the *adventure of the body and signs*[16]. It seems that such semantic dictates and oppressions, aligned with the need for sublimation,

14 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., p. 60

15 See U. Zürn, *The Man of Jasmine and Other Texts*, trans. Malcolm Green, Atlas Press, London 1994

16 J. Kristeva, *The Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York 2024, p. 17





BARBARA KUBSKA

She Feels Thin – Like a Sheet of White Paper,

installation, 2022 ☝

Self-portrait as Unica, photo, 2022

☛



BARBARA KUBSKA
She Feels Thin – Like a Sheet of White Paper,
installation, 2022

have found their visual reference in Paulina Walczak-Hańderek's painting diptych. At the Katowice exhibition, the artist presented two acrylic paintings titled *and what are you dealing with now* and *I don' t even know, what to say* (both 2022), composed into a type of painted parergon, made of horizontal geometric stripes on the wall. The aesthetic of the whole resonates with monochrome of cold greys, diversifies with typography of the title expressions. The artist's installation is kept in the convention of minimalism, complemented with textuality and geometry, a little suggestive of Robert Morris' famous collage *I-Box* of 1965. As much as the American sculptor leaned toward pastiche and irony, Walczak-Hańderek definitely thematises trauma, since the title words express a woman subject, who has clearly arrived at the verge of hurt. In her commentary, the artist explains that it is an *attempt to subordinate, get out of a situation, which captures a woman in the grid. The systematising grid becomes necessary to maintain internal peace, but can also be a self-inflicted trap.*[17]

Greyness of monochrome could obviously evoke boredom, repetitiveness, as well as the lack of emotional registers. The apparent calm of presentation, however, is broken by the rhetoric of titles and conversational character of this work, which indicates the (non)presence and polyphony of other subjects. The emerging existential tension is suspended and requires partners to get closer and calm down their language. On the other hand – as

17 The source of this quote is the e-mail information from Paulina Walczak-Hańderek.

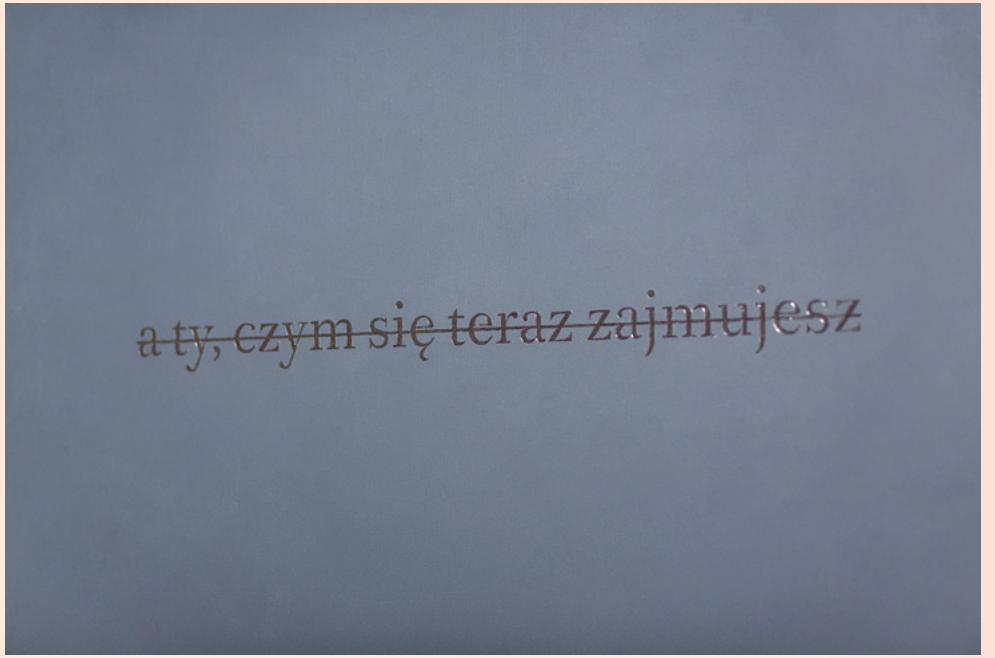

a ty, czym się teraz zajmujesz
nawet nie wiem, co mam odpowiedzieć

claimed by Bellmer himself – *a man imposes his elementary convictions, and the geometrical and algebraic manner of his thinking on the woman's image*[18], which poses a difficulty to agreement and well-balanced symmetry.

This very aspect, originating from inequalities and patriarchal sources of imaging, was addressed by Małgorzata Szandała. Her installation – titled *Corpus uteris (i.e. Useful body of the uterus*) – consists of a series of several tens of historical anatomical drawings, made over three hundred years, between the 17th and 19th centuries. Even at a cursory glance, what is distinctive of these drawings and prints, is the primacy of female representation, effective only in the sphere of reproductive system, which, in turn, contradicts the male perspective, present in remaining systems and organs of the body.

The consequence of this, all things considered, chauvinistic optic of anatomists, is the overrepresentation of male corporality, while in the domain of sexuality and reproduction, this obligation is lifted, maybe only to distribute and satisfy men's demand for eroticism. Historically speaking, medical discourse has always been determined by cultural conditions, handled by voyeurs and pornographers, who objectify and fragment the woman's body, transforming it into obscene and *ready-made* objects, as continued, to an extent, even in the early modernistic discourse (e.g. Édouard Manet's *Olympia* or Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World*, both painted in the 1960s).

18 H. Bellmer, *Little Anatomy...*, op. cit., p. 34



PAULINA WALCZAK-HAŃDEREK

and what are you dealing with now; I don't even know, what to say, acrylic on canvas, 2022

The drawing aesthetisation, apparent in these works, their focus on details and fragments of corpses of the bodies, was followed in the next century by the art of surrealism, where we find analogical compulsiveness, obsession and inclination to fragmentation in all psychosomatic areas. In this sense, the aesthetic of the first avant-garde presents very similar issues and toposes, and allows us to look at the culture as an interface of the iconography of oppression, as well as the oppression of iconography. Hence, textuality and iconography remain – as always – a natural source and alliance for both the audience and the artist, who desire (The Other) body and allegory.



MAŁGORZATA SZAŃDAŁA

Corpus uteris (i.e. Useful body of the uterus),

installation, 2022 ☛ 🚶





Towards the Sexual/Gender Revolution: the Doll, Puck and Ophelia as Prosthetic Bodies

In history of art, the phenomenon of the body is frequently the centre of representation, but it has only been in the contemporary epoch that is focusses the most symbolic, aesthetic and political tensions. A French transgender philosopher, Paul B. Preciado, observes: *The living human body is to the twentieth-first century what the factory was to the nineteenth: the seat of political struggle.*[1] The body and sexuality have been subjected to state and industrial management since the late 19th century. As such, they are the centre of political operations, but also the leitmotif of symbolic expression. The body is a site of oppression as an object of modern control on the one hand, and a seat of resistance which constantly eludes control on the other. It is, therefore, necessary to reinterpret modernity in its entirety of questions about sexuality and how it is challenged by representation. In this context, I would like to address one of the strongest phantasm of corporality in modern imagination, that is Hans Bellmer's *The Doll*, and correlate it as a work of art with other texts of culture: contemporary feminist postpornographic productions in the genres of performance and theatre.

1 P.B. Preciado, *The Hot War*, e-flux Journal, no. 114, December 2020, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/114/367059/the-hot-war [accessed: 18 Oct. 2025]

1. Bellmer: The Doll as disassembly/decomposition of desire, and as violence

Hans Bellmer, a surrealist visual artist, sculptor and theoretician, started working on his series of *Dolls* in the 1930s in Germany, in the times of when Nazism was on the rise. *The first one, made in 1933* [the year when Hitler came to power – AA], *depicted an adolescent girl from papier-maché, wood and metal, whose entire 'body' disassembled and assembled like a machine*, write Iwona Święch and Marek Jańczyk, the curators of one of the artist's final exhibitions in Poland.[2] *The second of Bellmer's Dolls, constructed in 1935, was made of tissue paper and glue, so that it resembled flesh. This one was photographed by the artist more than a hundred times in different arrangements, which expressed his fantasies connected with a young girl perceived as a passive victim.* From the artist's biography we know, that a direct impulse to make these works was his meeting with a teenage cousin from his wife's family, Ursula Naguschewski. The artist lives in Berlin, but his art quickly gains notoriety as degenerated, and Bellmer himself identifies as an anti-Nazi. Thanks to Ursula, who studied in Paris, the artist and his wife moved there, and he started collaborating with surrealists. Texts about the artist describe his and Ursula's relationship as ambivalent, but surely the cousin elicited his all-consuming obsession. Another element of *The Doll* genealogy is a parcel he received from his mother which contained a box of his childhood

2 See *Obsesja Hansa Bellmera*, https://www.fotopolis.pl/newsy-sprzetowe/wydarzenia/3823-obsesja-hansa-bellmera, [accessed: 5 Oct. 2025]



HANS BELLMER, *The Doll*, 1934



HANS BELLMER, *The Doll*, 1935

toys, bringing back a wave of memories. Bellmer's biographic facts indicate his vivid relationship with his mother, who was a victim of his sadistic father, a confirmed Nazi. In this context, what also seems important is his childhood fascination with cross-dressing: as a boy, Bellmer enjoyed wearing women's clothes, which was severely punished by his father.[3] The final link of *The Doll* genealogy was a spectacle he watched in Berlin with his wife and cousin – Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*, directed by Max Reinhardt. The opera libretto uses the motif of E.T.A. Hoffmann's work about the love of a grown-up man for Olympia, the demonic doctor Coppelius' daughter, who eventually turned out to be a mechanical doll. Such a game of tension between desire and fantasy, life and image, impossibility and incredibility, are the two poles between which the artistic concept of *The Doll* project was conceived.[4] It includes Bellmer's objects, photographs, as well as his artistic and theoretical texts.

3 Cf. https://www.theartstory.org/artist/bellmer-hans/life-and-legacy/, [accessed: 18 Oct. 2025]

4 Cf. *The real breakthrough in his career came with Die Puppe, that is The Doll – **a multidimensional project he started in 1933 and obsessively continued in the following years*** [bold emphasis – AA], *consisting of experiments with the title Doll as well as the photo-documentation and literary texts, published and instantly enthusiastically welcomed by the French surrealists, which allowed the German artist to find his individual place in this hermetic artistic environment.* B. Swoboda, *Rojenia międzyanatomiczne i anagramy ciała: Konstanty A. Jeleński i prace Hansa Bellmera*, *Przestrzenie Teorii*, no. 37, 2022, p. 73, file:///C:/Users/agata/Downloads/SwobodaB-Rojeniamiedzyanatomiczne.pdf, [accessed: 5 Oct. 2025]

Bellmer's sculptures and installations depicting *The Doll* are characterised by intrusive intensity along with the impossibility of fulfilment. His principle of representation consists in disintegration and fragmentariness, suggestive of inadequacy of other means of expression. The sculptures present the doll's body as convulsively misshapen, dismembered, disassembled from the inside, like a construction mechanism of the phantasm it is meant to impersonate. Such transmutations, however, are doomed to repetitiveness, to rejection of the cohesive entirety, and lasting in something ruptured and incomplete. We are, therefore, within the process of survival, which incarnates the specific decomposition, accompanying the creative subject and reflected in the artistic object. The object becomes a total projection, but also a vision of the world in crisis, calling this entire world into question. *The Doll* suddenly stands for a phantasm of childhood, what has been lost and will never come true, the game of cruelty. It is also an automatic correlation between a family home and danger, since being at home becomes a threat every time. *The Doll* is also a synonym (attribute) of a young girl on the threshold between childhood and sexual maturity, which, as the cultural empty space, serves as a screen for men's projection. The doll's body is a descent into black eroticism as well as a material for forging the impossible. *The Doll* are biomorphic sculptures[5], whose swells and structure were intended to indistinguishably imitate living flesh, but it is



HANS BELLMER, *The Doll*, 1935

5 A term coined by K.A. Jeleński in his essay *Bellmer albo Anatomia Miłości Fizycznej i Nieświadomości*, Gdańsk 2013

also the accomplishment of a fantasy, which feeds on the artificiality of the impossible assembly. In the end, *The Doll* is a monstrous-body, a hybrid-body, which comes to being in the outburst of uncontrollable desire. Biomorphism of the body's monstrosity is both organic and cultural, because *The Doll* is, in a way, a revolution of social conventions as well as a revolution of the body, which will not be possible without a new pact and a new story.

Bellmer dedicates to Ursula N. his poetic essay *Lalka: wariacje na temat montażu rozczłonkowanej małoletniej* (The Doll: Variations on the Assembly of a Dismembered Adolescent Girl, 1934), which ends in the following quote:

> *Adjust their joints one to the other, arrange childlike poses by using ball joints to their fullest extent, follow very gently the contours of the hollows, taste the pleasure of the curves, wander in the labyrinths of the ears, make everything pretty, and ruthlessly spill the salt of deformation. Don't stop short of the interior. Lay bare suppressed girlish thoughts,... ideally through the navel, visible as a colorful panorama electrically illuminated deep in the stomach.*[6]

The first *Doll* made at that time was a full-size wooden mannequin with perfectly moveable joints, with Bellmer's panoramas in the stomach: in the small crystals you can see The Eiffel Tower or Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. They were so described by Konstanty Jeleński: the crystals *featured the sequence of landscapes, a handkerchief with a girl's spittle, a ship sinking among ice fields of the North Pole...*[7] and commented by Bartosz Swoboda: *The panoramas mentioned in Jeleński's essay, the thoughts and dreams of an adolescent girl, as defined by Bellmer himself, are a set of six views – observable through the Doll's navel – based on a rotary mechanism in the mannequin's stomach and activated by pressing a button in its nipple.*[8] The woman's body becomes extremely objectified and sexualised, but this objectification does not refer to the body alone. It extends also to what might be defined as the girl's imagination, and a question regarding it, is a component form of the work. Through problematising the girl's interior, a metaphor of her stomach as a form of awareness, there arises the inalienable question about the girl's subjectivity to exist not only as a sexual object.

The Doll is staged in various settings (interiors or nature) and poses, often explicitly sexual in character, and with specific attributes (*a single high-heel shoe, artificial jewellery, a beret, stockings, suspenders, laces*[9]). It was only later, probably after the artist read Kleist's treatise *On the Marionette Theatre* (1810), that the second version of *The Doll* was given a centrally-situated ball joint, which allowed it to assume much more complicated and unreal poses. This *Doll* became surrealists' fetish and inspired Paul Éluard to

6 Cit. after: S. Taylor, *H. Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, MIT Press, Cambridge 200, pp. 28, 83

7 K.A. Jeleński, *Bellmer...*, op. cit, pp. 8–9

8 B. Swoboda, *Rojenia międzyanatomiczne...*, op. cit., p. 74

9 Ibidem

write several prose poems, which accompanied Bellmer's photographic series published in one of the magazines, and then in an individual book.[10] These texts express an univocal delight over derealisation of the body and situating what is girlish (womanly) in specific symbolic void. Metaphors of empty spaces and emptiness in *The Doll*'s eyes rest all the power and agency in the maker, thereby reinstating his lost right to sexuality, and generating a type of necessary sexual rebellion against the fossilised principles of sexophobic social order. Although Éluard, not altogether knowingly, documents what feminist philosophy calls dereliction[11] of girls' and women's subjectivity by symbolic systems, such void is revealed as trackless wilderness, possible space of sexual aggression.

Surrealism was the first western artistic movement, the programme of which included the necessity of egalitarian subjectification of intimacy and pursuit of new patterns of gender relations. André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) was not only the overall praise of imagination, but also called for trespassing the borders between a dream and reality, and proposed affirmation of gender in the form of androgynous utopia as the crowning image of surrealist revolution. Such programme postulates, proclaiming a form of gender equality, worked much worse in practice (women surrealists could only remain in Oedipal relationships with the great founders of the movement as their mistresses, wives, sisters, or muses). Rather than address the issue of gender in surrealism, however, the intuition expressed here allows to reveal the extent of a blind spot underlying the flashy emancipation of the early modernism. A French philosopher, Catherine Malabou, in her essay *Pleasure Erased: The Clitoris Unthought*[12], analyses Breton's literary work and returns to the fundamental principle of European imagination, consolidated since the Renaissance. It refers to the separation of the woman-image from how women experience their living body, and from the experience of women's collective life. Such a separation occurs by censoring women's sexuality and its representation, excluded from the principles of depiction typical of the renaissance nymph allegory. A nymph is a projection of a girl or a young woman deprived of her sexuality, which becomes an epitome of a woman at large. The philosopher recalls a known historical fact that from January 1928 to August 1929, surrealists would play a game of sexual truth: they asked one another convention-defying questions about intimacy. Never would they, however, defy the convention to allow themselves subjectify women's sexuality. Although to surrealists a woman was a muse and a sexual object in one, *no one thinks to ask whether she herself is, in fact, in love – whether her body is implicated in this erotic game.*[13]

In Bellmer's project of *The Doll*, this problem is particularly enhanced. *One of the daydreams he [man] enjoys is the impregnation of things by his will, shaping their form, penetrating their substance*, wrote Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949): *the*

10 H. Bellmer, P. Éluard, *Les Jeux de la Poupée*, Paris 1919

11 A French philosopher, Luce Irigaray, uses the term *déréliction*, cf. L. Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme*, Paris 1974

12 C. Malabou, *Pleasure Erased: The Clitoris Unthought*, trans. Carolyn Shread, John Wiley & Sons, 2022

13 Ibidem, p. 10

woman is par excellence the 'clay in his hands' that passively lets itself be worked and shaped...[14] In Bellmer's art, the Pygmalion complex is apparent, but many commentators indicated that it has been specifically exceeded. In his essay *The Anatomy of the Image* (1957), the extended title of which (*Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious: Or, the Anatomy of the Image*) speaks of physical unconscious, explicitly referring to suppressed desire and creative coercion connected with compulsion to repress. *Expression with its pleasure component*, writes Bellmer, *is a displaced pain and a deliverance.*[15] Creation is permanently situated between prohibition, desire and the pain of taboo, and becomes *a bizarre fusion of the 'real' and the 'virtual,' of the 'permissible' and the 'forbidden.'*[16] The monstrous body of the eternal hyperbolic metamorphosis, personified by *The Doll*, is not so much the final product of male gaze,[17] structuring the world according to patriarchal perspective. Here, the gaze is additionally directed to the double-banned object: it is prohibited to speak of one's own desire of the minor, and even more so to ask any question about her subjectivity. Bellmer's male gaze is mostly the gaze focussed on its own desire, the gaze which sees itself and its own impossibility. Researchers of Bellmer's art commented that *The Doll* becomes a mirror of unconscious male desire (Swoboda)[18], and that through *The Doll* the subject of the artwork annihilates both himself and the object of creation in phantomatic dismemberment (Łojszczyk).[19]

This process is accompanied by a large dose of sexual violence and resistance beyond its control. First of all, according to the rule of autotelic male gaze, Bellmer uses accessible descriptions of hysteric women and includes his own projections in his essay. In their case studies, the patients suffer from a series of symptoms such as hallucinations of seeing with their hand, tip of their nose or their left ear. Seeking expressions of the forbidden desire (his own, not the hysterics', after all), Bellmer focusses on the emerging hybrid combinations – new corporal forms – and shapes them into metaphors of womb-armpit, womb-arm. *The image of the sex having slid over that of the eye, there is no obstacle for sexuality (love), disguised as the ability to see, to keep its prestigious promises*, the artist comments. If we can say that the clenched fist opposes the tooth, (...) *the image of the tooth is displaced onto the hand, the image of the sex onto the armpit, that of the leg onto the arm, that of the nose onto the heel. Hand and tooth, armpit and sex, heel and*

14 S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, New York 2009, p. 229

15 H. Bellmer, *The Anatomy of the Image*, trans. Jon Graham, Dominion Publishing, Vermont 2004, p. 6

16 Ibidem, p. 9

17 L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, [in:] eadem, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

18 *The Doll is a mirror reflecting the artist's unconscious – in this regard, it is a visualisation of the unconscious at work, a mechanism of projection of repressed desire.* – B. Swoboda, op. cit., p. 79

19 *The Doll undergoes synthesis and reduction at the same time: the artist photographs individual organs of the mannequin in astonishing configurations in order to eventually annihilate himself as a subject along with the object in phantomatic dismemberment.* E. Łojszczyk, *Niejasne postanowienie roślinnej natury. Strategie mimikry w twórczości Hansa Bellmera i Brunona Schulza*, *Konteksty. Polska sztuka ludowa* 2010, no. 1, p. 116, cit. after: B. Swoboda, op. cit.

nose, (...) *virtual excitation and real excitation are confused through superimposition.*[20] Thereby, the author directly combines fragments of the body as mutual substitutes, which align as metonymical sequences of desire, keeping it alive despite, and even in the face of prohibition. The hybrid forms assumed by *The Doll*'s body actually extend the principle of substitution derived from hysteria in order to narrate the male condition.

Today, hysteria is understood as a social illness medicalising women's sexuality, mainly due to the 19th-century medicine which, shackled by social taboo, could not describe and understand women's intimacy. Bellmer enhances systemic epistemic violence typical of the epoch with trivialisation of sexual abuse, characteristic of modernity, which ceases to be hidden in the taboo sphere. In his deliberations about the correlations between a woman and her image, among his references the artist indicates a bizarre photograph, featuring a crime: *a man, to transform his victim, had tightly bound her thighs, shoulders, and breasts with crisscrossed wire haphazardly causing bulges of flesh, irregular spherical triangles, stretching into folds, unsavory lips, multiplying never before seen breasts in outrageous locations.*[21] The 2nd-century sculpture of Diane of Ephesus, connoted in this context, where the goddess is wearing an ample bulgy robe, reveals surrealists' inability of communing with living women, who could not be restrained to allegories of men's projections.[22]

In the same essay, Bellmer develops the theory of substitution regarding his own inhibitory control. Within the analysis of materiality of the body anatomy, possible to voice only in the unconscious, he introduces the term of body anagram, derived from a linguistic concept. According to this principle, bodies, like sentences, can be artificially assembled, across, by fragmenting wholes recognised as deposits of meaning. And reassembled into new meanings and a new language of desire.[23] (...) *the woman's finger, hand, arm, or leg becomes the man's sexual organ. Thereby the man's sexual organ could be the woman's leg clad in tight hose beneath the swelling of the thigh*, writes Bellmer, *or a pair of oval-shaped buttocks that emphasize the slightly arched spinal column. It could just as easily be her two breasts appended to her neck stretched taut or hanging freely from her torso, or finally the entire woman seated, her back forming a hollow, with or without a hat, or standing...*[24] The concepts of anagrams and permutations became Bellmer's most deliberate attempt at facing the deficit of sexuality management system in the society in which the artist functioned. His apparent alliance with sexual violence (his text revolves around

20 H. Bellmer, op. cit., p.12
21 Ibidem, p. 32

22 Bellmer's biographical facts include an intimate relationship with an outstanding surrealist, Unica Zühn, which ended in her suicide.
23 (...) *the body is comparable to a sentence that invites you to disarticulate it, for the purpose of recombining its actual contents through a series of endless anagrams.* Cf. H. Bellmer, op. cit., pp. 37–38
24 Ibidem, p. 26

the trivialised motif of rape) is partially disarmed by searching for equivalent possibilities of sexual attributes and gender inversion: finding a penis in a woman's body, but also a vagina in a man's body. According to Bellmer-surrealist, the most ideal corporal-linguistic anagram would be a sentence which could function like the body of a hermaphrodite.

It is the very hybridity, dismemberment, fragmentation of *The Doll* that causes this project to plot a certain area of emancipation of its own phantasm. In the context of history of representation, *The Doll* can be interpreted as criticism of growing fascism and rigid social norms, but also as revealing the image of sexuality, which in art history has never been violence-free. Thereby, Bellmer's staging of the woman's body *based on variety, unlimited multitude, all-consuming blend, free fragmentation, and arbitrary assembly does not fit within the limits* of the traditional image of a body consistent with itself. *Bellmer's anatomical transfers, repetitions, transformations, inversions, reversions*,[25] as well as *anatomical divisions and multiplications*, which Jeleński called inter-anatomical delusions,[26] all these forms of transfiguration undermine the principle of naturalness of the body or the urge, emphasise their constructability, and necessity of renegotiation. In a word, *The Doll* is a sexual subaltern, subordinate to others, which deconstructs desire and gender patterns. Moreover, it reveals that there is no desire other than the one under deconstruction.

25 B. Swoboda, op. cit., p. 71
26 K.A. Jeleński, op. cit., p. 18

The Doll is a language of urge confined to an commercial toy of the industrial epoch. It means departure from the organic body towards a prosthesis, supplement, replaceable item, substitute, which according to a French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, emancipates from its secondary function and becomes a separate quality.[27] *The Doll* is artificial, but as such, it is real, it is, like desire and gender identity, a type of social fiction. *The Doll* escapes its maker and becomes a prosthesis, which undermines the prohibition and desire itself. It is a personification of a prosthetic body, whose individual parts can reverse the sense of their meanings. Every part can be something different from what it seems to be, but also every part undermines the meaning of sexuality. *The Doll* impersonates decomposition of impossible desire, an eruption preceded by suppression, yet does not annul it. As a site of sexual violence, *The Doll* is also a field of new processes of deconstructive desexualisation and resexualisation, it is a new design of prosthetic sexuality.

A French non-binary philosopher, Paul B. Preciado, founder of the concept of countersexual revolution[28], which consists in a proposal of a new social pact in contrast to traditional sexual violence as epistemic violence, writes: *Masculinity and femininity,*

27 Cf. P.B. Preciado, *La logique du gode ou les ciseaux de Derrida*, [in:] idem, *Manifeste contra-sexuel*, Paris 2000, pp. 59–72
28 Cf. A. Araszkiewicz, *Seks przeciwko władzy: postpornografia (naprawdę) objaśnia nam świat*, Krytyka Polityczna, 1 June 2024, https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/seks-przeciwko-wladzy-postpornografia-naprawde-objasnia-nam-swiat/, [accessed: 5 Oct. 2025]

heterosexuality and homosexuality are not natural laws, but contingent cultural practices. Languages of the body. Aesthetics of desire.[29] This excellent commentary to Bellmer's aesthetics is enhanced by Preciado, as he even stronger undermines the fossilised sexual codes. In the persistent effort to design our sexual subjectivity outside gender hierarchy, the philosopher describes a fantasy of a futuristic biological 3D printer. *It would be possible to have a penis with a clitoris or neither of the two or a third arm in place of the penis, or a clitoris on the solar plexus or an eroticized ear devoted to sexo-auditory pleasure.*[30] Such corporal clusters of new organs, the intuitive echo of Bellmer's hybrid forms, break with heteronormative cognitive violence of fetishising gender differences. *The time will come of contrasexual aesthetics,*[31] the philosopher argues, *defined not by laws of sexual reproduction or political regulation but by the principles of complexity, singularity, intensity and affect.* The project of prosthetic sexuality redefines the pattern of sexual difference, which does not refer only to anatomic differences of the body, but rather to its similarities, and its substitutes as separate autonomous whole. Anatomy is an oppressive political fiction. In place of the traditional iron-clad distinction penis–vagina, Preciado proposes the pattern anus–dildo, focussing on the departure from romanticised yet burdened clichés, and designing alternative forms of functioning and experiencing sexuality. A part of this aesthetics, therefore, will be a prosthetic body, able to go beyond and disarm traditional violence and alienation of one's own urges, which is a product of the arbitrary system of power.

29 P.B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus. Chronicles of the Crossing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, emiotext(e) 2020, p. 208

30 Ibidem

31 Ibidem, cf. also: A. Araszkiewicz, *Preciado i rewolucja kontra-seksualna* [in:] P.B. Preciado, *Mieszkanie na Uranie. Kroniki przeprawy*, Kraków 2022, p. 245

II. Puck and Ophelia:
Sexual reconstruction as new gender forms of incarnation

Expanding these deliberations, a new staging of the body and sexuality is offered by a postpornographic film of a German director, Maja Classen, *A Body Like Mine* (2023, 34'). Its protagonist is a non-binary performer of a Berlin's queer circles, who struggles with the discrepancy between themselves and their stage alter ego, often misunderstood, judged and fetishised. Through postpornographic performances and wrestling, Puck tries to build their position of otherness in the world, and boldly presents their engaged actions. Their artist-maker, in turn, emphasises her sensitive position, as she frequently feels uneasy and unstable. Puck's activism relies on presenting themselves as an immanent part of images, which traditionally exile non-white and non-binary bodies. In this case, against the social prohibition of self-expression and its suppression, the division into subject–object is completely and irrevocably blurred. The subject of action (the artist) not so much produces the object, as she multiplies herself in it, in a play of the created character. This way, in the postpornographic visuality, there generates a field for developing new questions about the body and new phantasms of sexuality.

Postpornography discharges systems of exclusion underlying representations of nudity and sexuality in patriarchate not only by means of artistic objects, but also by creating performative space. To postpornography, gender-based violence is visible, and so revealing the machine of abusive meanings of cultural patterns and making defence mechanisms against them, is one of its goals.[32] In traditional representations of sexuality, the body, whose sexual experience is absolutised, conserves systems of power and remains blocked from the possibility of transformative social potential of sexuality. Postpornography not only reveals such patterns of power, but also indicates all space for speaking of and performing sexuality – as space for negotiation. According to Paul B. Preciado, what is crucial in postpornography is the *epistemological and political rupture*[33], that is the individual, independent from collective matrices, DIY principle of deconstruction and reconstruction of desire and pleasure patterns. It is accompanied by a different understanding of visual manners of cognition, new forms of embodiment and sexual practices, and a new sexual definition of what we describe as public space.

Postpornography reveals discriminations connected with sexuality, race, social class and binary gender. It sees sexuality as a phenomenon that is fluid, diverse, amorphous, in constant transition. Here, gender ceases to be only performative, but also becomes prosthetic, and can be formed by means of prostheses, including sexual gadgets as potent carriers of gender and sexuality. The key elements of postpornographic representation, therefore, are various prohibited, politicised, prosthetic and performative bodies. In the film narrative, Puck is fighting for their visibility as a black person affirming their identity. They address controversial topics such as the right to be a sub in BDSM context without the necessity of justifying it only with skin colour. The frames feature them in queer cabaret shows, performing a prosthetic gender, using their female body with an enormous decoy penis in their successful spectacle. The film struggles to present sexuality-based violence in a transformative way, as stagings and postproduction of individual frames attempt to repeal the principle of male gaze.

At the level of film narrative, two stylings collide: the non-binary artist in their daily life and the oneiric layer of Puck's domain, who present themselves in the Baroque setting of still life. This setting is abundant and excessive, amid dry flowers, fruit, shells, pearls and candle light, we see Puck on a platform as a being perfectly fit in the composition. On the one hand, it undermines classical canons of iconography, which exclude whatever is inconvenient, and on the other, reveals that the equality of all bodies and their urges always could have been represented it them. Such marvellous oneirism balances out difficult daily reality, in which the non-binary character faces social marginalisation and discrimination. Rather than serve the role of illusory detachment, this form of imaginative utopia is an authentic imaginative vehicle of social transformation.

32 A. Araszkiewicz, *Seks przeciw władzy*..., op. cit.

33 Cf. P.B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson, The Feminist Press, University of New York City, 2013; cf. also A. Araszkiewicz, op. cit.

Puck is a revisitation of a famous character from Shakespeare's drama *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: the favourite elf from king Oberon's suite has a specific assignment of enchanting personas according to the royal scheme. Its lapse sets in motion a series of comical mishaps, which in the play indicate a range of specific inversions, coming together in a type of sexual anarchy. *Exchangeability of affects and lovers becomes a frolic*, wrote Jan Kott,[34] *'A Midsummer Night's Dream' is the most erotic of Shakespeare's plays*. According to the Polish theatre scholar, it is because of Puck that the *imagery of love, eroticism and sex in 'The Dream' undergoes such considerable transformations*. Sexuality becomes a domain of returning to the archaic animal-human whole, beyond social taboo, offering intoxication and liberation. This way Puck, as a non-binary prosthetic body, becomes our guide to a new gender and counter-sexual revolution. The film title itself *A Body Like Mine*, which annuls the division into the self and the body, generates a new formula of subjectivity, incarnated and gendered in an innovative manner.

Making an allusion to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Maja Classen also introduces a different perspective on film making, that is a queer gaze.[35] It bears no frames, embracing and normalising whatever society perceives as weird, non-classifiable and difficult. Moreover, it challenges the notions of female or male corporality either by opening up the relationship between gender and corporality or by specifying the existing notions of transgender. A queer gaze objects to forcing embodied experiences into the frames of acceptable representation and insists on recognition of all embodied experience, striving for their visibility and representation. It departs from the focus on perception and becomes a way of being – there are no active or passive subjects. Thereby, it disturbs historical relations of power and repeals the objectifying understanding of sexuality, offering a more inclusive and evidently political point of view.

Classen's film shares such an intention with a theatre spectacle of an Austrian director, Florentina Holzinger's *Ophelia's got talent* (2022), which challenges the myth of nymph and the place of the woman's body in collective imagination. This postdramaturgic staging leads us through a setting of a TV show, myths and fairytales, patriarchal clichés, as well as the tragedy of Ophelia as a modern incarnation of nymph. In Shakespeare's drama *Hamlet*, which solidifies the domain of public matters as men's, it must be achieved by blurring sexual violence. Ophelia is sacrificed and drowns, while water is meant to incarnate the true element of womanhood, consisting of tears, amniotic fluid, and milk. Her silent death embodies patriarchal idealisation of a woman's death, the coercion of which underlies social order. With Holzinger, however, the catastrophe of patriarchate writes not only into glorifying sexual violence, but also into the catastrophe of Anthropocene. On stage, actresses and non-binary acting persons, including persons with disabilities, act with their nudity. Ever

34 J. Kott, *Szekspir współczesny*, Warszawa 1969, pp. 265–279

35 M. Moss, *Thoughts on a Queer Gaze*, https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/thoughts-on-a-queer-gaze/, [accessed: 5 Oct. 2025]

since the Renaissance, nymphs have been presented as women without sexual organs. The spectacle, featuring the slaughter of nymphs by prohibiting their own gender, achieves what has been unrepresented so far: it situates women's vaginas at the centre. It questions their place in the logic of representation and the logic of constructing patterns of sexuality and desire. The spectacle raises questions about the possible reversal of deadly patterns of gender functioning, necropolitical ways of managing what is material: bodies and nature.

The phantasm of the body as proposed by Holzinger should be understood as completely detached from any essentiality. Although its emanations occur through naked women's sexuality, they actually redefine what traditional iconography codenamed as women's nakedness. First and foremost, their status exceeds the principle of subject–object: it is a consistent stage work on reversing the objectification of the woman's body. Persons acting on stage sometimes function in the roles of marionettes, animated dolls. Such an intuition of permanently challenging the representation of a woman's body as a doll hybrid, under recurrent, never-ending deconstruction, is always present in Holzinger's spectacles. The presented corporal diversity are not only bodies of various sizes, but also wheel-chaired ones, and bodies in drag. On stage, in huge water tanks, throughout the spectacle there swim naked, embodied nymphs, while other acting persons perform with their women's nudity various incarnations of aquatic manhood. Pirates, fishermen, sailors, marine man-centric culture of chantey – all these are acted in drag king performances, while maintaining women's nudity. In the spectacle, Ophelia is the nymphs' – mermaids Udine and Melusine – sister, who finds her true survival underwater, although her life and death are defined by the stereotype of womanhood, according to which she dies in silence, as if nothing has happened, it also defines her resistance. As a female character, at the threshold of modernity Ophelia becomes agentic in her lack of agency. Imaginatively, she has survived in water metaphors, in aquatic figures of mermaid and nymph creatures, because as a victim of symbolic rape, she is the focal point of the narrative about dissent to the silent death sentence, to sacrificing women and non-normative persons in the order of representation and democracy, social and symbolic structure. The scene of slaughter of mermaids as an environmental disaster and incarnation of sexual and sexist violence is on repeat in the huge water tanks on stage. Phantasms of massacre, dismemberment, disintegration of the world and outbreak of the catastrophe is an enormous staging of the critical moment. Outrage is repetitive as a manner of narrative, a form of expression, and accounting for tradition of visuality – a perpetuation, recurrent solidification of murder–slaughter of mermaids is an attempt to exceed the linearity of disaster, immanently written into the order of Anthropocene and Capitalocene. As such, Ophelia's corporality becomes a new form of prosthetic corporality, form of resistance and survival of aquatic inclusive womanhood: its meaning is fluid, polymorphous, displaced, destabilised, and subversive.

III. Conclusion: Towards the Counter-sexual Revolution

In the light of presented deliberations and ways of understanding of the discussed works, corporality and sexuality turn out to be a phenomenon, which is, by definition, transgressive and escapes norms, prohibitions, restrictions. In Bellmer's vision of the body, the said subversion relied on thematising social prohibition in times of growing fascism, and expressed violence in him constructing hybrid, polymorphous, and diversity-incarnating forms of the prosthetic body of *The Doll*. Turning into an autonomous substitute, *The Doll* reveals the potency behind deconstruction of the subject–object creative dynamic. The open space of the phantasm exposes the arbitrariness of construction of identity and patterns of sexuality. Expanding representation by the issues of prohibition and exclusion, exposing sexual violence in presentation of corporality and, more broadly, sexuality, imposes the reference to contemporary representations of queer, related to post-pornography and a queer gaze. The non-binary and racialised film character of Puck, performing their prosthetic sexuality on stage, exposes political fictionality of anatomical organs. Enhancing the idea of the body as a prosthesis, it decolonises the ideal of beauty and principles of racialisation and sexualising of interpersonal relationships. Florentina Holzinger, in turn, by making a feminist theatrical thriller of Anthropocene, saves the bosom of nature by situating a woman's womb in the centre of representation. There, women's nudity is prosthetic also in the sense that it plays the role *pars pro toto* of the entire spectrum of gendered identities. The remade idea of the doll entails deconstruction work with the body as a phantasm internalising gender-based violence. To Holzinger, sexual and sexist violence is both the start point and end point of stage deliberations. It is, however, also a necessary stage of construction of egalitarian imagination within the new gender revolution. Counter-sexuality challenges the heterocentric social agreement, the normative performativity of which has been written into bodies as biological truth. It offers new terms and conditions of the counter-sexual contract, focussed on pleasure–knowledge, of all bodies and their desires – defined not according to gender, but as vocal subjects. Maybe beside sexuality as we understand it at the moment, in order to depart from pain, cruelty and suffering toward inventing other public, shared, collective forms of sexuality, which could go beyond these confined frames.

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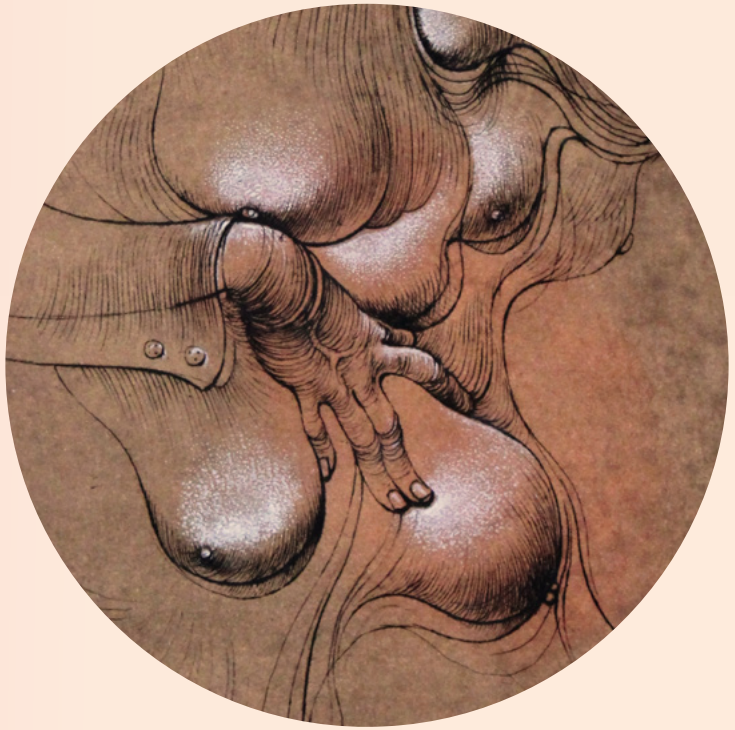

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Disturbing art rarely enjoys understanding. Nonetheless, it is the tension between fascination and resistance where the space of the real dialogue resides. Hans Bellmer was an artist, who was not seeking solace in beauty, but the truth in its cracks.

I decided to support this publication, because I believe that contemplation of art, also the one disturbing, difficult and evading simple categories, is one of the most important ways to talk about freedom, the body, identity, and boundaries of human experience. It is not only a story about an artist, but also a reflection on the human condition in the 20th century. Our fear, desire, and pursuit of meaning in the world, which has fallen apart before our eyes.

Supporting this publication, I believe that art and critical thought constitute one of the last resorts of authentic freedom. They allow us to ask questions with no easy answers, and learn sensitivity toward what is different. This book invites such a conversation.

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