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OFFSETTING THE ‘VIOLENCE’ OF THE MALE GAZE THROUGH THE BOX-ASSEMBLAGE

ŁAGODZENIE “PRZEMOCY” MĘSKIEGO SPOJRZENIA POPRZEZ ASAMBLAŻ

Abstract

The purpose of the article and my purpose as an artist is to demonstrate how my box-assemblage succeeds in countervailing the ‘violence’ of the male gaze through its sanctuaried design and Idoia’s simulacra, relics and memorabilia that make up its fabric. While acknowledging that Idoia embodies my unattainable other, I have come to the point where I have no qualms in equating her with the transcendental. To this effect, the box-assemblage fuses the sacred and the profane, and subjects Idoia’s raw sexuality to a process of transubstantiation whereby the ordinary yearns for the extraordinary. Furthermore, by having her body eroticised and fetishised through fragmentation, a process construed as violent in nature, the artefact roots within itself the notions of Eros and Thanatos. With

Abstrakt

Celem tego artykułu, jak również moim zamysłem artystycznym, jest wykazanie w jaki sposób moje asambláže przeciwstawiają się przemocy męskiego spojrzenia poprzez swój rezonujący religijnie kształt oraz symulakra Idoi, relikwie i pamiątki, które składają się na ich tkankę. Choć przyznaję, że Idoia uosabia mojego nieosiągalnego Innego, nie waham się odkrywać w niej element transcendentalny. W ten sposób asamblaż łączy sacrum i profanum i podporządkowuje pierwotną seksualność Idoi procesowi przeistoczenia, gdzie to, co zwyczajnie tęskni za tym, co wyjątkowe. Dodatkowo, poprzez fragmentację jej ciało staje się erotycznym fetyszem i to, co w naturze utożsamiane jest z przemocą, poprzez dzieło sztuki zaczyna być nośnikiem pojęcia Erosa i Tanatosa. W ten

such attributes, the box-assemblage not only empowers this woman to display herself on her own terms, but questions and disrupts the violent spectatorship and dominance of the male gaze.

Keywords: female body, Eros and Thanatos, fetish, fragmentation, male gaze, *mise-en-abyme*, violence

sposób asamblaż daje kobiecie siłę nie tylko w przedstawianiu siebie na własnych warunkach, ale również by przełamać przemoc i dominację męskiego spojrzenia.

Słowa kluczowe: kobiece ciało, Eros i Tanatos, fetysz, fragmentacja, męskie spojrzenie, *mise-en-abyme*, przemoc.

My contribution to this volume revolves around a series of thirteen three-dimensional, body-themed box-assemblages that I produced as part of my doctoral research at Loughborough University in the United Kingdom. The outer walls of these artefacts conceal from uncontrolled public display fetishised and sacralised representations of a particular woman who, for the purpose of this study, goes by the alias of Idoia, together with several other objects. For the past fifteen years this specific person has been the cynosure of my studio practice and, I dare say, within the context of my work she not only epitomises but also transcends womanhood, even if merely on a purely imaginary level.

The manifold representations held inside such a structure include look-alike plaster simulacra produced from moulds taken directly off Idoia's body. Unlike other forms of portrayal, for their materialisation body-casts require the direct intervention of the person in question. It is a collaborative and intimate technique that allows us to metaphorically transfer her body fragments into the box-assemblage. Consequently, this kind of artefact questions and disrupts the traditional assumption that tangible esthetic experiences can only be brought about through the artist's (invariably male) mind and its supposed predilection to ingenuity [Mey, 2007, p. 13]. The specialised procedures entailed in the production of these simulacra are digitally registered by camcorders; excerpts of raw footage thus captured are screened as looped video clips inside three of the box-assemblages. All this goes on to demonstrate that, rather than the passive associate in the creative process, Idoia transforms herself into a creative agent and direct accessory. She not only partly bears the responsibility for how her persona is conveyed to prospective gazers through the box-assemblage, but enables herself to come up against the 'onslaught' of indiscriminate male scrutiny.

Whereas the box-assemblage's distinct design is meant to entice prospective partakers to physically walk around it and examine it, lack of forthright disclosure of its contents ought to keep at bay any gender partiality they might foster. Following familiarisation with the artefact's fabric and subsequent unfastening of its closure mechanism, the viewers set themselves on an intramural journey of it. Such action calls upon them to take the pertinent role of 'participant-spectators,'¹ readily and physically available to interact with it. This artwork not only subverts the unequivocalness that characterises

¹ Marsha Meskimmon uses this term to denote viewers whose interest in a work of art goes beyond just gazing. She uses it in several of her works including *Contemporary art and the cosmopolitan imagination* [2011] and in the editorial introduction to *Women, the arts and globalisation* [2013].

traditional subject-object positioning in Western art history, but also implicates the viewers in its perception.

When the first hinged panels of the box-assemblage are agape, in sight is just a fraction of what it has to offer—what lies at its innermost is still concealed. However, at this juncture one gets the correct impression that the artefact is a complex representation of Idoia, one that makes her an elusive prey for the male gazer. Further ingress into the structure translates into contact with Idoia's prurient body-parts, intimate belongings, and also treasured first-class relics of her. With its multiple doors and chambers, the box-assemblage sets in motion a provocative *mise-en-abyme* that not only enforces its self-reflexivity, and through representations and objects entices the viewers to experience the next in line, but also narrativises my relationship with Idoia. The participant-spectators are lured to move from the innocuous images adorning its outer walls to the provocative representations of this woman within. Each 'step' translates into more explicit exposure of this female subject's body, and at times also me as the artist. The *mise-en-abyme* culminates at the very centre of the structure where, in lieu of what they might expect—her complete and idealised body, the partakers are presented with a raw and prurient token of her femininity. The shock value of the last mentioned is augmented by the accompaniment of the sealed vial of pubic hair retrieved from Idoia's skin. Confronted with such surprises and explicit imagery, the male gaze is liable to lose its domineering power, that accrued over past centuries, the result of ingrained Western visual culture that disdains female subjectivity.

Here it is appropriate to point out that the triviality of the pubic hair held inside the box-assemblage is comparable to that of relics encased, guarded and idolised in many churches and other places of worship. Through a similar *modus operandi*, once these body fragments are placed inside the box they are 'sacralised' and transformed into symbols of Idoia, or rather relics of her existence. According to the Roman Catholic Church, a relic is part of a soul's 'container' with which it will eventually be restored back to a full body through resurrection. As Idoia's actual body parts are unified with the artefact, they obscure the differentiation between its state as representational device and that of substantial presence of the subject concerned. Thus, with its explicit reference to objects of veneration and its recall of the existence of many body-part relics spread around the world, the box-assemblage equates the female body with the divine and transforms itself into my personal means of accessing the other. Caroline Bynum and Paula Gerson point out that when a relic is part of an actual person, it transcends the distinction between 'representing' and 'being present' [Bynum and Gerson, 1997]. Here I exploit the lure of the body and the belief that our identities are locked into our flesh and blood—that the body is the locus of the self. The partitioned Idoia is re-corporealised through the artefact and, whether to be yearned or lusted, dreaded, or dispassionately examined, her transformed state is capable of substantiating desire and luring the male gaze [Fierman and O'Donnell-Morales, 2011, p. 35].

Going a step further, the enclosure of the box-assemblage not only situates Idoia in a particular frame of reference strictly identified and circumscribed with her and

myself, but obscenely suggests that it is capable of apotheosising her. This goes on to show that the artefact is a fusion of the profane and sacred, or rather the sexual and religious, one that readily subjects the raw sexuality of its protagonists to a process of transubstantiation² whereby the ordinary yearns to be converted into high-art [Gosden, 2004, p. 37-8; Nead, 2001, p. 85]. As is the case with more recent examples in which I as the artist feature with Idoia, through transubstantiation the artefact re-materialises the actuality of a bi-corporeal entity that, unlike the temporality of our breathing existence, is suspended in time together with particular moments of togetherness, sameness and equivalency, to become a locus of our convergence and near assimilation. This artefact has the necessary attributes to generate its own peculiar kind of taboos with which it then readily confronts the viewer.

Furthermore, the notions of Eros and Thanatos are rooted in this artefact because it eroticises and fetishises our bodies through fragmentation. On the one hand this discontinuity and displacement is empowering because, as is the case with Idoia's complexified appearance and performance within its confines, it enhances her self-representation and self-exposure. On the other hand, it may be construed as violent in nature because of its mechanism of mutilation and de-composition. Thus, the box-assemblage not only transforms the raw nakedness of Idoia, but through fragmentation, reconfiguration and sanctuarization, prosthetically establishes for it associations which go beyond the confines of her corporeality and temporality. Characterised with such circumstances the artefact is meant to confound further the male gazer's encounter with it. He may wish to believe that this artwork is just a composite portrayal of a woman, at least 'once removed' from her flesh and blood existence; however, the artefact makes itself amply clear that it is an actual presence of a transformed Idoia that transcends womanhood and harbours the unknown. And importantly, by initialising and executing direct interventions on her own body, Idoia not only confirms her right to do what she pleases with her self, but challenges patriarchal authority—through self-fashioning she affirms of her selfhood.

At this juncture I will make direct reference to *Tabernacle for Idoia*, 2011, which from its inaugural state of 'openness' brings to light embedded signs that are enough to establish its own links with the Christian faith. Design-wise, its similarity with polyp-tychs and tabernacles is unmistakable and Idoia's poses recall notable life experiences of Christ. This box-assemblage's array of nested and closable spaces not only secures an exciting spectacle but ensures that the mise-en-abyme experience, and the partakers' gradual take on its inwardness, are sustained. At its innermost, the link between Idoia and the divine is at its most forceful and disconcerting, whelmed with obscene and sacrilegious issues. As with a number of other examples, the penetralia of *Tabernacle for Idoia* holds the look-alike simulacrum of this woman's vulva in all its naturalness, complete with its asymmetrical form, protruding labia, and rugulose texture—the result of deliberately and unashamedly adopting an open pose in my studio. Idoia is aware that by doing so, her sex with all its minutiae is not just being presented to me but also to prospective

² *Transubstantiation* is the process whereby the Eucharistic bread and wine alter their substance but not appearance and molecular structure.

and anonymous viewers through the simulacrum. Whereas Idoia challenges and pre-emptly the power of the male gaze with such a disconcerting trophy of her femininity, she makes contact with the viewer through the welcoming gesture of her right hand. In all this, Idoia is staunchly countering the coercion of the male gaze and also what Lisa Tickner calls the 'de-sexualising of women and the fetishisation of their image' in the western world through the 'anaesthetisation' of the vagina or its outright omission [Tickner, 1978, p. 243]. Her exposed sex is neither pathologised nor eroticised, it is just it—one of several components populating the artefact. The contextualised setting of all these parts within the artefact is crucial to its purpose and function. And here it is pertinent pointing out that the box-assemblage's frame of reference and imagery are influenced by esthetical considerations in such a manner that it enables itself to trigger the sensuous and spiritual perceptions of the participant-spectators. Contemporaneously, it is also affected with others that are surely to bring on emotions of lewdness, dislike, distaste, and maybe also revulsion. Imbued with this contrariety—a result of its innate capacity to juxtapose the sacred and the profane, the esthetic and the obscene—the box-assemblage generates a particular kind of iconographic power, one that is strong enough to countervail the violence of the male gaze.

This faculty is sustained by the libido engendered by Idoia, a particular kind of eroticism that she willingly shares with anyone longing to entertain a mutually beneficial relationship with her. At this point I wish to make reference to Georges Bataille's claim that eroticism compels us to transit from what we believe to be a state that mirrors our true selves, and over which we confidently feel to be in control, to a state of 'partial dissolution,' one that brings us a loss of self-possession and self-discipline. Here Bataille is not alluding to some kind of calamity befalling partners in love; nonetheless, he connotes that through their erotic engagement they are likely to succumb to violations of their persona. In such discourse on eroticism and the changes it brings about, Bataille claims that the altered state transitioned to is qualitative and gender specific:

The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the real of discontinuity.... In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity [Bataille, 1986].

Bataille's analysis of cross-gender erotic desire is an interesting one; however, his assertion that in such sexual rendezvous the prime mover is the male partner is challenged by the modus operandi of the box-assemblage. Any male spectator wishing to experience Idoia's eroticism through the artefact must forfeit his anonymity which, in other contexts, advantages his position vis-à-vis the female subject. Also, as a consequence of the partitioned state of her body, he may never know whether she is still capable of countering and returning his gaze; this uncertainty may prove unsettling to anyone attempting a voyeuristic engagement with her. Furthermore, any dynamic and physical interaction with the artefact not only subjects him to an ever changing depth of field relative to it, but also obliges him to continually shift his viewpoint in relation to

Idoia. All this results in the fracturing of his gaze into a series of glances, a process which not only weakens the dominating power of his scrutiny but renders it harmless. As for Idoia, she not only permits but also controls the fragmentation of her own body with the knowledge that her plenitude is eventually restored and secured by the box-assemblage. At no instant is she violated or subdued.

Probably, the better example which discredits Bataille's assertions regarding the roles of the male and female participants in the sexual encounter is *Peephole box* (2013-unfinished). If the male gazer is game to this box-assemblage's idiosyncratic attributes, it awards him with a particularly forceful relationship with Idoia, even though it is characterised by a power imbalance in her favour. Anyone wishing to gain access to its interior and experience the 'spectacle' that lies beyond the orifice alluded to in its title, must relinquish his inconspicuousness and detachment. Visually and tactually examining the box-assemblage, and familiarising oneself with, it is a must.

While the outer recesses of the doors along its longer sides hold innocuous painted images, their inner counterparts carry photographs of an unveiled Idoia striking poses next to painted and oversized representations of herself. At the back of these doors are variedly sized spaces that contain a miscellanea of cast simulacra, objects, and mementos of her existence. As for the actual peephole, this lies behind two overlapping doors countersunk on one of the shorter façades. The recesses on either side of each of these two doors, save one, hold painted representations of Idoia's body fragments. While the frontmost and constantly visible painting shows her face and the crest of her left breast, the others with one exception show more of her intimate parts.

Once doors which have been just mentioned are drawn wide open, the spectators are confronted with a direct and exact replica of Idoia's perineal area with actual pubes embedded in it. This vagina and anus simulacrum is niched underneath the structure's own 5 millimetre wide orifice through which the spectators are invited to peep. When the structure is configured in such a state of 'openness,' this intimate body fragment comes flanked by a painting of a pussycat on the left and another of Idoia's vagina on the right. Although one might say that in opening these doors the spectators are getting more than what they bargained for, it is amply clear that throughout this unfolding of body-parts, Idoia is calling the shots. While through her first- and second-class relics she effects a 'presencing' of herself, she also returns the participant-spectators' gaze through her genitalia, anus, and the pussycat who acts as proxy and also visual pun. For the 'voyeur,' ocular access through the peephole comes at a price—he must effectively thrust his face against Idoia's prurient body fragment, which is in lieu of her worldly existence. All this clearly shows how the box-assemblage disrupts the traditional anonymity and detachment of the male gazer vis-a-vis the unawareness of the woman gazed-upon, a subject extensively addressed by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" [Mulvey, 1975]. With the facial and perineal contact established, the spectator looks through the peephole to see moving images of a naked and uninhibited Idoia performing in my studio. From time to time, she directs her own gaze toward the peephole to engage with whoever might be looking at her. Any feeling of separation between the two is

thoroughly obliterated. Although Idoia may be a kind of exhibitionist, considering the way she flaunts parts of herself, it is unlike the female figure Mulvey has in mind; she displays herself on her own terms and not only to appease male desire, if that is indeed the case. Also, he is unable to identify with the gaze of the camera because, unlike that of the cinema, the one inside *Peephole box* is set by herself and at no instance does she allow anyone to appropriate it.

At this point I wish to draw comparisons between *Peephole box* and Bataille's 1928 novella, *Story of the eye* [Bataille, 2001]. Both works complicate the concept of the 'male gaze' through critiques of gender relations; while mine accomplishes this through processes characteristic of visual arts, Bataille's effects it through literary mechanisms. Ultimately, both displace and 'destruct' the metaphorical violence of the male gaze, albeit for different motives. Just as in my artefact Idoia is the main protagonist, in Bataille's work it is another woman who goes by the name of Simone. However, notwithstanding the consequence of these two persons, in both works the primary is the eye itself. In Bataille's story the plot revolves around this human organ and its fetishisation through a series of potent and brutal incidents, and also through analogies between it and objects having the same rotundity and, at times, textural feel to them. As for the *Peephole box*, it is an artefact that is contingent on the manner in which the gazer's eye interacts with it. This particular box-assemblage manipulates the actions of the sight organ to such an extent that, in many ways, it is transformed into a fetish of the artefact itself. Also, just as Simone's character may mirror Bataille's sexual fantasies, I have no qualms in stating that Idoia reflects mine; meanwhile, the two women may take upon themselves the lewd thoughts of the reader and the gazer in *Story of the eye* and *Peephole box* respectively.

Here it is pertinent to point out that, according to Bataille, humanity is meant to maintain a continuous existence through sex and death; the former guarantees procreation, and the latter takes charge of making way and space for other individuals. The paradox of death is succinctly addressed by Charlotte Perkins Gilman who comprehends this terminal experience as *the* essential condition of life [Gilman, 1990, p. 40]. Notwithstanding all this, on an individual basis the majority of human beings are self-centred and concerned with their own survival, rather than that of the collective race. This translates into an existence characterised by a perennial urge to interrupt the continuity referred to by Bataille; one way of doing this is creating taboos. While the creation of taboos is one means of maintaining this discontinuity as they set in place behavioural controls with which persons are meant to abide; challenging and deregulating them is a way of resuming the generic continuity.

The box-assemblage arises out of the metaphorical 'discontinuity' of Idoia as her body is fragmented and boxed-up by way of the creative process. However, this cessation is reversed through the artefact's final assembly, a state that equates her with the divine, a conceptual existence of perpetuity and omnipresence; thus, her plenitude is restored. Also, while *Peephole box* transforms itself into a taboo by juxtaposing the profane with the sacred, it readily tempts participant-spectators to come to terms with it and, if need be, transgress it. As for the male gazer, the initial effect of the artefact is problematic on

him as it complicates the concept of what constitutes the theoretical ‘male gaze.’ The latter is transformed into glances whose relative innocuity compromises its appropriated power and triggers the discontinuity of the male counterpart. Nonetheless, interaction with Idoia through the artefact generates and offers a different kind of continuity to the male gazer, one that supersedes patriarchal prevalence and divergences based on gender.

As for *Story of the eye*, Simone and the narrator start off as ‘discontinuous’ persons who then readily confront a series of internalised taboos of their own. However, their continuity is restored through acts of transgression that involve the brutalisation and death of other persons. Interestingly, in both my artefact and Bataille’s novella, the processes that maintain continuity are actualised by women, Idoia and Simone respectively, though my portrayals do not suggest death.

Within the context of Freudian psychoanalysis, both the *Peephole box* and *Story of the eye* amplify any distress caused to male gazers as a result of a woman’s anatomy. Fully experiencing my artefact comes at the price of literally shoving one’s nose against the intimate parts of a particular woman. While on the one hand Idoia ‘succeeds’ in humiliating her viewers, on the other hand she effects a rapprochement with them. Idoia offers them not only the privilege of closely looking at and touching intimate areas of her skin, acts which go a long way toward ‘demystifying her mystery,’ but a direct association with a ‘reformed’ version of herself [Mulvey, 1975, p. 42]. In the case of Bataille’s novella, the male reader has to come to terms with the inherent violence and predomination of Simone and, notwithstanding her gender, associate himself with her.

Also, box-assemblage and novella play on the notion of sex-related shame, that awful feeling arising from the presumption of lewdness in one’s actions. While pudency may not be a primary to others, for myself it is and the inherent urge to address it has been a prime mover of this series of box-assemblages. Confronting and breaking taboos programmed in my upbringing has been a necessary step to come to terms with my own sexuality and the ‘continuity’ of my own existence. The narrator of Bataille’s story, referring to himself and Simone, declares that “[w]e do not lack modesty—on the contrary—but something urgently drove us to defy modesty together as immodestly as possible” [Bataille, 2001, p. 11].

And this brings me to the contingency of Idoia. Contact with any of the box-assemblages translates into contact with Idoia herself. Although they hold parts of her body and belongings, as unified artefacts they restore her plenitude, to be cherished and contemplated. Interaction with any of the structures translates into a direct and intimate relationship with a ‘reformed’ Idoia, nevertheless unidealised and true to herself. Any visual pleasure that a male gazer might attempt to draw out of it, and as alluded to by Mulvey, is harnessed and subdued toward obliteration.

Additionally, the male gazer is not only deprived of the anonymity that is synonymous with the cinematic experience but must make his action, that of engaging with Idoia and her body parts, conspicuous. Finally he must come to terms with the knowledge that he is the objective of another gaze, that of Idoia who might be looking at him from the other side of the peephole. Idoia orchestrates the presentation of herself to

the male gazer with the result that the traditional and theoretical male gaze is rendered powerless. While one may contend that Idoia's exposure as part of the artefact exists for the sake of the male gazer, she takes pleasure in its subjugation; in many ways she transforms the male gaze into a fetish for her own pleasure. It makes way to a new kind of gaze, one that is respectful to her subjectivity.

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