

PSEUDOMORPHING

JOVANA STOKIĆ MEETS ANNA OSTOYA



Female Pseudomorphisms (2010)

New York-based, Polish-born artist Anna Ostoya focuses on the impact of the photographic image in story and memory. Her work playfully and yet provocatively reveals unseen connections, social discrepancies, and gender issues in art history. This year, she was one of eight artists in MoMA's New Photography 2013 exhibition. For this issue of OSMOS, Anna Ostoya talks to curator and art historian Jovana Stokić about process and performativity.

JOVANA STOKIĆ You are eclectic: it's refreshing. You seem to feel comfortable in different media. Who are you?

ANNA OSTOYA I'm still in the process of discovering who I could be and what I could do. The clear definition is not yet formed; I'm not looking for it. In my work I use diverse media like painting, photography, sculpture, text, and sound. But to call myself a multimedia artist wouldn't be right. That would imply that I do installation art—whereas for me, installation art is only one of the media to be used. Mixed media artist wouldn't be right either; mixed media is yet another medium. I decide on a media in relation to a problem that I want to tackle. It is a conceptually grounded decision. Possibly collage—as introduced by Hannah Höch and John Heartfield—is the base of all my work; it defines my approach to art and to myself as an artist.

JS How does photography work for you? What is the impulse?

AO Photography is ever-present in my work. I use it in diverse manner and for diverse ends. For example, my paintings are based on photographs, and the way I paint is related to the photographic process in the sense that I think about the materiality of a reproduction, rather than the materiality of paint. In my series *Autopis: Notes, Copies and Masterpieces* (2009), my interest in the photographic image is particularly visible. I tried to comprehend the history of the avant-gardes by concentrating mostly on images. My initial impulse for the series came from reading art history books where the relationship between text and image often seems suspicious. What is written about the image is not necessarily in the image, and vice versa. For example, *The Tradition of Intensity and Force* (2010), is a photomontage where I collaged famous avant-garde group portraits into one composition. These portraits are predominantly of white male artists. The discrepancy between the



claims for emancipation and progress these artists are associated with—and the patriarchal reality the images present—is striking, yet often overlooked.

JS What struck me when I looked at them is that you've appropriated the avant-garde method of collage, which is a kind of de-hierarchization. There is no foreground or background. It is asking: What is more important? Who are the protagonists?

AO Definitely. Collage is a way out from oppressive reality, a way of challenging such reality.

JS It comes as a wonderful refreshing way of reworking a history written by the winners. And you're never angry-corrective. It's playful. You are aware of the feminist issue, but you are not trying to criticize it.

AO I am happy that you see humor in it.

JS Can you tell me more about this term you use, female pseudomorphism?

AO Yes, *Female Pseudomorphism II* (2010), for example, is a collage of two pictures: that of Emmy Hennings, a performer and one of the founders of Dada in Zurich, and

the other of Emma Heddich, a contemporary artist involved in performance and in collaborative projects. In *Visual Pseudomorphism in Monochrome* (2010), I cut out the elements from two photographs to make a disjointed composition of sculptures, which come from installation shots of Robert Morris exhibition in Green Gallery in 1964 and of Zbigniew Gastomski exhibition at Foksal Gallery in 1967.

AO Many pieces in the *Autopis* series are objects in between photography and sculpture. I used the word pseudomorphism to describe them. The word implies "morphing" and the idea of the morphing of content and the morphing of form. It also implies "pseudo" and the question of authenticity and imitation.

JS The interesting thing is that in any art history text we know that the Polish artist Zbigniew Gastomski and Robert Morris—from this canon—would focus on hierarchy. When you reduce them, or translate them into images, they can really morph, because there is no longer a master narrative. You just

look at them as images. You are playful, but it's a serious endeavor, highlighting power games. What about specific images of women artists at work?

AO I'm interested in the notion of exclusions, in the impossibility of escaping them. Historically, women are a profound example of exclusions in many cultures.

JS You're bringing a possibility of being silent as a way of encountering the bias of the art world, or, the absolute impossibility to speak, because you are muted, obliterated from that group portrait. For myself, as a feminist art historian, it is always tricky to address or reconstruct this historical narrative, without constantly making others feel guilty. I think your work strikes it exactly where it should, because you bring back historical responsibility, but without vengeance.

AO Responsibility is important. Anger can be dangerous.

JS The big problem for feminist artists is that they are ahistorical. They understand that they cannot go back and reinsert a female presence.



Visual Pseudomorphism In Monochrome (2010)

AO I think that a useful way to deal with these problems is to approach history as a narrative of possible histories, to treat it as a material.

JS And your answer is to look at the images.

AO Yes, to look closely and with an open mind, to see beyond what one knows. That's the stake for the artist and the viewer.

JS Tell me about the works in your latest solo show, *Rips: Future Works* at Silberkuppe in Berlin.

AO It is a show of various compositions that could be defined as paintings, collages or, in the case of a few pieces, photographs. The ambiguity of definition is one of the subjects of this show. In *Rips: Future Works (Rape 1)* (2013), I used a photograph that I took when waiting for a subway in New York. The photograph is of a female face that someone ripped off an advertisement and stuck on the tiles. I had the photograph printed and mounted on a board, which then I glued on canvas. I extended the composition from the photograph onto the canvas by repainting some of the photograph's fragments. Now it's difficult to say what is printed, and what is painted. The painted parts can be seen as a frame around the pho-

tograph. But they also can be seen as the proper composition.

JS And this brings to it a completely different register of meaning, because it brings a notion of violence and gender identity to this disruptive female identity in the image. But you also basically play with it. These difficult ideas are cooled by the colors and treatment, the abstract and the grid.

AO Yes, many works look ornamental. I am not afraid of the aesthetic aspect. I don't think it undermines the content or the impact of the message. It doesn't diminish the urgency. It is not an enemy. In any case, it is unavoidable, so it seems better to work with it rather than to ignore it.

JS You don't have to persuade me, because obviously this is what I respond to, but there is this attitude to women artists working with these notions, that would be considered it numbing. An anesthetizing of the message. And you're saying that the message is not losing anything of its potency, because it doesn't have to be propaganda.

AO There is no escape from the aesthetic aspect. There have been diverse attempts to diminish it in history, which I appreciate within their contexts.

JS Even if it's about you know, blood, in Gina Pane's work?

AO Yes, of course.

JS One day, not now, we should juxtapose images of Anna Mendieta's *Rape* and your work...because you cannot embody anything more than that—except perhaps re-stage Anna Mendieta and do the same?

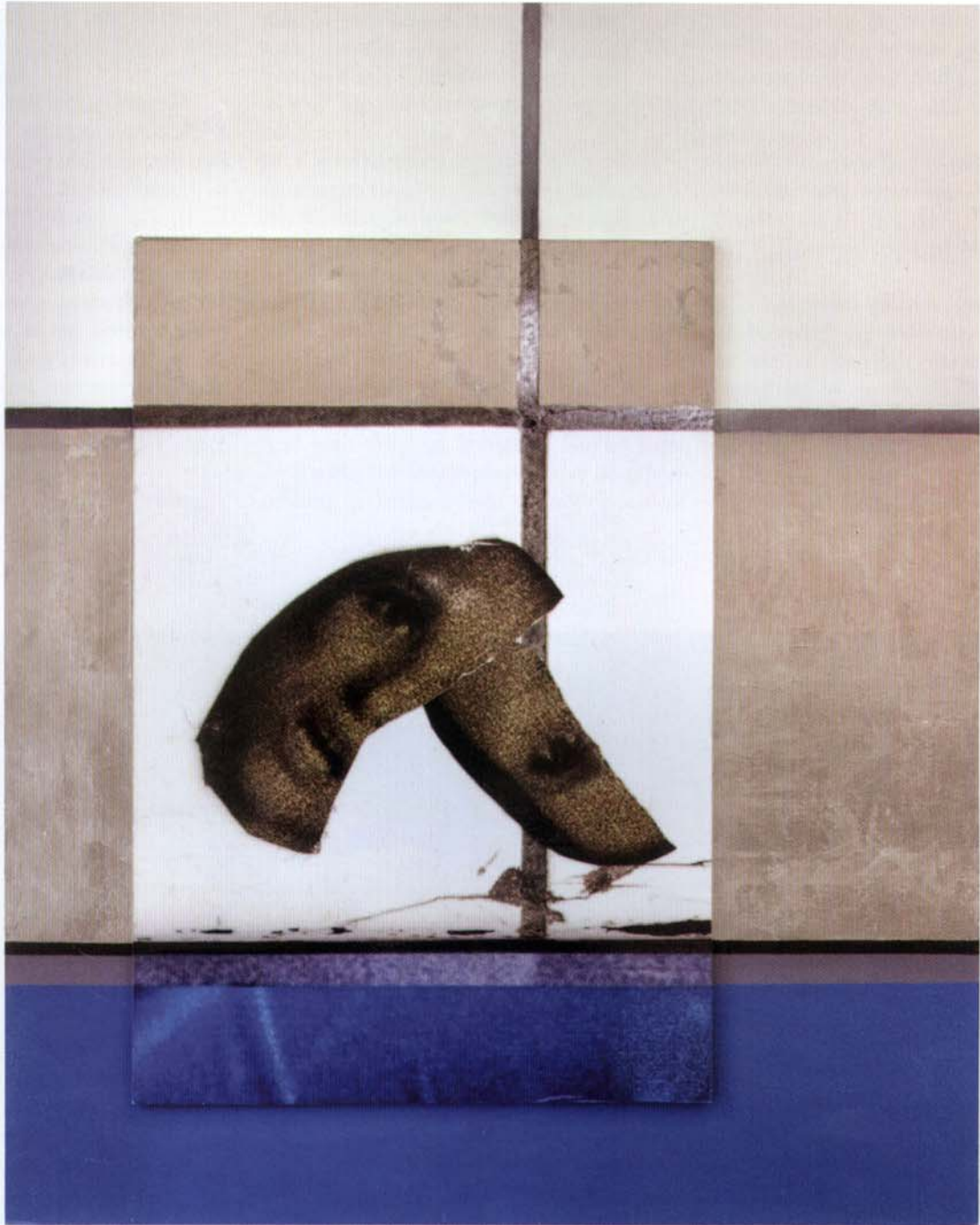
AO That's what some artists actually do. They see a method in re-staging.

JS Anna Mendieta was tremendously brave, positioning her body and her identity. I think it would be a wonderful way to discuss these impossibilities of interpretation and what the purview of art is: Where can you go with that, when not being active isn't right? And as you said, which I really appreciate: You are not muting that message of opposition to violence, but, the image itself doesn't have to be violent.

AO The image doesn't have to look violent to be about violence. I've tried to make nonviolent images about violence, since I think such images communicate more about violence than the images that display it.

JS Creating pictorial unity.

AO I would love to be called a pictorial activist! This eye is a symbol for me of the one



Rips: Future Works (Rape 1) (2013)

