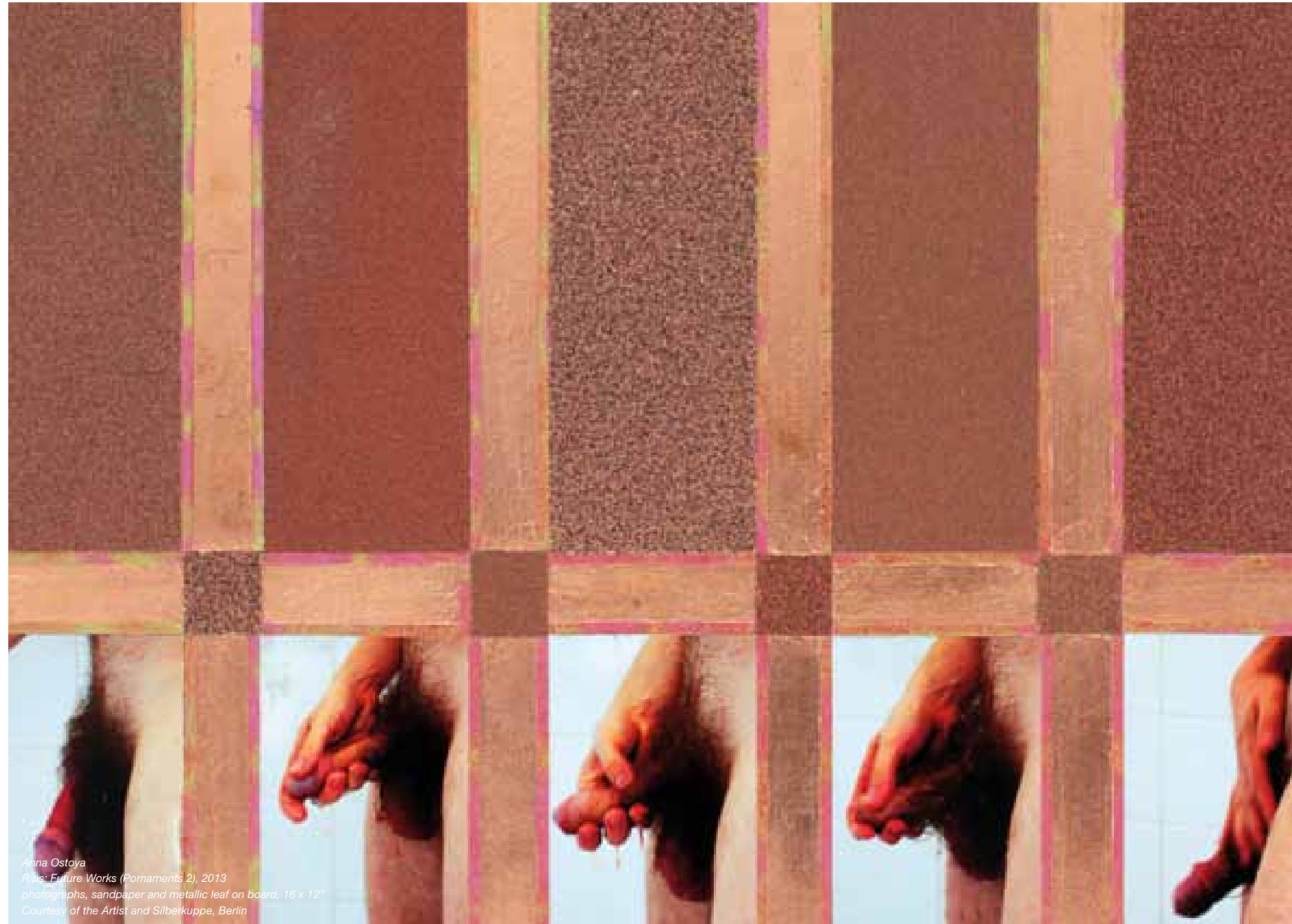


Break a rule to make a new one

Anna Ostoya

by Marta Gnyp



Anna Ostoya
Rips: Future Works (Pornaments 2), 2013
photographs, sandpaper and metallic leaf on board, 16 x 12"
Courtesy of the Artist and Silberkuppe, Berlin

Polish-born, New York-based artist Anna Ostoya explores in her exciting and provoking works the ambiguity of meaning and constructions of historical and social narratives. Combining various techniques and media, Ostoya has been creating an ambitious body of works in which humor and beauty defy social constructions and the contingency of shared values.

Marta Gnyp: You often apply time and space restrictions on yourself while making your works. Why do you put yourself in these limited conditions?

Anna Ostoya: I like the idea of restrictions and the idea of limited conditions. They push me to struggle against the impossible. In this way I feel confronted with the necessity of making decisions and of finding answers to questions such as what do I want to do, what should I do? Restrictions give me an opportunity to test what's possible in a given framework. They lay bare the possibility of a failure and I like the idea of risking a failure.

MG: Do you never cheat? Do you never break the rules that you imposed on yourself?

AO: I do break them. I discovered that it is impossible for me to follow the rules blindly. Often an aesthetic desire to go back, to rework a piece, this necessity coming from the work itself, has been stronger than my conceptual imperative to follow a schedule or to use preplanned material for a certain piece of work. But that's also my rule: Break the rules and make new ones.

MG: You use a lot of different materials, such as newspapers, golden leaves, paint, papier-mâché, glass, even blood. Do these different materials carry a meaning for you or do you use them mostly because of their formal aspect?

AO: Each material carries a meaning, actually a few meanings. That's important to me. There is a historical meaning of how a material has been used and a symbolic meaning for what it stands for. There is a meaning relating to the history of art and a meaning relating to history in general. Using materials means choosing and creating a meaning for them. I've never used any material purely for aesthetic reasons; there has always been a conceptual reason for why it has been used.

MG: Tell me about your recent Pussy Paintings, which you showed during your last exhibition in Berlin. The title could suggest a provocative technique for making (they look like vaginal stamps made with blood). For me as a viewer it was a bit awkward to look at them. I was thinking, what did you want to achieve with

this title? My first association was the *Piss Painting* by Warhol. Was your idea to address the masculine / feminine power game? Did you want to make a powerful, provocative feminine gesture?

AO: I wanted to have this provocative element, not to shock, but to stir. My desire was to provoke viewers to think and to decide for themselves what the works are. I entitled the series the Pussy Paintings numbers one to three. In captions, blood is listed among the materials. But no more information is given about how the works were produced or whose blood was used. That I left open so there is space for a viewer to consider a few possible options that could translate into a few possible interpretations. Surely, the reaction depends on a viewer's personal experiences and on the context of where the works are shown.

MG: So you play with the viewer and the ambiguity in meaning. You can concentrate on the feminine or feministic issues but you can as well think about concepts of artistic production or relativity of perception and so on. Do you feel a need to take a feminist position?

AO: I do feel such a need. I want to contribute to feminism, which I understand is a struggle against injustice. Feminism is about women's rights but it's also about the rights of any group or any individual who suffers from inequality; everyone should try to be a feminist. My use of ambiguity I consider non-ambiguous. I try to give ambiguity a critical use.

MG: I was also thinking in this regard about the works you did for the current exhibition at MOMA in New York where some of your collages are shown. They also address the historical construction of heroic masculinity and femininity, in a humorous way. Do you think that as an artist you need to have a social or political position?

AO: I think there is no way not to have it. Any artist and any artwork always has a political dimension. A lack of position in regard to social and political issues usually means supporting the dominant status quo. For me, negotiating my position in relation to the aesthetic, the political and the social makes art fascinating.

MG: Is your attitude somehow related to your Polish background? Has this kind of historical consciousness been a part of your education? Or is this attitude something personal?

AO: Of course part of one's attitude is always related to one's background. I grew up in Krakow, which is one hour away from Auschwitz; I will never forget

“Just because there are no immediate visible outcomes does not mean that art is powerless. It seems cynical to me to think otherwise.”

that. Also, I will never forget the excitement of the great change of 1989 even if I experienced it only as a child. My attitude was also formed by my interest in reading and talking to others. I was curious about those who questioned and who have tried to improve the world. I guess that drive to collect various explanations was something personal.

MG: Is this the reason that you try to engage with works of various avant-gardes? That you like to refer, for example, to the Mona Lisa, or to engage with Courbet or Mondrian? Do you like to give them a different meaning or add a new meaning to them?

AO: I try to 'activate' the works and the ideas from the past. I think making art means working with meanings, especially today when art is predominantly referential. Art is made, experienced and explained through references, mostly art-historical ones. Using these references in a way that transforms the established meanings has an emancipatory potential. That's why I refer to works from the past. That's also why I engage with avant-gardes who fought against the dominant status quo. I find the discussion about their failure or lack of failure fascinating. To me, nobody who ever really tries really fails; an attempt leaves a mark someone else can work with in the future.

MG: How would you like to treat art history?

AO: I guess I would like to treat art history as a material or a medium. To me, like paint, it has its form and its consistency. It has its history — the history of art history. Maybe it is better to say: it has its histories. I like this material. It seems the most interesting material to work with now since it changes the way art and history can be understood. By working with art history as material, I mean engaging critically with its narratives.

MG: In your collages you use existing images as a part of the material. When is an image appealing to you?

AO: What appeals to me depends on what I'm searching for and on how I decide to do the search. The search can be impulsive or considered. But it is always purposeful. In "Exposures," I sometimes went through a newspaper quickly trying to pick up an image in an instinctual way. I acted spontaneously. But for example in a series of collages based on Italian newspapers "More Real Than What We See," the procedure was different. Since I don't read Italian, I tried to decipher a story of a particular paper by finding connections among its images. Also, when I search for images on the Internet I use different procedures that determine different results.

MG: Your collages are formally very appealing. You are ambiguous about the meaning but I think you are very clear that your works need to stay in the classical realm of beauty.

AO: Thank you for using this word "beautiful" in relation to my collages. Sometimes I wonder what beautiful means. Beauty is not really my concern nor my goal. But I believe that being serious about the content demands being serious about the form. I think about the form through the content and I want the viewer to think about the content through the form. I'm unsure if what I make can be called beautiful.

MG: Is there a difference in your approach towards different media you work with?

AO: Yes. Making collages and compositions differs greatly from making paintings. Working with oil on canvas means working with layers and with fragmentations, which is extremely time-consuming and emotionally and physically draining. Paintings are about endurance; collages are about playfulness. In paintings I avoid "painterly" effects such as impastos or brushstrokes. In my collages and compositions I do the opposite — often I use effects that bring immediate visual results. Just to clarify — "Painting" here I reserve for my layered oil on canvas works.

MG: Why does painting require so much of your patience and persistence?

AO: The way I paint reflects my way of thinking about utopian goals — they can only be achieved through patience and persistence. There are no shortcuts. The outcome depends on the effort you put into the process.

MG: Why don't you allow yourself to be more free and to use this painterly gesture while painting?

AO: Because there is a conceptual framing that comes from my development. In the beginning of my education I painted more traditionally; then I reached the level when I knew how to make a good-looking painting in a fast way, in a few brushstrokes. That's when I stopped painting. I've always liked doing something that would allow me to go beyond my own limitations. Painting became too easy. It wasn't exciting. So I had to stop. But a few years later I was developing some new multimedia works. I wanted to use a specific image from a newspaper. I didn't want to print or to draw it since these techniques seemed too light in relation to the subject of the image, which was children living on a garbage dump. Oil on canvas seemed the right choice because of its gravity, its historical meaning and value. That was when I picked up

painting again to use it in a new way, the way that made me think and work hard. I got into my layered technique and into my abstracted fragmentations.

MG: So you took up painting again?

AO: Yes. It was a painful and slow process. I discovered painting as a metaphor for struggle, but also, as a metaphor for progress. So it wasn't a struggle for the sake of struggle. It was a struggle with an aim.

MG: In this process of struggle you reached the point that you could make paintings with emotional distance.

AO: You could say that. Maybe it's sort of anti paintings. My oils on canvas are nearly as flat as printed reproductions. In respect to some definitions of painting I shouldn't call myself a painter.

MG: But you definitely call yourself an artist.

AO: Yes, even a professional artist.

MG: Do you consider yourself to be a part of your generation of artists? Do you think there's something generational in attitudes toward art?

AO: No. I'm uneasy about the notion of generations. I have friends of different ages and of different backgrounds. I've never belonged to a group of peers born around the same time that I was. And even my friends around my age do different work from me.

MG: Is there a common denominator about your art?

AO: Somebody called my work brutalist eclecticism. But I don't know. I am not really looking for one common denominator. I think all of my practice is working against the idea of one definition. That's because I very much believe that we should always be in the process of changing what we know.

MG: Do you see your art as an instrument of change in a broader social sense?

AO: Of course. I think it is the main reason for making art. You are part of a society, you occupy public space; you have to think about the responsibility that comes with that.

MG: But do you believe your art can change anything?

AO: Yes I do. In general, I believe that art has a huge influence on how people experience the world, how they look at the past, the present, and the future. Through art, people's identities and sensibilities are being formed.

MG: This is not a common idea nowadays. Many artists consider art as an invitation



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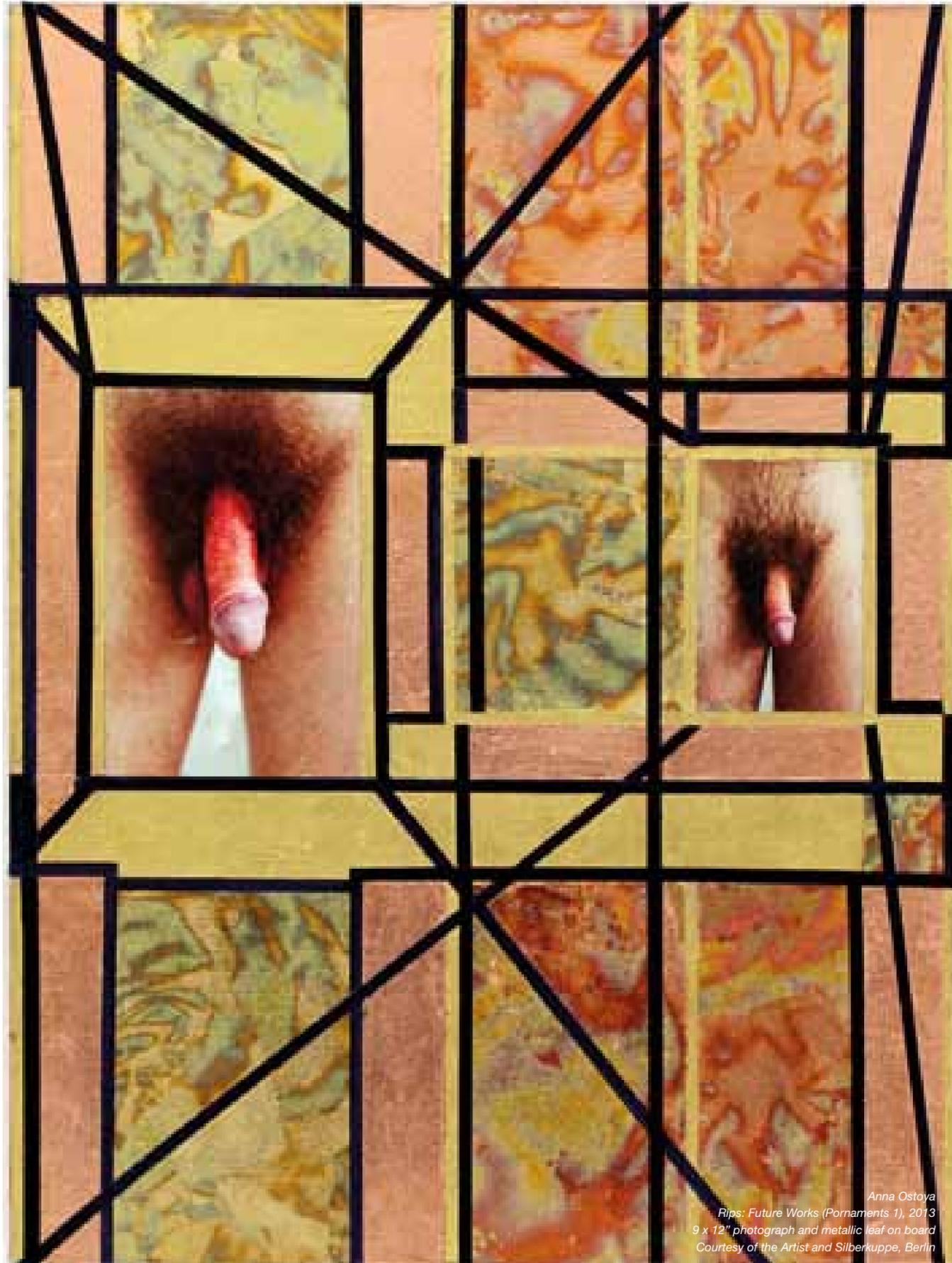
Rips: Future Works (Pussy-Paintings 1), 2013

blood on gesso board, 16 x 20"

Courtesy of the Artist and Silberkuppe, Berlin



Anna Ostoya
ANTHROPOMORPHIC VISUAL PEUDOMORPHISM, 2010
based on a reproduction of *Untitled (Desire)*, 1988
by David Wojnarowicz and a still from *Un Chien
Andalou*, 1929 by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí
Plywood, acrylic, print on paper, 13 x 20 x 10 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Silberkuppe, Berlin



Anna Ostoya
 Rips: Future Works (Pornaments 1), 2013
 9 x 12" photograph and metallic leaf on board
 Courtesy of the Artist and Silberkuppe, Berlin

to commenting and thinking but don't necessarily believe in art's power to influence and change society.

AO: I think some artists sometimes underestimate what effect their work has. Just because there are no immediate visible outcomes does not mean that art is powerless. It seems cynical to me to think otherwise.

MG: You started your artistic education in Krakow, then you spent a couple of years in Paris, next you went to Frankfurt and finally you did residency at the Whitney in New York. It seems like you are a perfectly educated artist. Have you always wanted to be an artist?

AO: I don't know what a perfectly educated artist means but I have not always wanted to be an artist. As a teenager I was interested in literature and in theatre. But it seemed impossible to follow these interests professionally. To become a writer meant studying in Poland and I didn't want that. To become involved with theatre meant working with a lot of people and I wasn't good at that. I had to find another discipline.

MG: But you probably had something called talent to develop.

AO: I don't know. For me talent is commitment and belief. I became committed to art and I started believing in it when taking drawing and painting classes with Barbara Leoniak, a sculptor, after graduating from high school. When one is convinced that art makes sense to oneself and that it makes sense to the world that is talent.

MG: After these private classes with her you went to Paris to study art. Was Paris a conscious choice?

AO: No. I wanted to study at an American school. But it was still the pre-Internet era. It was difficult to find out what was going on in international contemporary art. Since the last artist of the 20th century mentioned in my humanities classes was Andy Warhol I concluded that an American art school would be the most modern one; that it would be very different from anything I knew. I went to the American consulate in Krakow and looked through the best-rated schools. I wrote to many of them. The most generous offer I got was from Parsons Paris, a branch of the New York school. I had no money so the financial aspect was a huge issue. I wanted to go to New York but from Paris, I thought, in the worst case I could hitchhike back home.

MG: If they were prepared to give you a scholarship then it means that you had already developed something that was interesting enough for them.

AO: I guess so. Perhaps my portfolio looked special and perhaps that I was Eastern European was interesting. I was also very determined. I went there for an interview and I said I wanted to be accepted and that I had no money. They took me and I spent four years in Paris.

MG: Was Frankfurt and Städelschule also a coincidence?

AO: Not really. German art interested me.

MG: After four years in Paris you could have also said, I am a grown-up artist, why should I continue to learn?

AO: Well, I wanted to learn more because I was curious. Also, my choices were driven by my financial situation. For a young artist who has little income and who needs studio space, European art schools, which are mostly for free, are a good solution. Städelschule was great — there were many benefits and few requirements.

MG: Who were the important people who helped you to develop your artistic identity?

AO: In Krakow it was the sculptor Barbara Leoniak who was my first mentor. I'm still close to her. We did a show in New York last year and we'll do another one in Amsterdam next year. In Paris, at Parsons, it was the sculptor and writer Wade Saunders who shared with me his encyclopedic knowledge of contemporary art. In Frankfurt, at Staedelschule, it was the critic Isabelle Graw whose seminars allowed me to expand my interests in art and in politics. Then in London, where I was on a residency, it was the political theorist Chantal Mouffe who welcomed me to sit in on her classes that allowed me to foster my approach. Finally, there was Ron Clark at the Whitney Program in New York who gave me an opportunity to connect with stirring individuals. There were also other people. The list is humongous.

MG: You were lucky to meet people who could assist you in making sense for your art and for yourself.

AO: Yes I was. But also I actively searched for them. That wasn't so simple or easy. It demanded moving around a lot. Whenever I moved the change seemed traumatic. Each move exposed me to a new set of ideas and references, new behaviors. Nothing seemed stable; it was painstaking to make sense of the world.

MG: The codes are different in any place, and you have to get used to them.

AO: Yes, even in the seemingly homogenous Western art world the differences are big. With each change one has to decide how to treat previous experiences, how to negotiate the old with the new, how to combine different perspectives.

MG: Is this the reason that the contingency of meaning is such an important subject in your work?

AO: I think so. That changing of context has shaped my approach to art and life.

MG: Now you live in New York, you have three galleries in three different places in the world. You became also visible in the art market. Do you feel the pressure from the art market and institutions?

AO: There is some kind of pressure. But I don't feel the market pressure. I think the degree of market pressure depends on the artists' attitude towards the market; on how much they are capable of freeing themselves from a perception that the market establishes their value. From my experience, people respect you for your choices and won't push you into things they know you won't like.

MG: Would you like to have commercial success?

AO: It depends on what you mean by that. If you mean making enough to continue making art and retaining dignity in life, I want that. That seems

already a lot. But I guess you mean making tons of money. That's not my goal. I think that such commercial success is dangerous and artists should avoid it if they want to keep the high quality of their work.

MG: What is for you quality?

AO: It's a tricky term that I shouldn't have used. I have a few definitions for quality. One of them defines quality as the standard measured by commitment and honesty that an artist puts into a work. As an artist you just know when you start cheating. Sometimes one is unsure about certain pieces, if they are good or bad. But at least one knows if one took some risk or not. That can be measured by the level of embarrassment one feels.

MG: At this moment you are convinced that you would not give up quality to become a commercially successful artist.

AO: I've never understood people who get excited about making lots of money or about becoming famous. It seems to me that money and fame decrease one's freedom, one's time and one's space. I want to have my time and my space; I want to explore what I want to explore, which is not my sellout potential. I think money and fame could be interesting if one makes them a topic of one's work. As a woman artist, I could aim to make a point here — female artists make much less money than male artists. But that would be a regressive move.

MG: In the environment where you are in now, in New York, which is highly competitive and the most commercial art place in the western world, with artists being interested in earning money, such a position is not obvious and to some almost archaic.

AO: I consider it healthy. I know a few artists in New York who would agree with me. Calling a position such as mine archaic spreads a myth of everyone fighting for money and fame. That's the trap of market logic. I suspect that artists who really matter never go for money or for any other dominant form of recognition. That's the challenge for artists — to find new interpretations for the words "to matter." Another challenge is to stay honest with oneself and to continue taking risks.