

The Shell of an In-Essential Void: The Disappearance of the Body and Its Traces in Alina Szapocznikow's *Photosculptures*

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Abstract In 1971, Alina Szapocznikow's *Photosculptures* series captured chewed gum, molded by her teeth, in stark black-and-white close-ups. These works evoke Bataille's *informe* and vanitas-like dissolution, tracing the body's internal motion while resisting symbolic reduction. Informed by her awareness of terminal illness and Holocaust survival, Szapocznikow transforms ephemeral matter into a clinical, anti-realist testimony, where disappearance is suspension rather than absence. This study examines the 'white' of these images as Warburg's 'Denkraum', a conceptual space where latent temporality and unfinished subjectivities emerge. Employing Mieke Bal's narratological framework, the series is approached as visual fiction that reconfigures the body as residue and potential.

Keywords Body. Cast. Formless. Entropy. Still life.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Double Edged (Dis)Comfort. – 3 The Glyph of the Void. – 4 Feminine *malgré tout*. – 5 Conclusion.

Things without all remedy should be without regard: what's done is done
(William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 3, Scene 2, 1623)

1 Introduction

Works of art, in general, do not speak – and even if they did, they would speak even less. Claudio Zambianchi dedicates an article entitled “Senza parole” to Alina Szapocznikow, focusing in particular on *Photosculptures* (1971), a series of sculptures made with her mouth by chewing gum and subsequently photographed by Roman Cieslewicz, her second husband (Bonacina, Dziewańska 2018, 69). This series is connected to works such as Boiffard’s *Bouche* (1929), where, as has been observed, “if Boiffard’s mouth was a fragment of the entire face, here it is the mouth itself that appears in fragments” (Zambianchi 2015, 98).¹ These works convey pain in the absence of symbolisation and codification, where the very words needed to articulate suffering are quite literally missing.

The camera captures these ephemeral, plastic creations, shown frontally even though they tend to disrupt space and perspective, flattening them in a dissonant motion. Suffering portraits? Annihilated bodies? There is even a certain irony here... one that extends beyond the minimalist frame, which seems to reduce everything to a coldly documentary operation. In the text *The Other Saturday*, the artist describes an artistic practice rooted in the everyday, claiming that “Creation lies just between dreams and daily work”.² This places the photographic series in direct dialogue with an openly ironic work, her Portuguese marble Rolls Royce, *My American Dream* (1971), a small-scale model – a kind of monument to American capitalism (Ammer in Jakubowska 2011, 156).

Photosculptures opens multiple lines of dialogue, formally and conceptually, above all with Bataille’s notion of the formless (Bataille 1929, 382),³ exposing the entropic drift it implies and its agency over the human figure (Pollock in Jakubowska 2011, 79). The subject resists framing: the camera oscillates from close-up to full figure, and one risks forgetting that what is captured is, after all, a ‘thing’.

1 Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the Author.

2 “In ‘The Other Saturday’ the artist describes the chewing gum experience as a visual epiphany, a sudden realisation about the second nature of a substance she never before thought about twice. The French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman calls these phenomena phases (see Didi-Huberman 1998), a term derived from the Greek *phasma*, which means ‘apparition’, ‘vision’ or ‘phantom’. Phasmes are small and sudden chance appearances, located somewhere between the real and the imaginary, that usually enter the picture when we are actually looking for something else” (Ammer in Jakubowska 2011, 154).

3 See Didi-Huberman 1995; Krauss, Bois 1997; d’Ammando, Spadoni 2014.

As a product tied to consumerist aesthetics, it entails a dialectical downgrading of the existential dimension, where the distinction between human and non-human collapses into degradation (Butler in Filipovich 2011, 42). What remains is a clinical, anti-realist testimony to mass culture, which reconfigures the body not as subject but as residue.

Diagnosed with breast cancer in 1969, Szapocznikow projects a fatalistic aura onto the spat-out gum, precariously suspended on a thin edge. Yet the precipice sustaining the trace of a body – its inner movement imprinted in the act of chewing – resists both pessimistic materialism and symbolic abstraction. The work is not merely an exercise in mourning or an attempt to pre-empt her own disappearance; it reconfigures the relation between art and life.⁴ Here irony creates distance from tragedy, but so too does a formal research of echoes and unexpected returns. This meta-artistic gesture, in its semantic density, transposes the suffering of the perishable body onto the metamorphic plane of art and its virtual immortality. Szapocznikow's *Photosculptures* function not merely as aesthetic artefacts but as epistemic forms. Their iconographic and conceptual references are not dispersed; they are absorbed, like saliva into chewing gum, as though her art had 'digested' an entire artistic tradition, allowing it to be instinctively rewritten through contact with organic matter, unmediated by intellectual control. What emerges is a whole heritage of images and imaginaries set into play.

Theoretically, I propose to trace this movement backwards, drawing on Mieke Bal's narratology (see Bal 2021)⁵ to show how contemporary works can reread the past and reshape our vision of art history. Szapocznikow's photographic sculpture thus appears as a theoretical object, for its capacity to generate questions and displacements of meaning across time, operating as a critical and anachronistic device. By breaking linear temporality, it reconfigures cultural genealogies through unexpected and performative connections. In this sense, it is

4 "Photosculptures offers a telling allegory for the whole of Szapocznikow's work-imprinting that which is otherwise unrepresentable. Her insistent and repetitive casting of the body was her attempt to figure the reality of human vulnerability, struggling to present the body as unique and irreducible (i.e., utterly unreproducible) and its experiences as collectively shared (i.e., infinitely reproducible). Her work obstinately sits in this breach between the two, where photography played its ultimate role" (Filipovich in Filipovich 2011, 76).

5 Mieke Bal's narratology aims to investigate visual culture by moving beyond the division and hierarchy between text and image, emphasizing instead their dynamic and intermedial relationship. Her approach opens up interpretative possibilities that were not previously made visible within dominant frameworks, allowing us to recognise and critically engage with narratives belonging to the semantic universe of the visible that had remained unacknowledged or suppressed.

not simply an object of analysis but a catalyst for thought, activating processes of signification and theoretical transformation. Within this discursive space, a latent temporality emerges in the image – between material residue and psychic imprint – where disappearance signifies not absence but suspension, and the body endures as potential.

Much has been written about a desublimated impulse in her work – about a regression towards the processual formlessness of a mouth that, in uttering ‘the word’, debases itself by privileging the feral bite over the more domesticated act of manual creation.⁶ When the artist speaks of creation, in relation to the artistic rewriting of the body, as the affirmation of a “total erogenous zone” (Jakubowska 2011, 13) extended across its entire surface, she does not situate it in the sexual organs – where desublimation would ordinarily channel the drives – nor in their substitutes within the fetishistic order.⁷ Paradoxically, this process entails a sublimation of perversion, rewriting the polymorphous, perverse desire of childhood. This desire expands beyond the body, not to purge it of carnality, but toward the chimerical world of commodities, displayed as idols in the playful yet disquieting imagination of a spiritualised American capitalism, seeking in these objects a new mode of survival. In this way, the ‘great’ tradition of the past and the modernist aesthetic are refracted through a reimagined commercial and domestic imagery – through the negative imprint of a body.

2 Double Edged (Dis)Comfort

In *Double Edged Comfort. Domestic Life in Modern Italian Art and Visual Culture* (2021), Silvia Bottinelli observes: “Although the book is temporally and geographically specific, its subject – the representation of home cultures – has meaning for individuals and societies around the world” (Bottinelli 2021, 4). Taking this as a point of departure, I propose to read Szapocznikow’s fascination with everyday objects – lamps, for instance – as a resemanticisation of the domestic sphere into “awkward objects” (Jakubowska

⁶ “Obviously, chewing gum is inside a watery environment, namely the mouth, before being expectorated. In the case of the *Photosculptures*, the artist’s mouth virtually became a tool, a ‘blind assistant’, in the creation of yet another version of the body imprints she had been making since 1962. Instead of passively lending its shape and texture to the material imprinted upon, however, the mouth took on the active role of the ‘unconscious, gustatory, and sensual executor’ of a process the hands no longer wished to be accountable for” (Ammer in Jakubowska 2011, 153).

⁷ “The word *Fétiche* – fetish – recurs in the titles, denoting an object to which magical power is attributed but, above all, in its psychoanalytic sense, as a substitute for the object of love. The breasts, in particular, appear disturbing and seem – since the *mise en place* is significant – like mastectomies in a pastry shop window” (Sylos Calò 2016, 328).

2011, 13):⁸ bizarrely sensual, disturbingly pleasant creations. Her eccentric domain oscillates between the phallus transfigured into a flower – sublimated – and the reinvention of magical, totemic commodities, mocked and desublimated in both prestige and enjoyment, exposing narcissistic complacency in grotesque mania, yet trivialised within the consumerist boom and its spectacular waste. Ultimately, the mouth that produced the *Photosculptures* expels the matter, degrading it into excrement. Cast into the external world, it clings like a spider, worm, or insect: a figure of the formless (Bataille 1929, 382).

The sculpted gum, precariously displayed on a support suspended between academic table and modernist pedestal, recalls – in its resistance to figurative semantics – the compositional register of still life. Photographed, it appears almost as a decorative aliment, akin to canonical fruit, while its formal treatment betrays a ‘study’ character, comparable to academic drawing exercises. Its placement near the edge intensifies imminence: not only does the material decompose, it risks falling into a domestic precipice which, rendered in such abstraction, assumes a metaphysical resonance. This formal strategy reinforces the identification of the still life with vanitas, where the abyss doubles metaphorical decay. I argue that the *Photosculptures* perform a meta-pictorial function, reconfiguring the genre and its affective charge. As Victor Stoichita reminds us, the term “still life” is itself an oxymoron (Stoichita 1993, 35), and here the vital and deadly energies injected into the work collide, offering the inverse of an allegorical skull: an object that reflects on the fleeting nature of existence by exacerbating its conflict.

The emptiness of an insubstantial material and the flaw of its support do not neutralise the internal tension. In Szapocznikow’s work, emptiness is not only the surface on which her rubbery sculptures are precariously displayed – evolving in space like a frayed dance – but also the void within them, which renders the matter ephemeral, airy, ethereal. The rhythmic syntax of these compositions reflects on entropic degradation, on life and its precarious testimony, establishing a condition of ‘double edge’: sublime vertigo, as a desperate assertion of vitality and survival, and desublimated fall, as a prefiguration of definitive de-subjection, the reduction of the body to thing.

⁸ In a letter dated 1972, reflecting on her vocation as a sculptor, Szapocznikow states that: “As for me, I produce awkward objects. This absurd and convulsive mania proves the existence of an unknown, secret gland, necessary for life. Yes, this mania can be reduced to a single gesture, within the reach of us all. But this gesture is sufficient unto itself, it is the confirmation of our human presence. My gesture is addressed to the human body, ‘that complete erogenous zone’, to its most vague and ephemeral sensations” (Jakubowska 2011, 13).

Here the emptying of meaning does not unfold linearly but as a bleaching of signifiers, a drifting oblivion of meaning in a vortex of accelerations and decelerations – occurring, ultimately, in heterogeneous time. In this regard, Mieke Bal states that “heterochrony contributes to the temporal texture of our cultural world and thus, our understanding and experiencing it is a political necessity” (Bal 2021, 117). The montage of the photographic series is fragmented; no narrative markers suggest a ‘before’ or ‘after’, nor any thematic evolution. There is not even a metalinguistic frame to escape the absolute frontality of these deformed pseudo-subjects, which seem to glance at us obliquely. Without claustrophobia, the photographs tell a story of pure immanence. Yet this is not the triumph of modernist discourse – of asemantic formalism or the abstract domination of perception – but a lowered horizon of research, seeking purity in infinitely plastic materiality: whiteness vulnerable both to dirt and to the very fact of being spat out, trampled, degraded. Like an insect, precisely.

In Clarice Lispector’s (1922-1977) *The Passion According to G.H.* (1964), the protagonist undergoes a metamorphosis as she witnesses the slow agony of a cockroach, inadvertently crushed while opening a wardrobe door. In that moment, her comfortable bourgeois life – her domestic space, her values, her very identity – suddenly becomes unrecognisable, or rather infernal.

In hell, we fabricate our supreme exultation precisely with what should be punishment; with punishment in this desert, we create a further ecstasy of laughter and tears; we turn punishment in hell into a hope of enjoyment.

Was this, then, the other side of humanisation and hope? (Lispector 1964, 92)

Just as Lispector acts as a counter-modernist within a still modernist context, post-minimalism seeks process through an “eccentric abstraction” that celebrates transformation and precariousness. Lispector’s writing parallels this approach: it does not “represent” an event, but enacts metamorphosis as a lived experience. The white plasma seeping from the crushed insect – formless, soft, and eventually ingested by G.H. – evokes Szapocznikow’s chewing-gum works. Here, the mouth becomes a threshold for an initiatory event that destabilizes the values of a woman who, until that moment, epitomised the bourgeois consumer, one who might purchase a modernist canvas merely to decorate her living room. This access to depersonalisation – in both the creation of the artwork and the reconfiguration of the self – emerges as a mode of transforming pain into desiring production and of contemplating its joyful acceptance.

3 The Glyph of the Void

Chewing gum is an inherently insubstantial material: it vanishes from sight only to return as a nuisance, the repressed that adheres to the sole of one's shoe. This simultaneity of presence and absence generates an iconic discourse on absence itself, an asemantic writing inscribed by the mouth. The rubbery, amorphous forms it produces do not resemble the letters of an alphabet but instead *play* at the very threshold of meaninglessness – an absence that paradoxically overflows with possible significations. They suggest, I argue, a regression of the modernist dream, revealing both its wealth and its misery in the proliferation of meanings. The utopia of the pure image, realised through an impure material par excellence, gives rise to a disorderly iconographic indigestion, regurgitating tradition in fragmentary form, and admitting the intrusive return of the psycho-biographical element in an anti-heroic, anti-mythical key – a lucid parody of itself.

Might Szapocznikow, then, be mourning not her own body – revived through laughter and tears – but rather an artistic language that has lost its symbolic potency? In the collective imagination, Egyptian culture epitomises a sophisticated negotiation with death, and such references permeate her sculptural imagery. In *Stèle* (1968), for instance, a body encased in black expanded polyurethane is transfigured into a living tomb. In *L'Apesanteur (Hommage à Komarow)* (1967), the cosmonaut's figure appears mummified, as though the immensity of outer space were itself a descent into death. Even her final works, such as *Tumors Personified* (1969), unfold as expanded funeral rituals, assembling an ideal reliquary or fragmented sepulchral monument. Crucially, this ritual is processual: enacted *in vita* by the artist herself, it resists codification into any stable canon. Her fascination with Egypt thus reactivates the enigmatic and deathly physiognomy of hieroglyphics, but projected into an age where symbols are increasingly void. The body – its repressed residues and opaque remains – emerges as a late-capitalist hieroglyph, at once indecipherable and inexhaustible.

From this perspective, Szapocznikow's artistic *corpus* – so closely intertwined with the physical body – can be read as a virtual foreshadowing of its own disappearance, producing a void that paradoxically resonates with life. This void stands in contrast to absence itself, which is continually sacralised through mournful artistic rituals. A striking example is *Alina's Funeral* (1970). The psychic virtuality at work here – recalling both the dreamlike dimension and the unconscious realm of desire – shapes the artist's creative investment and enables viewers and readers to enter her imaginative universe. Within it, the thread of her vitalistic yet mortiferous discourse is momentarily suspended. Ultimately, this

process allows us to 'dream' her work, to make it reverberate within contemporary meta-artistic discourses through sensations, thoughts, and emotions, thanks to the unconscious reserves that permeate it and surface as silhouettes. Confronted with the *Photoscultures*, we perceive not so much the predominance of grey as a whitening of the signifier, a luminosity that floods every fold and crevice: the final page, beyond death, is not black, but white.

4 **Feminine malgré tout**

The modernist formalism of the *Photoscultures*, rendered in sober black and white, acquires a desert-like quality, echoing the Egyptian imagery they evoke.⁹ The desert signifies emptiness not only through its vast horizons, where the sky overwhelms the gaze, but also through the sense of sterility it embodies. After undergoing treatment for tuberculosis, Szapocznikow discovered she had become infertile. Within her artistic practice – dominated by the sexualised, feminine body – a strongly creative dimension assumes a procreative quality, multiplying the sensual potential of this body. Yet, when cancer struck and her left breast was surgically removed, she no longer portrayed or reproduced this body in drawings or casts. As the disease advanced, so too did her work, increasingly shifting the feminine element into the space of loss – beyond the self – since every artwork is destined, sooner or later, to detach from its creator (Sylos Calò 2016, 330).

If her earlier practice engaged seriality through bodily objects – such as her partial-object lamps, which evoked the production logics of the American economic and cultural model – later this theme of repetition was reconfigured as a mode of working through the trauma of loss. In this defensive process, the organic element, set against the coldness of the industrial or purely formal, but not against the 'thing' as such – hence the reinvention of an Art Nouveau decorativism – (Van Alphen in Jakubowska 2011, 114), generates a surplus that borders on kitsch, without ever fully succumbing to it. Like the casts of body parts, chewing gum evokes corporeality as an excessive experience, which – even in repetition – culminates in an eccentric movement that resists mere reproduction or compensation for a deferred event: the unintelligible trauma displaced from consciousness.

This line of inquiry has been situated theoretically in relation to Georges Didi-Huberman's notion of the imprint (see Didi-Huberman 2008), which concerns both the indexical mark of the body and the imprint's function as testimony to the body's disappearance

9 The title of the paragraph is a clear reference to Didi-Huberman 2003.

(Mytkowska in Filipovich 2011, 132). Szapocznikow's creative response – whether involuntary or therapeutic – thus participates in a process irreducible to rational control or to the subject's body itself. Within this trajectory, the survival of the feminine element vital, *malgré tout*, seems transposed into the realm of objects, into possibilities tied to the domestic horizon of paintings and bedside lamps: forms of survival entwined with the relations of other corporealities. Like rubber that clings to surfaces when stepped on, Szapocznikow's cast objects remain inextricably attached to the bodies that generated them, enacting a form of bodily promiscuity and projecting vitality beyond their own material limits. To recall Mario Perniola (see Perniola 1994), one might speak of a "sex appeal of the inorganic" in her production, as a last recourse for sustaining an excessive vitality – at once life-affirming and deadly – of an inessential femininity that exceeds the mere shell of a body no longer able to sustain life.¹⁰

Her interest in a vision of pop culture that legitimised a kind of spiritualised materialism is evident in her reference to *Goldfinger* (1965) and its marble Rolls Royce crowned with a phallic *bouchon de radiateur*. In a letter, she even remarks that Julie Christie's mouth served as the model for the *Illuminated Lips* series (1966) (Jakubowska 2012, 342). The actress – celebrated for her role as Lara in David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* (1966) – embodied the Soviet drama refracted through a Western lens, the very perspective Szapocznikow embraced when she left Poland. The allusion to a film star, at a time when cinema had far greater cultural and media resonance than today, signals, in my view, an attempt to amplify her own voice through the borrowed glamour of an admired mouth.

The difficulties she faced in securing financial stability and artistic recognition are counterbalanced by such choices, which transmute the emptiness of separation and isolation into a productive distance, opening space for new identifications, alter egos, and idols within a renewed culture of the image. In her final years, explicitly religious

10 The artist's production of objects participates in the sex appeal of the inorganic, as theorised by Walter Benjamin and further developed in Mario Perniola's eponymous study. Our artist, an outsider within the *Nouveau Réalisme* group, explores, from her personal perspective, an aspect that would become central in New Dada and Pop research: the relationship between humans and the products of cultural industry. In this sense, the metamorphic capacity of the inorganic's sex appeal to assume the guise of a "foreign garment", according to Perniola (1994), lays the foundation for a productive encounter between the corporeal and the intellectual, thereby dismantling yet another longstanding opposition.

motifs also appear: the *Madonna of Kruźłowa (Motherhood)* (1969),¹¹ and references to Christ in *Piotr* (1972) and the *Herbarium* series (1971-72). As Elena Filipovic observes, the latter resemble ghostly shrouds, recalling the imprint of Christ's face on the Shroud of Turin (Filipovich in Filipovich 2011, 72). Without offering any facile aspiration to transcendence, these works reveal how, beyond the feminine, even the maternal can persist through the objectification of a feeling that – already artistic in itself by virtue of the power of Christian visual culture – refuses to be diminished in the virtual process of esthetic transformation.

5 Conclusion

Having survived the Holocaust and the concentration camps, Szapocznikow seems to give shape in her work to Paul Valéry's metaphor of the eye consumed in a furnace: faced with an intensity impossible to sustain, this exceptionality turns into a condition of burning invisibility. It dissolves into pure white, offering an image of perfect disorder (see Valéry 1934).

This proposal focuses on the 'whitening' of these images as a conceptual solution, taking the *Photoscultures* as a theoretical object through which to examine the paradoxical role of both artist and viewer when art confronts a sensory potential that anticipates the disappearance of the human subject – the before and after of the fatal event of death. A shared impossibility emerges: one remains on the threshold, and this watershed becomes a place of passage. This whiteness may thus be read in the sense of Warburg's *Denkraum* (see Ghelardi 2022; Ghelardi, Aby Warburg [1929] (2016): a space in which the emotional impulse crystallises within an elegant black-and-white shot, while thought is spatialised in the extension of a deferred disappearance – one that involves colour, matter, and subjectivity. In this way, disappearance is not treated as a universal drama but as a marginal note, a discursive smudge, becoming the spokesperson for another temporality: one that continues, one perpetually in transit.

¹¹ "The erotic body transformed into the language of art not only made transgression possible but also exposed to scrutiny that which had been hidden. This can be seen in her *Madonna of Kruźłowa (Motherhood)* from 1969, which she made for Father Józef Sadzik, a Pallottine from Paris, an enlightened humanist and philosopher, probably influenced by their conversations. Szapocznikow's is a personal take on the famous *Madonna of Kruźłowa*, a gothic sculpture from circa 1410 of Mary and child. Rather than show the full figure, the artist reproduced and multiplied the *Madonna's* face, sinking the images in plastic, and endowing them with breasts, reminiscent of teardrops" (Bonacina in Dziewańska 2018, 69).

Even if emptiness seems to seize every possibility of discourse, in fact – as if enveloped in a spiral of entropic annihilation – a distant echo restores what the interruption of life had seemingly paralysed forever. The disruptive force of the artist's oeuvre, which led to its rediscovery and subsequent critical and commercial success, appears implicitly in solidarity with his late research: an effort to redeem the shadow of death in a luminous reversal that does not erase it but makes it thinkable through art. The emptiness left by the *Photosculpture* is never absolute; it refracts through the remains and traces of the body in intervals: seriality (mortiferous or vitalistic), the critique of traditional artistic genres (portrait, still life...), and the deconstruction of modernist canons from within punctuate the layered plurality of this absence, making its singular void reverberate in a larger history, producing resonances and contrasts.

Today, her work is presented in a prestigious collection such as François Pinault's, represented by an important gallery like *Hauser & Wirth*, and placed alongside artists such as Louise Bourgeois¹² and Eva Hesse,¹³ as if their inquiries had, in fact, touched each other. Although this dialogue now appears almost natural, the gap remains unbridged. What is compelling in this apparent reintegration of research into a feminist canon is the way in which, across shifting contexts, the suspended threads of art weave apparent symmetries between stories that are actually out of sync: everything seems to fit so seamlessly that one is led to believe it was meant to. This synchrony reveals the fullness of a void that is not an end, but a reserve, a latent charge – not to rewrite what has been, but to liberate the unexpressed possibilities still waiting to open the past, transforming it from a monolithic tombstone into a (dis)continuous flow of air, a breath for words and for the body.

12 "Like Bourgeois, Szapoznikow was a thoughtful modernist, moving, however, from figuration into abstraction, while deeply engaged also with questions of equilibrium. In the late 1950s she began to work with malleable cement; in the 1960s she began carving in the most classic sculptural material, Italian marble from the quarries at Carrara, where her residency did not quite coincide with that of Bourgeois, who also came to Italy in the later 1960s to carve marble" (Pollock 2013, 185).

13 "Had the show at Bonino Gallery presented her most recent sculptural projects such as the steles made of black polyester foam with imbedded female torsos and legs made from fragmentary body casts [...] who knows if American art critic Lucy Lippard, who had curated an influential exhibition in 1966 on what she named *Eccentric Abstraction* (including work by Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse), might not have written Alina Szapoznikow into the emerging feminist history of women artists of the 1960s?" (Pollock 2013, 186).

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