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Sheer Skin: The Dissolution of Sculptural Skin and Sculpted Skin

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**ALINA
SZAPOCZNIKOW:
AWKWARD OBJECTS**

**EDITED BY AGATA
JAKUBOWSKA**

**MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
IN WARSAW 2011**



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SHEER SKIN: THE DISSOLUTION OF SCULPTURAL SKIN AND SCULPTED SKIN

In her work from the early 1960s, the skin of Alina Szapocznikow's sculptures becomes more and more opaque. This is perhaps a strange observation, for it is also in those years that she begins to use polyester resin for making sculptures. From a formalist point of view, this renders her work more and more translucent. When I say opaque, I mean that the outward appearance of her sculptures relates less and less to an inner structure. Whereas in her earlier work from the 1950s, the outward appearance of the human figures arises from the illusion of a skeletal substructure that supports the poses and gestures of the bodies, such a supporting and explanatory relationship between internal structure and outer appearance dissolves in the 1960s. We are more and more left with appearances that lack interiority, or with appearances whose interiority is forcefully and artificially held together (as in the mummies).

Rosalind Krauss has described a similar transition in the work of Rodin. Neoclassical sculpture consists of the revelation at or on the skin of an inner system, a system that may be skeletal in the bodily sense or expressive in the psychological sense. The inner structures or inner feelings are what explains and motivates what the sculpted skin and the sculptural skin look like. In Rodin's work, however, this inner/outer relationship is no longer at work. To illuminate the difference, Krauss compares Rodin's sculpture with *art nouveau*

design in architecture and the applied arts. In the inkpots and candlesticks by Victor Horta or Henry van de Velde, furniture by Hector Guimard, or the architecture of Gaudi, we encounter a style of design which is not at all concerned with the internal structure of an object.¹ As Rosalind Krauss notes, "Generally speaking, *art nouveau* presents volume with an undifferentiated sense of interior, concentrating instead on its surface."² This means that the surface of *art nouveau* objects, but also that of sculptures by Rodin and Rosso, gives rise to the illusion of a formative process carried out externally. There is no longer a relationship between outward appearance and internal structure, but rather between outward appearance and external forces or influences. The design suggests that we are looking at something that

was shaped by the erosion of water over rock, or by the tracks of waves on sand, or by the ravages of wind; in short, by what we think of as the passage of natural forces over the surface of matter. Shaping those substances from the outside, these forces act with no regard to the intrinsic structure of the material on which they work.³

The design of *art nouveau* objects relates polemically to the background of the neoclassical tradition in which the surface and the appearance of the sculpture are a direct expression of a previous meaning, an inner experience or structure. For example, the experience of pain is expressed in a specific physiognomically, recognizable appearance of the body. Rage or aggression is translated into yet another outward appearance, another gesture, or physiognomic expression.

The absence of a convincing relationship between internal structure and outward appearance in the sculpture of Rosso and Rodin can be perceived as another kind of expression: the surface, that is, the texture and appearance of their sculptures, gives expression to the process of formation and production. The hand of the sculptor is more evident on the surface than is the internal structure.

¹ A degree of nuance is required here. In some *art nouveau* objects, like those of Emile Gallé, an internal structure is in fact expressed in a very emphatic and extreme manner, namely in the form of muscles, tendons or stems. Here the idea that an object constitutes an organic whole is not abandoned, but rather accentuated in this extreme form. Precisely by way of their extremeness (literatness) these examples of *art nouveau* confirm the view that the relationship between interior space and outer form is a key aspect of *art nouveau* design or is even its problematic focus.

² Rosalind E. Krauss, "Narrative Time: the Question of the *Gates of Hell*," in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), p. 33.

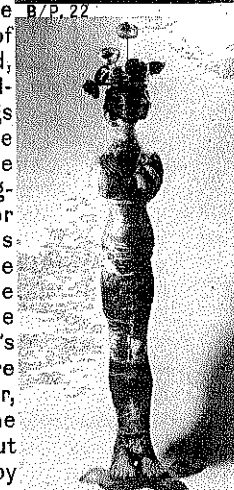
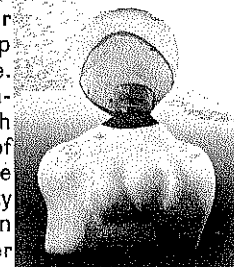
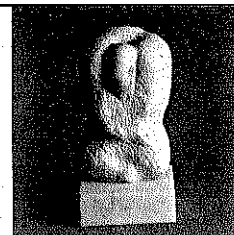
³ Ibid.

This is not the case with Alina Szapocznikow's sculptures from the 1960s on, however. Her sculptures give thematic emphasis to the relationship between internal structure and outward appearance. This occurs in two ways. On the one hand, this relationship is ostentatiously ignored, as is often the case with *art nouveau*. Occasionally the surface of the works of those years is, indeed, reminiscent of *art nouveau*. The movement, the commotion, and the changeability evoked by the organic surface of her sculptures then suggest natural, external forces such as those of water and wind. One example is *Biological Sculpture* (1963). The smoothness of the swellings seems to be the result of processes or labor coming from the outside, wind, water, or even simply the hand of the sculptor, considered—polemically—as an outside force. The swellings seem less the result of an inner tension or force. The swelling in **PINK TORSO**^A (1966-67) is a growth from the inside, a kind of tumor, when we view it, as the title suggests, realistically as a torso. But the human form or torso is not the first thing that strikes the eye. It is rather the contrast between the smoothness of the swelling and the belabored surface of the rest of the volume that stands out. In the belabored surface one can see the traces of the chisel, the tool in the artist's hand. Different treatments of the sculptural skin are here contrasted. The same can be said of the lower, marble part of **SELF-PORTRAIT I**^B (1966). Following the title, the two smooth swellings must be breasts. But such a figural reading is at the same time challenged by the central location of the two swellings. Once this loca-

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tion attracts the eye, the image of sculpted skin is exchanged for an eye to the different treatments of the sculptural skin. We see the care with which the skin has been smoothed and the violent gestures which have created the more rough surface. In both cases the sculptural skin cannot be explained by inner structure or feeling, but by a working of the skin from the outside.

The notion of skin, sculptural as well as sculpted, is foregrounded in yet other ways in two sculptures from 1966 and 1967. In **BOUQUET II**^C (1966) and in *Weightlessness [Homage to Komarov]* (1967), a human figure has been wrapped in layers of cloth as if it were a mummy.

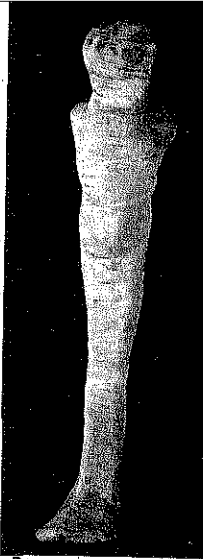


An artificial skin has been added to the human skin. In this case the outer experience is completely motivated by the inner structure it covers, the human body. At the same time this relation between inner structure and outer appearance is the opposite of organic. The mummification is an added skin which imprisons the inner form artificially and, it seems, violently. All inner feeling and expression are imprisoned in **WEIGHTLESSNESS**^{D (1987)}, and in *Bouquet II* a multiplication of breasts and mouths seems to be intimately related to the closing off, the lopping and cutting off, of the rest of the body. The bouquet of mouths and the uncovered breasts stand in sharp contrast to the constricted body. It is this contrast which raises the issue of expression of inner feelings and structures and its impossibility.

The few works of Alina Szapocznikow discussed so far make it clear that the sculptural skin of her works does not function as a mediator of inner structure or inner feeling. At the same time, the notion of skin is not only foregrounded as a formal aspect of sculpture as a medium; it is also a recurring and consistent thematic and narrative feature raising issues at the level of representation. To better understand the importance of the sculptural skin and of sculpted skin in her work, I will first consider the different functions of skin. I contend that Szapocznikow's works imply a notion of skin that differs from the ordinary one, as it is grounded in a phenomenological and psychoanalytical view of skin, although not limited to such a view.

French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu explains this view in his book *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to The Self* (1989). According to Anzieu the skin serves the purposes of containment, protection, and communication:

The primary function of the skin is as the sac which contains and retains inside it the goodness and fullness accumulating there through feeding, care, the bathing in words. Its second function is as the interface which marks the boundary with the outside and keeps that outside out; it is the barrier which protects against penetration by the aggression and greed emanating from others, whether people or objects. Finally, the third function—which the skin shares with the mouth and which it performs at least as often—is as a site and a primary means of



communication with others, of establishing signifying relations; it is moreover, an "inscribing surface" for the marks left by those others.⁴

Anzieu is not speaking of the physical properties of the skin, however, but of the metaphorical qualities of flesh. His concept of "skin ego" articulates this beautifully. By "skin ego," Anzieu explains,

I mean a mental image of which the Ego of the child makes use during the early phases of its development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychic contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body.⁵

The skin's functions of containment, protection, and communication are the result of a dual process of interiorization.

Two spatial aspects of the skin need to be internalized. First of all, the interface between the bodies of the child and the mothering figure (what Anzieu calls the "psychic envelope") is internalized, and second, the mothering environment itself with all its verbal, visual, and emotional properties. Anzieu articulates this concept of skin ego and this dual interface by means of the somewhat odd word-combination "the goodness and fullness accumulating there through feeding, care, the bathing in words."

Let me insist that this view of a psychoanalyst cannot be unproblematically brought to bear on works of art. But to the extent that it represents a philosophical conception as well, as that odd addition "bathing in words" particularly suggests, it can be brought into dialogue with art. It is especially the skin's dual possibility of establishing barriers and filtering exchanges that constitutes this conception. I contend that Szapocznikow's work engages in a dialogue with this rich conception of skin. The artist's work "on the skin" seems to challenge the skin's functions of containment and protection. Instead, her skins are multivalent "discussions." Her works function as visual puns that raise numerous issues of life, touch, and sensation. As a consequence, she also challenges the ordinary notion of the skin's metaphorical significance as ego. Importantly, her works utterly lack the wholeness such a meaning implies. Thus, while endorsing, or absorbing, Anzieu's extension of the skin into the environment, she declines the totalizing wholeness that retreats back into the skin as boundary of the human individual.

4 Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Self*, trans. Chris Turner, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, p.40.

5 Ibid.

Most noticeably, it is striking that the first function Anzieu ascribes to the skin is increasingly absent in Szapocznikow's work. Her sculpted skins and sculptural skin are not like the "sac which contains and retains inside it the goodness and fullness accumulating there through feeding, care, the bathing in words." Her work **THE BACHELOR'S ASHTRAY I**^{E (1972)} is a good example of how the skin-sac fails in containing and retaining inside. It is an example that can be read as an allegory of how, in which sense, skin, sculpted as well as sculptural, fails its primary function. This container is open at the top and the cigarette stubs flow over the edge. The usual openings, the mouths, are closed, but the cranium is lifted and open. This container does not retain within but is an open hole that can be filled from without.



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Furthermore, the skin's secondary function is of little relevance in Szapocznikow's work. Skin in her work is no "interface which marks the boundary with the outside and keeps that outside out"; it is not "a barrier which protects against penetration by the aggression and greed emanating from others, whether people or objects." An example of this failure that is again allegorical is *Mad White Fiancée* (1971). The allegorical narrative suggested by this sculpture shows the phallus as enormous and red, announcing its penetration of the female body. She looks as if she were fainting; whether out of sheer pleasure or of fright remains ambiguous. The issue is how the penetration of the body is explicitly and provocatively foregrounded. Another example is **SCULPTURE-LAMP VI**^{F (1970)}, where the moment of penetration is represented in the act. Moreover, many of her works show fragments of the body, especially mouths. These are multiplied. The proliferation of these bodily fragments seems to demonstrate the utter openness of the body and the failure of the skin to function as a boundary with the outside.

Containment and protection are radically undermined by Szapocznikow's treatment of the sculptural and sculpted skin. Instead, in Szapocznikow's work, skin is presented as highly communicative. The third function of skin Anzieu distinguishes seems to be all-pervasive in that work. Let me reiterate his formulation of this function: "the third function—which the skin shares with the mouth and which it performs at least as often—is as a site and a primary means of communication with others, of establishing signifying relations; it is

moreover, an 'inscribing surface' for the marks left by those others." Anzieu's definition of communication is peculiar, because although it compares this function of skin with the mouth and not with the ear, it explains it as an inscribing surface for the marks left by those others. Communication is not seen as an exchange but as a one-way process initiated by others from the outside.

Szapocznikow's works open out to the world. The skin of her works does not mark a boundary; rather, it is a zone of contact where spaces and beings can entangle. In Anzieu's terms this can be understood as "the common-skin fantasy." Anzieu characterizes this fantasy of human relationships as problematic, because it takes place not between autonomous individuals but as mutual symbiotic dependency. Szapocznikow enacts the common-skin fantasy as ambivalent, as attractive and seductive, as well as problematic because it is so torturous. In the following discussion of other works I will describe what the ambivalences in this fantasy of "a skin we share" are, and in what sense this fantasy is a form of idealization.

A recurrent motif in Szapocznikow's work is the belly. Presented as bodily fragment, these bellies are not tight or swollen, but consistently folded. The skin of the belly has folds by means of which it creates an alternative inner-outer structure. The inner space suggested is not behind the outer skin. There is only skin, and the skin creates its own inner spaces by means of folds. The space within the fold is an inner space, but in fact it is inner and outer at the same time. There is interiority, but that interiority is located not behind the skin, but on its surface; it is a kind of "virtual" interiority. The distinction between inner and outer does not really hold here, because it is both. Skin touches skin, but that skin is not someone else's skin. The sharing of skin that takes place here is like touching one's own skin. The folded belly is like an auto-erotogenic zone. But the open spaces within the folds are not really open the way mouths can be, or vaginas. They are impenetrable inner spaces. When opened up, or penetrated, the fold dissolves and inner space transforms into outer space, as in **BELLY CUSHIONS**^{C (1968)} and **BIG BELLIES**^{H (1968)}. Here the fantasy of a common skin is realized within the subject, not in relation to other subjects.

The folded belly is and is not like the other recurrent motifs in Szapocznikow's sculptures, the mouths. They are the same



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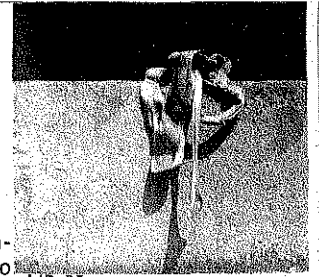


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insofar as they are both pieces of folded skin. And according to Lacan the erotogenic zones of the body always consist of folded skin that functions as an opening of the body, as a boundary of inside and outside, of inner and outer. Not only the mouth, but also the eyelids, the vagina, the anus, and the penis are such erotogenic folds or openings. Most of these erotogenic folds occur in Szapocznikow's work as bodily fragments. She foregrounds them by showing them as bodily fragments. The difference between the folded belly and these other folds is, of course, that the belly is not a "real" opening of the body. The interiority of the belly is only suggested by being folded. At the same time, this difference can also be turned into another similarity: it draws attention to the fact that the mouths in Szapocznikow's work are consistently closed and refuse to be an opening to the body. The skin as interface and as a means of communication, of which the mouth is emblematic, is contested in her work. But the skin is not only a means of communication; it is also a site of communication. It is not the subject herself who is the communicating subject, but the other who uses the subject's skin as an "inscribable" surface. The work **BIG TUMOR II**¹ (1969) is a work which can be seen as an inscribing surface. Photographic imprints are left on the sculptural skin. Like the veil of Veronica showing the imprint of Christ's sweating and bleeding face, this appearance shows someone else's outer appearance. The common skin or the skin-we-share results here in a conflation of appearances at the site of skin as inscribing surface.

Anzieu describes how the skin ego can develop either in a narcissistic direction or in a masochistic direction. When it is developed in the narcissistic direction, the fantasy of the common skin is transformed into a secondary fantasy of a skin reinforced and invulnerable. The skin becomes like a shield. When the common-skin fantasy develops in a masochistic direction, the fantasized skin is seen as damaged, torn off, and yes, as flayed.

It is clear that in Szapocznikow's work it is not the skin as shield, but the skin as flayed that provides a more specific conception of the common-skin fantasy. The sculptures she made in 1972 consist of representations of flayed skin in the most literal sense. The sculptural skin is now utterly flat, not suggesting any volume or interior space, whether brought into being by internal structures or external forces. These skins no longer contain anything, and they have clearly failed to protect because they are damaged and torn off. In *Self-Portrait, Herbarium* (1971), we see the flayed skin of the head, the body, the legs, and the feet, attached to a flat surface. The gradual



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splitting of the skin's three main functions—of containment, of protection, and of communication—seems to have come to a radical closure in this flayed condition.

Not only psychologically, but also as sculpture, they fail to do what they are expected to do. The three-dimensionality of sculpture has shrunk into the almost-flatness of relief. There is a temporal, narrative aspect to this. The sculptural body is only suggested as trace, not as volume. But, as I will contend later, it is a trace not just of something left behind, but also, in a Derridean sense, a projection forward. Inner structure or inner expression is completely absent, while formative powers from the outside, too, are now absent. This sculpted and sculptural skin does not function as a surface of inscription; it is just skin, nothing else. But this "sheer skin" still operates as trace, not spatially but temporally. It offers traces that can be read as narrative, analeptically and proleptically. The well-known myth of the flaying of Marsyas by Apollo offers the framework for this reading of the flayed skin as narrative trace.

The series of flayed-skin sculptures seems to be a radically masochistic closure of a sculptural project that gradually takes apart the conventional functions of sculpted skin and of sculptural skin. A masochism that no longer contains any pleasure seems to be Szapocznikow's endgame. The sensuality of the body belongs clearly to the past of these flayed skins. But this is not Szapocznikow's final word on the subject, either. For, in contrast to this fading away of any possible sensuality, the series of twenty **PHOTOSCULPTURES**¹ (1971), made just before the flayed-skin series, shows something utterly skin-like as sensual. The tiny sculptures she photographed consist of nothing other than chewing gum. They are radically formless; they do not represent anything. No inner-outer relationship is evoked. These chewing-gum sculptures are not bodies or objects; they are sheer skin. Nothing else. And when all remnants of the psychological functions of skin are eliminated, these photographs seem to suggest, this skin-only can shine again, not for a subject it clothes, but as interface to a visual transaction. Thus, a skin of art has something to offer beyond psychology. Now it is a trace that only projects itself forward, outward. There is no body left behind; only a visual act-to hope for.