

# Paweł LESZKOWICZ

Adam Mickiewicz University, Head of Modern and Contemporary Art,  
Department of Art History, Poznan

## QUEERING INTERSPECIES IN CRITICAL THEORY AND POLISH PERFORMANCE ART

There are queer climate scientists and environmental advocates, biologists, performance artists, eco-sexuals, radical faeries and environmental educators, who describe feelings of cultural resistance or healing associated with reflecting on or experiencing queer intimacy and interspecies relations. In the queer ecological imagination, new options are emerging through reflection on interspecies kinship. They develop as an opposition against conservative biopolitical appeals to 'nature' and the 'natural' that cast queer bodies and subjectivities as deviant, morally wrong, unnatural and at the same time less human. From this transgressive position, subversively some queer theorists, activists and artists have created personal narratives connecting their human otherness with non-human otherness.<sup>1</sup> Many projects draw attention to queer relations with the more-than-human environment.

In my text I will present briefly two theoretical positions that respond to the framing of non-normative bodies as unnatural by exploring queer interpretations of nature, ecological relationships, and environmental politics from the perspective of the unnatural other. I am inspired by two feminist postcolonial

concepts of interspecies intimacy and eco-erotics by Molenda Le May and Melissa K. Nelson who articulate intimacy as a physical disruption of borders between human and more-than-human in sensory, material and performative terms.

Then I would pose a question whether these contemporary postcolonial feminist literary theories could be related to the Polish male queer performance art from the late 20th century, as a way of reinterpreting and seeing these historical works from a different cultural context, anew. I will discuss naked performances that by definition are closer to the natural state of being.

First I would start with the concept of interspecies intimacy that was developed by Molenda Le May in her analysis of human/nonhuman border crossings in contemporary fiction of queer writers of color.<sup>2</sup> She considers how the turn towards the non-human as a subject in post-humanist critical cultural studies introduces new frameworks for analyzing human/non-human relations in queer eco-narratives. Writing about interspecies intimacy as a social affective process of crossing, Le May claims, "what binds race, sexuality, and species together is a panic around the capacity of bodies to forge physical intimacies against the regulative taboos

that would keep them separate.” Thus she reads intimacy as a border-crossing phenomenon which reaches far beyond the human and emphasizes the significance of intimacy as a disruptive force. Interspecies intimacies questions racialized and sexualized hierarchy of humanness. She points out how queer writers of colour developed characters against the biopolitical use of animality which debases people of colour and queers as primitive. They do this by allowing their characters to creatively interact with animality and in doing so reimagine what constitutes humanness beyond a cis-hetero-patriarchal set of norms.

The second term that I will use is eco-erotics developed by Melissa K. Nelson in *Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures*.<sup>3</sup> She analyses eco-erotics in indigenous oral storytelling as a pathway to ecological ethics. Nelson records stories of women in eco-erotic, at times explicitly sexual, relationships with the more-than-human beings. These stories she argues, support a native ecological ethic characterized by interspecies vulnerability, kinship and empathy, which is necessary for living in balance with the more-than-human world. These stories were largely lost through forceful introduction of hetero-patriarchal sexuality via Christian missionaries and boarding schools in both Americas. Nelson defines eco-erotics as a type of intimate ecological encounter in which we are taken outside of ourselves by the beauty, or sometimes the horror, of the more than human world. She describes eco-erotic interspecies intimacy in sensory terms, such as when she recounts her pleasure at eating and wallowing in dirt as a child. Contrary to the western colonial perspective associating eroticism with deviance or primitivism, Nelson envisions a pansexual relationship between human and more-than-human that is embraced through these intimate stories. Pansexual means an attraction all forms of being as opposed to the attraction someone hetero-, bi-, or homo- sexual has with their preferred sex(es).

Developed by Le May and Nelson, these moments of intimacy at the border between queer humans and non-human others are the focus of my interpretation of queer male nudity in the

performance art of Krzysztof Jung and Krzysztof Malec, two Polish artists who died in the 1990s and were pioneers of the queer art of masculinity.<sup>4</sup> This study is part of a bigger research project of tracing homoerotic expression, alternative queer embodiments and polymorphous eroticism in the art of Eastern Europe. Application of new terms of cultural theory such as interspecies intimacy and eco-erotics may offer a potential of new reading of performance art and queer art but also may expose the limits of such new modes of interpretation.

### Krzysztof Jung (1951–1998)

Krzysztof Jung performed (with) the naked and eroticized body, both his own and that of others; his actions reveal a fascination with the male body as an aesthetic, sexual and rebellious subject. The visual conventions of the People's Republic of Poland distorted and veiled the male body: full male nudity, considered pornographic, was censored. The artist found in body art the means to explore male nudity but also plural sexuality. In the 1970s, Jung was affiliated with the Warsaw's countercultural Repassage Gallery (1971-1981) – the centre of body art in Poland but also many other countercultural ideas of this period, including ecology.<sup>5</sup> In this alternative space, he performed a number of events, which raised issues such as the beauty of male body, the amorous relation between people, the deep interrogation of nudity, love and desire.

Since his first actions in 1967, Jung's performances featured naked men and women that tore apart threads, webs of threats, which the artist had woven around them, like a spider. Weaving was a typical feature of his performances. His naked friends and he himself got caught in his webs. In all these actions, weaving a web, staying within it, and tearing it was crucial, especially the experience of the sensual touch of the threads. Bound naked men and sometimes women who liberated themselves from webs in his performances acquire a variety of meanings.<sup>6</sup> They might be a projection, an enactment of his own craving for the truth, for something which is bodily authentic in the false



1



2



3

1. Krzysztof Jung, *Self-Portrait with a Fly*, 1979, pen on paper, 26,6 x 25,4, copyright Dorota Krawczyk-Janisch and Museum of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw

2. Krzysztof Jung, *Love* (to Czesław Furmankiewicz), performance, 1978, copyright Grzegorz Kowalski

3. Krzysztof Jung, *Metamorphosis* (to Wojtek Karpiński), performance, 1978, copyright Grzegorz Kowalski



1. Krzysztof Malec, *Silence*, installation, 1992, copyrights the State Art Gallery in Sopot and Jacek Staniszewski

2. Krzysztof Malec, copyrights the State Art Gallery in Sopot

3. Krzysztof Malec, *Silence*, installation, 1993, copyrights the State Art Gallery in Sopot

official ideological system that stripped people of real human contacts. The actions were seen at the time as striving for deeper physical and spiritual connection and being. The performances were not perceived or conceptualised at the time from a queer point of view, even though his collaborators knew about his sexual identity and that he performed with men whom he loved or desired. But from a contemporary queer perspective his artistic theatre might relate to destroying the strict web of masculinity. His performance art can be interpreted in political (anti-Communist) as well as sexual (non-heteronormative) terms. In his actions, a polymorphous reflection on a relationship between two men and men and women, became a real experience in the Repassage circle of friends, as a part of countercultural experience.

But what interest me in this interpretation is the act of 'nitkowania' (threadings). In different settings – alone or with other performers, naked or undressing during the act – the performers were positioned in a web of thread set up in a gallery space or created as part of durational work. During these performances, various participants were forced to negotiate their movement within the restrictive tactile construction that the naked artists wove around them like a spider spinning its web. In Jung's threading, desire manifests itself through connections temporarily made visible by the web of string, rendering the desiring dynamics between the bodies explicit as they subtly manipulate the tensely stretched thread. There is a definite connection to an action of a spider, the queer artist as a spider (!). Spiders, because of all their weird biology are just so inhuman, that they're incredibly strange. There is an identification with a spider as a radically different and scary non-human biological phenomena. Moreover in many of Jung's early drawings we can see his erotic fascination with insects. He created very detailed, mimetic drawing, depicting insects. The artist had a passion for nature, for bizarre animals, reptiles and insects. He also eroticized these radically other, 'repulsive' species. Especially his drawings from the series *Eros* are dragonflies whose abdomen takes shape of an erect or floppy penis.

The incorporation of the phallic shape into the insect's body suggests an estrangement, as though Jung was pondering the penis as foreign to him and his body, outside of its penetrative function for reproductive purposes only – outside, then, of its placement in a biopolitical arrangement of sex. Such merging of a dragonfly with the phallic shape can be read as an investigation into alternative, beyond-Oedipal conceptualizations of the penis but also a form of interspecies erotic fusion, the sexual unity of the human and nonhuman body.<sup>7</sup>

Jung as Eros-spider, binding the performing naked bodies with the ephemeral ejaculatory material in an insect-like cocoon, proposes new forms of affective or desiring communities involving the human and the animal, including the human as a naked animal, who intersects in the search of deeply authentic and therapeutic sensual connection with the self and the other.

Is then the contemporary idea of interspecies intimacy relevant for such performances that still centered on humans but with rich natural / biological connotations? Le May considered intimacy as a border-crossing phenomenon, a disruptive force to the hierarchy of humanness. Jung's drawings of penis-insects certainly can be interpreted through such frames, but what about his actions of spidery threading of naked people, can we see here the collapse between the human and animal sensory behavior? There are many questions to pose, but Jung's art offers possibilities for posing such themes related to queer interspecies intimacies.

### Krzysztof Malec (1965- 2002)

I would like to move from animals to plants: The second artist, Krzysztof Malec, used an unusual plant-based material - 'misty down' to create his atmospheric and soft installations/environments entitled *Silence*. The artist filled and transformed interiors with marsh plant seeds, dematerializing the contours of things. He used down consisting of billions of dandelion seeds or water tendrils, filling various interiors with an almost snow-

white mist. His worked with this natural sculptural material since 1991, the year of his diploma at the Warsaw's Academy of Fine Arts Sculpture Faculty. Politically it was the beginning of the first decade of Polish post-Communist democracy, the time of major cultural and social transformations.

In 1992, Krzysztof Malec participated in a group show mysteriously titled *Mystical Perseveration and A Rose*, curated by Ryszard Ziarkiewicz at the State Art Gallery in Sopot. As a part of the exhibition, the office of the director of the Provincial Centre of Culture in the City Town Hall in Gdańsk was magically transformed for three days by the vegetal down covering the interior and the furniture. Filling the rooms with light down blurred material shapes and created an atmosphere of mystery. In Sopot during the same exhibition, the artist dematerialized the basement of the Gallery with misty marsh plant seeds.<sup>8</sup>

His plant-based installations are full of ambiguities, but the title *Silence* remains symptomatic. An unspoken presence in an official interior, silent yet omnipresent, transforming reality, yet beyond verbalization, beyond institutional language. It is metaphorical, but also possibly repulsive – swamp fluff, where meanings are infinitely open. I propose a look at this installation from a queer perspective, trying to read some of its potential. *The Silence* of the title reflects one side of the presence of the issue of queer rights and subjectivity in the official, political/public life of the early 1990s in Poland. Although this topic had a certain media appeal and was exploited in the popular press, it rarely appeared in the language of new emerging democracy in a meaningful way. The installation *Silence* can therefore be interpreted as slipping into a heteronormative public/institutional space closed to the issue of queer rights. Into a space where a full and clear pronouncement was still impossible. In a political sense, the down in Malec's installation can speak of such silence. In his art, however, a psychological experience was more important. Non-heteronormative subjectivity was still a taboo and shame, which forced LGBT+ people to hide, to be silent, to live in silence in the public sphere and often in

the private sphere as well. Thus metaphorically, the queer subjects were like mist on the verge of visibility, yet present. It was not a state of full presence, but its dispersed form, more of an emergence than a being. That is why Malec's misty down installations are so atmospheric, they change interiors as if without touching them. The artist was one of the forerunners of installations as spatial fantasies but he used them to pose a question about the self and otherness about the forms of existence/non-existence.

In his performances Malec was coming out naked from the plant down filled spaces. In the dark photographs from his performance, the artist emerges naked from the plant mist, moves around in it, gets lost, and from time to time materializes. His spoke about the softness of his environments and the sensual experience, the pleasure of being in them. His most-well known naked performance is called *The Birth* (1991) from the workshop for students of sculpture of the Warsaw's Academy of Fine Arts in Dłużewo.<sup>9</sup>

This naked performance with plant's seeds can be read as coming out of silence, revealing oneself. It represents being pushed into silence and then gradually breaking it or discovering its meaning and even beauty, hence the sensual softness of plant-based material. And finally, one can read silence as a withdrawal, as a refusal to participate in a hostile public discourse, which one does not accept, but does not give up existing. We see the transition of vegetal mist into flesh, just as his body in the performance's photographs appears from the seminal darkness of the installation, being a part of it. On another note, in the materiality of the seeds of the swamp plants there is also a sexuality of the act and of the natural substance – the seeds of plants. After all, the artist filled the public interiors with seeds, the libidinal material of plant life but also of masculinity. Hence we can read this flora-based tactile works as a reflection on the softening and transforming of male sexuality, dispersing it into a new dimension of eco-erotics of tactile vegetal softness!

I would like to suggest that surprisingly there is a possibility of reading Jung and Malec's art through the interspecies metaphors and theories of the current cultural and ecological

moment. Their art dealt with issues of intimacy and crossed the border between the human and natural world. According to queer eco-feminists, through interspecies intimate practices, participants come to articulate a queer ecological narrative that is based more in interdependence, kinship and change than in categorical belonging. These narratives intertwine queer bodies with non-human bodies and spaces in a mutual process of recovery and change in terms of intimate sensory experiences such as participating, witnessing, listening, and touching. These acts are crucial for performance art. New forms of interdependence and kinship are at the center of Jung's spidery work with naked humans. Eco-materialism and plant based spaces form Malec's investigations of queer visibility/invisibility. At the same time both artists explored alternative embodiments of masculinity, associating it with nature, using biological metaphors or materials.

To finish with, I would like point out that the homophobic ideology and imagination still remind the main political point of reference for queer interspecies projects, especially in countries like Poland. The central issue here is the perception of non-heteronormativity in the homophobic discourse, as on the one hand unnatural (because only heterosexuality is taken as natural), on the other hand, as animalistic - inhuman. One of the absurd arguments against the legalization of same-sex unions is that if we allow them, polygamy and relationships with animals will be next. Paradoxically, homophobic ideology identifies non-heteronormativity as both unnatural and animal at the same time. Queer eco-feminism argue that there is power and transformation in it. In this perspective, queer interspecies art and theory are particularly fertile and creative in producing an alternative discourse from this position of marginalization. Hence interspecies art is thus fundamentally queer! One can only ask whether this discourse is useful for social and political emancipation, or whether it is merely culturally subversive - attractive for the world of art and ideas but without a political force, which we need the most. After all, is it not a coincidence that both Jung and Malec as gay men in late 20th century Central

Europe reached for natural entities particularly degraded - terrifying - spiders, insects and swamp and marshland vegetation, as if locating their art and subjectivity at the bottom of the traditional human hierarchy of values and aesthetics. Let us hope that in the 21st century the power of eco-consciousness and the recent intellectual histories of animal studies and posthumanism, arguing for interspecies as a way to navigate new directions, will transform the traditional, not only nonhuman but also human, hierarchies.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In my approach I am indebted to Arielle Frances Marks thesis on “Queer Interspecies Intimacies,” accessed November 21, 2021, [https://archives.evergreen.edu/masterstheses/Accession86-10MES/Thesis\\_MES\\_2019\\_MarksA.pdf](https://archives.evergreen.edu/masterstheses/Accession86-10MES/Thesis_MES_2019_MarksA.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> Megan Molenda Le May, “Bleeding over Species Lines: Writing against Cartographies of the Human in Queer of Color Fiction,” *Configurations* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 1-27.
- <sup>3</sup> Melissa K. Nelson, *Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> Paweł Leszkowicz, “The Queer Story of Polish Art and Subjectivity,” accessed November 21, 2021, <https://artmargins.com/the-queer-story-of-polish-art-and-subjectivity/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Maryla Sitkowska, ed., *Sigma, Galeria, Repassage, Repassage 2, Repassage* (Warszawa: Zachęta National Gallery, 1993), 4-15. Exhib. cat.
- <sup>6</sup> For the description of his performances see: Grzegorz Kowalski and Maryla Sitkowska, eds., *Krzysztof Jung (1951-1998)* (Warszawa: Xawery Dunikowski Museum, 2001). Exhib. cat.
- <sup>7</sup> Aleksandra Gajowy, “Insects, Threads, and Urinals: Polymorphous Desire Flows in Krzysztof Jung's Work,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 1-19.
- <sup>8</sup> Danuta Cwirko-Godycka, “Krzysztof Malec – In the Field of Nature,” in *Mystical Perseveration and a Rose* (Sopot: State Gallery of Art, 1992), 30. Exhib. cat.
- <sup>9</sup> Dorota Grubba, “Rzeczywista twórczość pustki. O twórczości Krzysztofa Malca (1965-2002),” *Kwartalnik Rzeźby Orońsko* 1-2 (2004): 19.

## Bibliography

- Cwirko-Godycka, Danuta. “Krzysztof Malec – In the Field of Nature.” In *Mystical Perseveration and a Rose*, 30. Sopot: State Gallery of Art, 1992. Exhib. cat.
- Gajowy, Aleksandra. “Insects, Threads, and Urinals: Polymorphous Desire Flows in Krzysztof Jung's Work.” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 1-19.
- Grubba, Dorota. “Rzeczywista twórczość pustki. O twórczości Krzysztofa Malca (1965-2002).” *Kwartalnik Rzeźby Orońsko* 1-2 (2004): 15-25.
- Kowalski, Grzegorz and Maryla Sitkowska, eds., *Krzysztof Jung (1951-1998)*. Warszawa: Xawery Dunikowski Museum, 2001. Exhib. cat.
- LeMay, Megan Molenda. “Bleeding over Species Lines: Writing against Cartographies of the Human in Queer of Color Fiction.” *Configurations* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 1-27.
- Leszkowicz, Paweł. “The Queer Story of Polish Art and Subjectivity.” Accessed November 21, 2021. <https://artmargins.com/the-queer-story-of-polish-art-and-subjectivity/>.
- Nelson, Melissa K. *Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Marks, Arielle Frances. “Queer Interspecies Intimacies.” Accessed November 21, 2021. [https://archives.evergreen.edu/masterstheses/Accession86-10MES/Thesis\\_MES\\_2019\\_MarksA.pdf](https://archives.evergreen.edu/masterstheses/Accession86-10MES/Thesis_MES_2019_MarksA.pdf).
- Sitkowska, Maryla, ed. *Sigma, Galeria, Repassage, Repassage 2, Repassage*. Warszawa: Zachęta National Gallery, 1993. Exhib. cat.