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THE BOX-ASSEMBLAGE AS EXILIC SPACE

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Abstract

This presentation revolves around my box-assembly, a three-dimensional body-themed artefact whose iconography is imbued with liturgical as well as profane tropes. I demonstrate how this artefact provides the female model and myself with an **exilic space** within which we not only re-assess concepts of alterity and subjectivity, but challenge the dominant role of male subjectivity in the western world. Its creation, a collaborative endeavour prompted by our desire to create an exclusive realm where libidinal desires are freed from societal inhibitions, starts off with our encounters in my studio. Parts of the latter's **space** are then transferred into the artefact itself, together with our metonymic presences in the form of relics and simulacra of our bodies-in-pieces. The box-assembly engenders an **exilic space** within itself, one characterised by liminality and in-betweenness; positioned between the sacred and profane, the tangible and intangible.

Abstrakt

Artykuł dotyczy moich asamblaży, trójwymiarowych obiektów artystycznych o tematyce cielesnej, których ikonografia przesycona jest zarówno motywami liturgicznymi, jak i dogłębnie świeckimi. Ukazuję, jak ów artefakt zapewnia modelce oraz mi jako artyście przestrzeń uchodźczą, w której nie tylko możemy poddać rewizji koncepcje inności i subiektywności, ale także rzucić wyzwanie dominującej w świecie zachodnim roli subiektywnego męskiego spojrzenia. Tworzenie asamblaży – projekt, który ma swój początek w mojej pracowni – wymaga współpracy, możliwej dzięki naszemu wspólnemu pragnieniu stworzenia odrębnej przestrzeni, gdzie libidinalne żądze uwolnione zostają od narzuconych przez społeczeństwo zahamowań. Pewne aspekty tej przestrzeni przeniesione zostają do samego artefaktu wraz z metonimiczną obecnością nas samych pod postacią relikwii i symulaków naszych poddanych segmentacji ciał.

By correlating her body with the divine, the box-assemblage gives this woman, as an embodiment of what I consider to be the “true other”, a trans-corporeal identity. Rather than controlling the other, the artefact provides an indeterminate **space** wherein the self encounters the other in a manner that initiates an equitable relationship, unhindered as much as possible by presumptive knowledge. This is aided by the box-assemblage’s underlying esthetics and dynamics which, while encouraging gender fluidity and disengagement from preconceived dogmas—a sort of reverse cognition—also enhances the experience of its deific symbolism. Ultimately, it allows us to speak through our bodies, transforming itself into a meta-narrative of our shared existences.

Keywords: alterity, box-assemblage, divinity, exilic, femininity, selfhood, transcendence

Wewnątrz asamblażu rodzi się przestrzeń uchodźcza, której istotą jest liminalność i bycie „pomiędzy” – umiejscowiona jest ona między sacrum a profanum, między tym, co materialne, a tym, co niematerialne.

Poprzez zestawienie ciała kobiety z boskością, asamblaż nadaje jej, jako urzęczywistnieniu tego, co uważam za “prawdziwie inne”, tożsamość transcielesną. Artefakt nie stara się kontrolować Innego, lecz wygospodarowuje niedookreśloną przestrzeń, w której “ja” spotyka się z Innym w sposób, inicjujący relację na zasadzie równości, w możliwie największym stopniu nieograniczoną stereotypowym myśleniem. Efekt ten wspomaga kluczowa dla moich asamblaży estetyka i dynamika artefaktu, która nie tylko promuje myślenie w kategoriach płynności tożsamości płciowej oraz niezależność od przyjmowanych a priori dogmatów, a więc swego rodzaju poznanie à rebours, lecz także wzmacnia jego boską symbolikę. W ostatecznym rozrachunku asamblaż pozwala nam przemówić poprzez nasze ciała, zmieniając się w metanarrację naszej wspólnej egzystencji.

Słowa kluczowe: inność, asamblaż, boskość, uchodźczy, kobiecość, „ja”, transcendencja

My contribution to this conference revolves around a series of thirteen three-dimensional, body-themed box-assemblages that I produced as part of my doctoral research at Loughborough University, the United Kingdom. The outer walls of these artefacts conceal from uncontrolled public access an intimate **space** which, although diminutive in size, holds exceptional significance to myself and a particular woman who goes by the alias of Idoia. It is pertinent to point out that for the past sixteen years Idoia has been the cynosure of my studio practice and, I dare say, within the context of my work, she not only epitomises but, at the same time and on a purely imaginary level, transcends womanhood.

The secluded territory within the box-assemblage displays within itself fetishised and sacralised representations of Idoia’s body and my own, together with other objects. Those manifold representations include look-alike plaster simulacra produced from moulds taken directly off our bodies. Unlike other forms of portrayal, for their materialisation body-casts require the direct intervention of the person in question. Consequently, this kind of artefact questions and disrupts the traditional assumption that

tangible esthetic experiences can only be brought about through the artist's (invariably male) mind and its supposed predilection to ingenuity [Mey, 2007, p. 13].

This demonstrates that, rather than the passive associate in the creative process, Idoia transforms herself into a creative agent and a direct accessory. Body-casting is a collaborative and intimate technique that allows us to metaphorically transfer our body fragments into the box-assembly's inner **space**, one that not only severs us from our mundane and personal lives, but sustains /opens up an **exilic** existence for ourselves.

The fusion of liturgical and profane tropes embedded within the box-assembly, such as the case with *Triptych for us*, 2014, and also *Wedge box*, 2013- (unfinished), underscores the liminal nature of the **space** afforded to us by the box-assembly, one that resides between the transcendental and the commonplace, the exceptional and the ordinary. However, this coalescence also mirrors the heterogeneity characterising our existences, an idiosyncrasy that is not unlike the one that underpins Christian faith. In *Strangers to ourselves* Julia Kristeva examines how St Paul understood this incongruity in human nature and exploited it to his cult's advantage. Pauline doctrine is based on the hypothesis that humans are binary beings, or rather entities endowed with an existential *split*, one that ...*divides them within themselves, on a same wandering between flesh and spirit, life and death* [Kristeva, 1991, p. 81-3]. Christ's followers are meant to embrace such dichotomy within themselves; and believe that transiting from the "shackling" materiality of their bodies to the "liberating" transcendence of their spirituality is within their reach. Thanks to Christianity's own dogma of transcendentalism, persons may re-generate themselves and be part of a wider community in which not only the sexual orientation and ethnicity of its members are inconsequential, but so are notions of homeland and **exile** as applied to their geographic whereabouts.

Paul takes a pragmatic approach to the expansion and diffusion of the Christian community; he puts forth one sole requirement for membership—a desire to identify with God through Christ who, just like any other person, possessed a carnal and spiritual existence. However, within a prospective member's material body must stem and flourish the eagerness to be part of this congregation, a flock whose collective physicality Paul identified with Christ's body. His religion is all about a merging of bodies; the Eucharist is a subtle erotic referent of this coalescence; consumption of Christ's flesh and blood pushes this communion to its extreme objective. Paul succeeded in creating a "cosmopolitan" *Ecclēsia* whose physical collective is actualised through the otherness of the divine [Kristeva, 1991, p. 83].

Exploiting this same kind of alterity, the box-assembly acts as receptacle and shrine for our broken down bodies and other objects, and, it constitutes part of an ongoing process whereby the relationship between myself and Idoia is re-visioned, metamorphosed, and scaled-up to an acutely intense level.

Consequently, the conventions associated with what is traditionally considered to be a strictly dichotomic relationship in the studio, that between male artist and female model, are re-negotiated. While time-honoured criteria make a clear distinction between the observant position of the former and the acquiescence of the latter, my work

veers away from such divergent statuses and opts for a mutually beneficial collaboration between us. As teammates in the artistic process, we undermine the asymmetry of this presupposed power structure to secure an equitable rapport between us [Polinska, 2000, p. 48]. At times, the woman is ascendent in the pair as is unambiguously displayed in one of the representations belonging to *Cabinet of intimate landscapes*, 2009- (unfinished) where the states of dress and undress are swapped between artist and model. Here Idoia not only engages with what appears to be a domestic setting on her own terms, but transforms the scene into a subtle political statement. While the male artist takes upon himself any vulnerability associated with nakedness, the female subject deliberately engages with the gaze of the viewers who, at this point in their “voyage” within the box-assemblage, would have already actively transformed themselves into “participant-spectators”, partaking of the structure’s secrets and establishing a liaison with its protagonists.¹

Furthermore, once self-exiled into the box-assemblage’s exclusive **space**, Idoia enfranchises her *unidealised* and resolute self not only to subvert traditional representations of the female body, but also to expose what Jennifer Griffiths refers to as *the uncontrollable nature of external and internal human desire* [Griffiths, 2013, p. 85]. The **space** within the structure becomes her theatrical stage where she can express her own sexuality in all its naturalness, complexity and mystery. The way her genitalia are shamelessly displayed without any hint of modesty, a result of her inventive performance inside the studio, together with her intimate belongings, augurs a self-possessed femininity that rejects any attempts to force her to submit. Within the physical confines of the box-assemblage, while patriarchal authority is adamantly dismissed, the woman is in complete command of her own sexuality.

Our **exilic** “co-habitation” in the spatiality of this artefact, accompanied with first-class relics and a miscellanea of intimate and other items, makes it amply clear that we are the binary driving force behind it. Invariably, the two of us are ever present and visible within this scaled-down architecture through manifold representations that give rise to convoluted gazing and complexified iconography, all of which are characteristics that contribute to the cutting back and at times the erasure of conventional and societal **spaces**, both physical and temporal, that may exist between us.

The artefact succeeds in appeasing my innate desire to access the other via a self-reflexive process which involves both mirroring and distancing at one and the same time, one that impinges directly on my very existence and the extent of its alterity. Needless to say, the purposefulness of the artefact is catalysed by the female subject’s affected presence through simulacra, real body-part relics, and memorabilia of her existence. However, at this point it is pertinent to point out that the inherent potential of Idoia partly lies in her capacity to emulate that which is transcendental and other in western theological thought. Each box-assemblage fetishises and sacralises at one and the same

¹ Marsha Meskimmon uses this term to denote viewers whose interest in a work of art goes beyond just gazing. She uses it in several of her works including *Contemporary art and the cosmopolitan imagination* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011) and in the editorial introduction to *Women, the arts and globalisation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013).

time Idoia's partitioned body. While each of these fragments is meant to be contemplated in succession, collectively they recreate her plenitude. They are a transformed Idoia who, in my perception, lacks nothing; not unlike the Roman Catholic belief that the disunited body and blood of Christ in the ciborium and chalice constitute, in actual fact, his absolute presence. The vial of yanked body hairs and personal belongings inside the box assemblage hint to the presumed inherent potency of first-class and second-class relics, the result of their origin and contiguity to hallowed persons. As actual body parts unified with the artefact, the hairs obscure the differentiation between its state as representational device and that of substantial presence of the subject concerned. Going a step further, the enclosure of the box assemblage not only situates Idoia in a particular frame of reference strictly identified with her and myself, but also apotheosises her.

Hypothetically, the way our bodies are linked and portrayed within the box-assemblage reflects a dialectical tension between the feeling that the female other has almost become a metonymic extension of myself and the awareness that such a feeling is at the same time illusory. Despite this association between us, the intersection of our heterogeneities starts off within the studio where Idoia accentuates the vulnerability of her nakedness by making the more intimate areas of her body available not only to my gazing, but also to my touch. The studio sessions are characterised by an empathy between us that is particularly intense. With our minds completely in sync, the physical distance between us is obliterated through the necessitated touching; the viscous silicone used in the body-casting process, and which I apply directly to her skin, becomes our coupling medium. We transform ourselves into a new corporeal unity—a sort of third and hybrid body; one that although characterised by the in-betweenness of our existences, succeeds in transcending the distinctiveness and boundaries of our individual bodies. Here I am partial to Elizabeth Grosz's notion of the "imaginary anatomy" which she describes as *an internalised image or map of the meaning that the body has for the subject, for others in its social world, and the symbolic order conceived in its generality (that is, for a culture as a whole)* [Grosz, 1994, p. 39-40]. Becoming a psychic extension of myself that goes beyond our subjectivities, Idoia provides me with what I lack. Paradoxically, the box-assemblage is a dynamic materialisation of this "imaginary anatomy", one that encapsulates within itself a segment of the actual studio **space** and coalesces with itself our body fragments, first- and second-class relics. However, notwithstanding the tangibility of its components, its morphology is constantly in a state of flux and liminality. The essentialness of the artefact's intramural **space** resides between that which is sacred and that which is profane, that which identifies with manhood and that which identifies with womanhood. This same essentialness and indeterminacy characterises our embodiment within the structure.

Here it is relevant to state that the quality and nature of Idoia's first-class relics held inside the box-assemblage, pubic hairs sealed in a glass vial, are comparable to those idolised in many churches and other places of worship. Once placed inside the artefact these hairs lose their triviality; they are made sacred and transformed into symbols of the female subject, or rather keepsakes of her existence. According to the Roman

Catholic Church, a relic is part of a soul's "container" with which it will eventually be restored back to a full body through resurrection [Bynum, 1991, p. 263-4]. As Idoia's actual body parts are fused with the box-assemblage, they obscure the differentiation between the artefact's state as representational device and that of substantial presence of the subject concerned [Bynum and Gerson, 1997].

Besides Idoia's first-class relics, also of substantial consequence to the box-assemblage is the objet trouvé and more so her second-class relics or personal effects that once grazed her skin; besides acting as fetishistic mementoes of her body, these also establish a direct and tangible link with her. While some are meant to evoke past experiences, others act as metaphors to fragmented memories. At this juncture Salman Rushdie's observation with regard to the incompleteness of memory is particularly germane: *The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities* [Rushdie, 2010, p. 12]. Rushdie's evocative commentary suggests that anything placed inside the box-assemblage acquires new meanings and associations. Collectively, the shell and constituent parts of the artefact may assume a significance that takes them beyond their physical presence and positions them in a realm akin to the divine.

All this goes on to show that the box-assemblage takes upon itself the responsibility to correlate the model's body with the transcendental, to give her, as an embodiment of what I consider to be the "true other", a trans-corporeal identity. However, rather than exerting control over the other, it provides a **space** with pious overtones whereby I am able to encounter the other and initiate an equitable relationship, unhindered with presumptive knowledge, as already stated earlier on. The particularities of the artefact's aesthetics and dynamics, while encouraging gender fluidity, aid the process of disengagement from preconceived dogmas—a sort of reverse cognition—also enhances the experience of its deific symbolism.

The box-assemblage expresses Luce Irigaray's notion of transcendence which, by promoting the notion of an "in-dwelling" divine, actualised through its materiality, dismisses divinable hierarchical differentiation. Thereupon, the box-assemblage discredits the notion that the self may be "essential" or "absolute", by laying emphasis on its fluidity and vulnerability [Joy, 2006, p. 4]. The box-assemblage translates into the perfect setting for a particular kind of contact, the one which Irigaray describes as (...) *the meeting with an other, another who is different while being the nearest to ourselves: the clearing for the advent of a dialogue or conversation between the two parts of humanity in the respect of their otherness to one another* [Irigaray, 2004, p. xii].

Redolent of Irigaray's commentary on selfhood and alterity, is that of Kristeva according to whom living with the other, as in the case of our shared existence within the box-assemblage, is not just ... *a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of being in his (her) place, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself*. I fully concur with her belief that while all this may lead to personal disaffection, it (...) *provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well*

as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture [Kristeva, 1991, p. 13-4]. The artefact's **exilic space** allows our bodies to appropriate their manifold actualities, aptly described by Elizabeth Grosz as the "(...) site(s) of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or consumption. She reminds us that (t)he body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural, the cultural, product. [Grosz, 1994, p. 23].

Henceforth, the box-assemblage translates its architectural **space** and conflation of the profane and sacred, sexual and religious, into our near-perfect **exilic** realm; an embodiment of what Stefan Themerson refers to as our "city of refuge" [Wadley, 1990, p. 225]. In the meanwhile it subjects our raw libidos to a process of transubstantiation whereby that which is ordinary yearns to be converted into high-art [Gosden, 2004, p. 37-8; Nead, 2001, p. 85]. Deprived of the quality of individual wholeness, our bodies-in-pieces invite ambiguity, apprehension and reflection. Individually and collectively, each one of them has a story to tell—a meta-narrative scaled-out through time and **space** [Ferrari and Spalten, 2011, p. 46], one that Edward Said describes as *contrapuntal* to our own private and separate existences [Said, 2000, p. 168].

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