Traumatic encryption: the sculptural dissolutions of Alina Szapocznikow
Captions to chapter 4


37 Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73) Self-Portrait 1, 1966, marble and polyester resin, 41x30x20 cm.


41 Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73) Rolls Royce II, 1971, pink Portuguese marble, 20x64x21 cm.

42 Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73) Stele, 1968, polyester resin and polyurethane foam, 79x46x69 cm.

43 Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73) Illuminated Breast, 1966, coloured polyester resin and electrical wiring, 56x17.5x16 cm.


45 Hannah Wilke (1940–93) S.O.S. – Starification Object Series, 1974–82, gelatin silver prints with chewing gum sculptures, 40x58½x2¼ inches (101.6x148.6x5.7 cm).

46 Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73) Photograph of the artist with Invasion of the Tumours, 1970, outside her studio at Malakoff.

47 Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73) Tumors Personified, 1971, polyester resin, fibreglass, paper, gauze, ranging from 33x56x34 cm to 15x23x16 cm.

48 Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73) Herbarium XIII, 1972, polyester resin and polychrome wood, 110x80 cm.

49 Michelangelo (Buonarroti, Michelangelo, 1475–1564) Last Judgment – detail (Saint Bartholomew) [before restoration].

50 Hans Holbein (1497/98–1543) The Body of Christ in the Tomb, 1521–22, oil on wood, 30.5x200 cm, Basel, Kunstmuseum.

51 Mathis Grünewald, Mathis (1455–c.1528) Isenheim Altar: Crucifixion and Entombment.


53 Bedrich Fritta (1906–44) Temporary Living Quarters for the Elderly in One of the Barracks Terezin (Theresienstadt) ghetto, c.1943, wash.

54 Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73) Exhumed, 1957, bronze, 64x42x30 cm.

55 Alain Resnais (b. 1922) Nuit et brouillard (Night and Fog), 1955, Argos Films: shot.

56 Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73) Untitled, 1971–72, pencil on paper, 29.5x21 cm.

57 Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73) Alina’s Funeral, 1970, polyester resins, glass wool, photographs, gauze, artist’s clothing, 135x210x50 cm.

58 Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73) Souvenir of the Wedding Table for a Happy Woman, 1971, polyester, glass wool and photograph, shown at the Galerie Florian, 1971. Photo: Jacques Verroust.

59 Photographic Source (The Artist and Her Father) for Souvenir I, 1971, polyester, glass wool and photograph, 75x70x30 cm, photographic source.

60 Photographic Source (Unknown Newsreel or Photograph) for Souvenir I, 1971, polyester, glass wool and photograph, 75x70x30 cm, photographic source.

61 Montage using two sources for Souvenir I.


63 Bracha L. Ettinger (b. 1948) Eurydice, no. 37, 2001, oil and photocopic dust on paper mounted on canvas, 21.4x28.3 cm.

64 Uziel Lichtenberg, Bluma Fried and friend, Lodz, 1938: the parents of Bracha L. Ettinger.
L’artiste saute, en plein soleil, brûlant d’avantage d’émotion dans son corps. Il se jette dans une eau de bain bouillonnante pour se rafraîchir et se détendre. Il prend ensuite une douche froide en se ruant vers le porte-fenêtre pour se refroidir davantage. Il se couche ensuite pour se reposer et se ressourcer.

Il peint des images de ses propres corps, vêtus de tissus étranges qui évoquent les souvenirs d’expériences passées. Il peint des scènes de sculptures abstraites et de matières organiques se mélangeant en peinture blanche par les murs.

Il peut voir des images dans les fenêtres, mais il ne peut pas les voir clairement. Il voit des images de ses propres corps, vêtus de tissus étranges qui évoquent les souvenirs d’expériences passées.

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I have been defeated by the main protagonist, the wonder of our times, the machine. Today all beauty, the discoveries and testimonies of our times, the recording of history, all belong to the machine. True dreams belong to it; it is applauded by the public. I only produce clumsy [or awkward] objects. (Objets maladroits) …

Despite everything, I persist in attempting to fix in resin the imprints of our body: I am convinced that among all the manifestations of perishability, the human body is the most sensitive, the only source of all joy, all pain, all truth … On the level of consciousness because of its ontological misery which is as inevitable as it is unacceptable.

Alina Szapocznikow, April 1972

In these statements, Alina Szapocznikow (1926–73), an artist born in Poland who died in France, places the adulation of modern technological and mechanical beauty, associated with various moments of Pop Art in North America and Nouveau Réalisme in France in direct opposition to the fragile human body (Figure 36). Displaced and yet still potent, the body is for her alone sensitive to questions of perishability. The choice facing the artist is, therefore, to produce objects that lack the formal beauty and technological order of the machine age, emblematic of an inhuman modernity, and instead exhibit their own deformation as testimony to the ontological misery of human corporality and an acute sense of mutability and mortality.

What are the conditions for this aesthetic and philosophical manifesto? Are they personal? Are they historical? Are they evidence of an aesthetic practice formed by the encryption of a traumatic burden at once intensely experienced in the artist’s own body and yet of a truly historical order of catastrophe?

I was introduced to Alina Szapocznikow’s work by two outstanding queer feminist Polish scholars, Tomas Kitlinski and Pawel Leszkowicz, during a visit to Poland on the occasion of the first retrospective of Louise Bourgeois in Warsaw’s prestige Zachęta Gallery, in 2003, already referenced in Chapter 2. They gave me the catalogue of Anda Rottenberg’s exhibition of Szapocznikov at
Memorial bodies

Zachęta in 1998 to confront me as a Western European feminist scholar with an artist celebrated internationally during her life, canonical in Eastern European art history, and utterly unknown to me in 2003. Rottenberg commented on the weak response to the first retrospective exhibition of Szapocznikow, held in Paris shortly after the artist’s death in 1973:

The exhibition fell on stony ground. The autotelic and linguistic references within the sphere of seventies artists [she is referring to conceptualism] did not accord with the carnality and drama of the artist’s work … a new generation grew up before art started dealing with the human body. Louise Bourgeois gained recognition only a few years ago. Eva Hesse who had been active more or less at the same time, did not leave her imprint on American art until the 1990s. Alina Szapocznikow is still waiting for the place which is her due.

Thus despite Szapocznikow’s fascination with ‘personal fate and the functioning of our bodies, biological, cultural, existential and social’, Rottenberg felt that Szapocznikow was awaiting her time even ten years after the realignment of Eastern and Western Europe had expanded our understanding of art in the later twentieth century across all of the continent.

From the moment I saw the mixed media Self-portrait on the cover of the 1998 catalogue, I was completely fascinated (Figure 37). Why had I never seen her work before? How did she come to make this kind of work? It was like things I knew and yet radically, troublingly different, disturbing, perplexing. Yet the work also opened a window into the disappeared modernisms of post-war Eastern Europe for Szapocznikow’s work had its own relations to influential but still little known Czech sculptors such as Eva Kmentová (1928–80) and Vera Janousková (1922–2010) who shared her material experimentations and engagements with both the female figure and contemporary representations of femininity. How many other women have been hidden behind the Iron Curtain that severed East from West in European modernism for forty years?

Like Bourgeois, Szapocznikow 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. She was also experimenting with dangerous industrial materials including latex, polyester and polyurethane. When she died in 1973, she had been on the verge of radically moving beyond sculpture while dealing with embodiment, corporality, sexuality and mutability in installations of an early kind.

Across Alina Szapocznikow’s extraordinary sculptural project, amplified by an equally extraordinary body of drawings, I am tracing contrary direc-
tions. Initially there was an attempted reconsolidation of the body through traditional sculptural figuration in modernist and then social realist modes, the latter culturally as well as economically supported in post-war Communist Poland. But a dissolution of materials and melting of forms begin by the early 1960s, some hilarious and joyfully erotic, others unbearably burdened by both ontological misery and historical trauma, as the once upright sculptures slip to the horizontal axis, spill, flow, crumple and corrupt. Compare the effect of two installations of the early sculptures of the 1950s and of the work of the 1960s (Figures 38 and 39). I suggest that the ‘body’ of work registers the gradual surfacing of a traumatic charge, embedded in the body, that does not achieve aesthetic transformation. Forms at first erect and grounded in the classical manner of sculpture, shift to a horizontal axis and succumb to a progressive dissolution of form. Encrypted trauma ultimately surfaces in forms and materials finally shockingly imprinted via photographic traces embedded into the dried resin with memories of the body through the fabrication of an artificial, damaged skin (Plate 12).

Finding a place

A photograph taken in New York in 1970 (Figure 40) places Alina Szapocznikow in a city and an artistic community that might have recognized an affinity with what she was doing in working with polyurethane and resin, combining a daring engagement with the sexed and sexual body but also with dereliction. Alina Szapocznikow was only in New York briefly, exhibiting at the Bonino Gallery with a group of conceptual artists brought from Europe to show in New York by the critical advocate of Nouveau Réalisme, Pierre Restany. In New York, there was no artwork on show. Artists merely attached to the wall proposals for a project. Szapocznikow outlined her plan to make a double-scaled model of a Rolls Royce carved in pink Portuguese marble (Figure 41). She rendered useless the most luxurious and expensive of cars by using age-old sculptural skills to carve it in weighty, impenetrable stone. Deposing the usually semi-naked women who draped desirable cars in advertising, and the frank equation of status symbol automobile and phallic machismo, the manufacturers’ elegant female insignia was replaced, wickedly, by a winged, erect phallus. Szapocznikow had hoped that Harald Szeeman, Director of Documenta ‘72 would help her realize the full-scale version, but, at the time of an oil crisis, neither he nor she could find sponsors to raise the huge funding necessary to carve and transport such a work. The artist also created another conceptual work for a Pierre Restany project: a skating rink to be suspended over the chasm of the volcano on Mount Vesuvius that might aggravate an eruption to petrify, like a modern Pompeii, modern pleasure-seekers.
Witty conceptual works, already in tune with new directions in contemporary art, were, however, hardly representative of Szapocznikow’s originality during the later 1960s and early 1970s. 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 (Figure 42), or mounds of transparent but cherry-coloured breasts or lips on stems illuminated with electric light (Figure 43), 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 Szapocznikow into the emerging feminist history of women artists of the 1960s?

But, we might also have then to ask: What would have been rendered invisible by such a purely feminist, and perhaps body art focus at that date? Would it have prematurely foreclosed the darker and traumatic histories, as was the case of Jewish child survivor of the Holocaust Eva Hesse until the work of Vanessa Corby in the 1990s re-examined Hesse’s work in relation to survivorship, Jewish subjectivity and maternal loss?8

Long adulated ‘at home’ as a key figure in Polish post-war art, and widely exhibited and regarded in her own lifetime across Europe, Alina Szapocznikow is in the process of being ‘discovered’ internationally. In 2011/12, the first major retrospective exhibition staged outside Poland, Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone 1955–1972, opened at the Wiels Art Centre, Brussels, before travelling to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, The Wexner Center, Columbus, Ohio and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Accompanying the exhibition a catalogue contains essays by Elena Filipovic, Joanna Mytkowska, Allegra Pesanti and Connie Butler. In 2011, under the title Awkward Objects, referring to the epigraph above in which the artist avows her own work as objets maladroits, Polish art historian Agata Jacubowska edited papers by international scholars delivered at a symposium that accompanied Joanna Mytkowska and Agata Jacubowska’s new, contextualizing exhibition of the works of Szapocznikow in Warsaw in 2009, Jacubowska being in addition the author of the first monographic study of the artist.9 Since 2007, dealers and curators have promoted Szapocznikow’s work in Europe and New York leading to new conversations, for instance, in Lynda Benglis, Louise Bourgeois, Alina Szapocznikow: After Awkward Objects (London: Hauser & Wirth, 2009).10 In 2010–11, Szapocznikow’s works have appeared in a survey of women in pop art, Seductive Subversions 1958–1968, organized by Sid Sachs for the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery of The University of the Arts, Philadelphia and been shown at The Brooklyn Museum by Catherine Morris, Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum and in Mind and Matter: Alternative Abstractions: 1940–Now at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, curated by Alexandra Schwartz in conjunction with
the publication of that museum’s volume *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (2010). Photoworks were exhibited at *documenta 12* (2007) and included in *Elles@Pompidou* (2009–11). Dedicated research in Poland produced catalogues raisonnés of her drawings and of her sculptures in 2000 and 2004 and her work is now accessible to researchers through her archive, which is on line at the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw (http://www.artmuseum.pl/archiwa.php?l=1&a=1).

Will Alina Szapocznikow now find her place in the art history of post-war sculpture? Aligned with contradictory tendencies from Pop Art to Abstraction while also being appreciated for her postminimalist use of new industrial materials, Szapocznikow is gaining belated critical visibility as an innovative post-war sculptor. Is this at the cost of erasing specificities of art under Communism, post-Auschwitz Jewishness and gender-specific morbidity and mortality?

In 2007, Alina Szapocznikow was brought to international attention by her inclusion in *documenta 12*. Featured with a few sculptures, Szapocznikow was noted, however, for her series of *Photosculptures* (1971) (Figure 44), a series of micro-sculptures created with softened masticated chewing gum, suspended into unpredictable and temporary forms on wooden or stone edges that were then photographed and enlarged in scale by Szapocznikow’s husband Roman Cieslewicz. When exhibited in a special format devised in 1978, they appear as flat, serial, refined photographic prints. The uncanny quality of chewing gum softened by the teeth and spit, then allowed to take on its own forms once exposed to air when suspended is contained by a formal beauty of framed prints that has made these dematerialized images immediately ‘digestible’ in contrast to the many challenging works by Szapocznikow that frankly confront the viewer with abject, horizontal forms made of rubbish and despair (Figure 39).

In the Virtual Feminist Museum, however, Szapocznikow’s gum pieces enter into conversation through that medium with the work of Hannah Wilke (1940–93) who, in 1974, the year after Szapocznikow’s death, independently began using masticated but coloured chewing gum. Wilke shaped the softened gum into suggestive vulval forms and attached them to her own partly nude body in a photographic series called *S.O.S Starification Series* or invited audiences to create them during performances to attach to wall texts. She also peppered found images with this signature form (Figure 45).11 Marking of her own body with insignia of her sex that also touched on both the abject and the scarifying resonated for Hannah Wilke with the racialized marking and wounding of Jewish bodies during the Holocaust. In an interview Wilke stated: ‘My consciousness came from being a Jew in World War II’ and in her performance ‘*Intercourse with …*’ she affirms, ‘To also remember that as a Jew, during the war, I would have been branded and buried had I not been born in America.’12
Remembered, and critiqued, for her beauty, daring and intensely corporeal sculptures and performance, Wilke’s sense of Jewish identification and historical trauma was overlooked until scholars such as Amelia Jones and Nancy Princenthal paid close attention to her affirmations. It is a further terrible irony that Hannah Wilke would also die too young from cancer, making some of her most powerful work about the body she had so insistently mobilized as a sculptural material throughout her career in the face of her own mortality. Her final series, *Intra-Venus* (1994) is in fact a posthumously printed and assembled photographic series of staged photographs plotting out her chemotherapy and bone marrow transplants during her fight against lymphoma from which she died in 1993. She had earlier produced a series of works with her own mother, Selma Butter, whom she had nursed during her battle with breast cancer. Like Szapocznikow, Wilke has had to wait until the first decade of the twenty-first century for the first monographic study. But placed in conversation now, both artists open up this intricate field of Jewishness, femininity, and creative innovations in media and practice around the body stemming from a sculptural imagination that occurred simultaneously in so many different sites in the 1960s and 1970s, and which hinged trauma, sexuality, corporality and mortality in ways that then defied critical comprehension. Yet, it must be stressed that there is a world of difference between Wilke, experiencing her Jewishness at a safe distance of projective identification, and Szapocznikow’s direct subjection to the horrors of ghettos and concentration camps, and to the life-long horror of being a survivor from that universe.

Out of time: too early and too late: the exhibition of 1973

Alina Szapocznikow died on 2 March 1973, aged forty-six, from secondary bone cancer following her long fight against breast cancer (first diagnosed in 1969). ARC Director Suzanne Pagé and art critic Pierre Restany organized a posthumous exhibition at the Musée Moderne de la Ville de Paris of Alina Szapocznikow’s recent works: two series called *Tumours* (Figures 46 and 47) and *Herbarium* (1971) (Plate 11 and Figure 48).

The first series directly referenced the deadly growths of spreading cancer that would take the life of a woman who had already fought off virtually untreatable peritoneal tuberculosis in 1949/50 – only surviving by means of an experimental dosage of Streptomycin. She had also ‘survived’ the German invasion of Poland in 1939 when she was thirteen and, as a result of being Jewish, incarceration in two ghettos – Pabianice (1940–42) and Łodz (1942) – being sent via Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen (1942/43) for ten months and then possibly to the Czech ghetto of Terezin (autumn 1943–May 45, also unconfirmed), from which she was finally liberated, aged nineteen, on 7 May 1945, imagining herself as the sole survivor of her immediate family. She was
separated from her mother in late 1944 and her brother is known to have died on 15 January 1945 in Terezin.

The terrible irony of imminent and excruciating premature death from an already mutilating disease after twice defying extinction charges the *Tumours* with almost unbearable pathos – these lumpen confrontations with biology run amok made from rubbish, newspapers, imprinted photographs and cloth bunched into clumps by polyester resin (Figure 46). Are they exorcisms, externalizing the invisible, autogenetic killer within? What happens when, as in some cases, these tumour forms are personalized with human features (Figure 47)? Are they being claimed back by the subject whose body and hence whose locus of subjectivity they were destroying? How do these clumsy objects register or dispel the repeated battle with mortality or register and dispel accumulating, and repeating, trauma in the face of death?

The second series *Herbarium* is a group of works in low relief made from flattening polyester positive imprints from negative body casts of the artist (Plate 11, Figure 48) and her adult son, Piotr Stanislawski. These crushed body forms were hung pathetically on black wooden boards, functioning as both objects and relief sculptures. Colourless, the sculptures at once remind me of a flayed skin, like St Bartholomew in Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement* in the Vatican (Figure 49), onto which the artist projected his own distorted features; as such, they might tip into the abject. Yet, their waxy whiteness also invokes the distancing and eternal peacefulness of carved marble. Sleep rather than death is suggested. Tender and pathetic, the meditative *Herbarium* works counter the awkward litter of the ‘clumsy forms’ of the *Tumours*, which lie scattered, on a horizontal axis on beds of naked earth or pebbled stone, suggesting both burial and disinterral.

Both series insist on the organic physicality of the body, its own generative distortions, its fragility and its eventual disappearance leaving, however, imprinted traces. Both the body represented and its imprint have suffered. The procedure of body casting and then making an imprint in a malleable form, however, undoes the bonding of death and resurrection that marble once offered, in the Western tradition of sculpture, as a means of maintaining the body beautiful in petrified eternity beginning with pagan antiquity and appropriated by the Christian imaginary for European culture.

Of the works in the 1973 exhibition, Pierre Restany, long-time supporter of Szapocznikow’s work in France, stated:

*The Tumours and Herbarium are Alina’s (sic) last works. Apart from their value as a human testimony they illustrate in a gripping way the naked truth of the creative process, conditioned directly by the imperious drives of organic sensuality. Alina had no need to conceptualize her love of life. She lived that love most intensely, with all her biology, that sensitive energy which became*
naturally crystallized in the act of creation. She had that rare gift, typical of
great sculptors, the innate gift of integrating mental motivation into the flesh
of forms, the idea into matter.\textsuperscript{15}

Perspicacious and generous, Restany’s comments also betray gendered and
gendering tropes about ‘Alina’ (note the use of only her first name) as a sponta-
neous, sensual, carnal artist, while at the same time recognizing something
profound that he cannot quite articulate in the intensity of what he calls ‘her
love of life’. He is struggling to reconcile a quality that defies conceptualiza-
tion and calculation and yet invests matter with sense: the term holding both
sensuousness and some elusive suggestion of symbolic meaning. I want here
to catch the difficulty of understanding a ‘mental motivation’ that is translated
into the ‘flesh of forms’ when what we see are a resin skin entombing rubbish
and the empty, fragmented trace of an invisible body.

Listing the events of Alina Szapocznikow’s life between 1939 and 1945, as
I have done, risks overwhelming the encounter with the artist’s work with an
outrageous biography. Her posthumous reception has indeed suffered from
such overemphasis. Any study of this artist’s career, however, that did not pay
due respect to the enormity of her encounters with one of the most traumatic
events of the catastrophic twentieth century, the Shoah/Holocaust, or to the
nature of her own struggle with one almost untreatable illness that robbed her
of her fertility aged twenty-three and then with fatal cancer would be guilty of
an egregious ethical failure. How can we calculate the meaning of experience
for the artist as a person, and for his or her artistic practice, especially when
those experiences are so extreme? We swing between outlawing biographical
reference for fear of reductive sentimentalization of women as artists – the
cases of Frida Kahlo, Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois would be examples
of biographical reductiveness – and modes of feminist cultural analysis that
attempt theoretical finesse. The significance of lived experience itself is read
with a range of psychoanalytical and phenomenological resources, while the
mode of translation into aesthetic formulation is also given its full due.

Szapocznikow was never as loquacious as Louise Bourgeois about the
significance of her past or the range of associations engendered by her work.
Indeed, the years of what Szapocznikow poignantly named her ‘baptism
of despair’ were clearly so horrific that she was intensely reticent, refusing
to speak in public about her past. Some survivors, we know, lived for and
felt compelled to bear witness; others buried their dreadful experiences in
disavowing silence. Survivor Primo Levi wrote honestly and with a hint of
anguish, moreover, about the shame that afflicts survivors for having survived,
and a sense of being impossibly compromised by contact with the ‘gray zone’
that was often necessary for survival.\textsuperscript{16} Szapocznikow once wrote to her first
husband of the gulf that lay between them because of what she had experienced
and witnessed in the various camps that indelibly altered her being in the world.

Thus, without abjuring the significance of Szapocznikow’s histories, I want to dispel the aura of pathos or tragedy by following her own lead: what matters is that she chose to become a sculptor. We should not read her work for testimony to any of her life’s events; but we can, I suggest, decipher beyond the energetic engagement with life and a successful career in conditions of financial, political and cultural difficulty – post-war Europe, Communist Poland, foreignness in France, and so forth – the traces of the encryption of trauma (some of it known but unbearable, some unassimilably horrific) that nonetheless leaked from its psychic entombment and ‘surfaced’ over the twenty-eight years of her practice as a sculptor in ways that radically altered the sculptural form to which the artist had dedicated her life’s work.

Szapocznikow’s choices were, I suggest, historically and traumatically overdetermined precisely by the absence of the words she would not speak, for experiences indelibly engraved upon her own flesh. These refused to remain ultimately invisible. Between 1939 and 1945 her young body was tortured by starvation, brutality, exhaustion and worse. She witnessed the unspeakable atrocities committed against other bodies around the dark core of mass industrial killing and the struggle for survival in ‘the concentrationary universe’.

She hung onto life but then had to live that life imprinted by what she had endured and seen, smelt and touched. Hence we need to approach her work through the deeper understanding of the concept of the survivor, and I shall discuss her work in relation to Terence des Pres’s study and Charlotte Delbo’s writings on the nature of survivorship and traumatically imprinted deep memory.

Secondly, Szapocznikow endured the experience of infertility, an anguish that has only recently been fully acknowledged in public discourse to deepen our understanding of its grief. Studies of Holocaust survivors remark on the urgency of having children that overtook many still fractured men and women, as if procreation, the sheer will to create life, was the last act of defiance in the face of attempted genocide. To be unable to renew life from within one’s own body – when the desire or the compulsion is there – is not a wound to be superficially dismissed by mere mention. It is perhaps one of most profound and unfathomably painful afflictions to be endured by a healthy woman and far too little recognition is given to the ramifications of this experience in terms of an understanding of oneself as a body at war with one’s will and desire. Alina Szapocznikow and her first husband adopted a baby in July 1952, revealing to no one, not even her son during her lifetime, his adopted status.

Thankfully, I have not yet faced a mortal disease prematurely claiming my life; my mother and some of my closest friends have. Even that vicarious experience of the imminent and unwilled death was terrifying enough for me.
to insist, alongside both of the above extremities of human suffering, upon the terror Szapocznikow confronted through cancer and to admire the courage of those who have to face the coming of their deaths out of time.

Thus instead of the bathos of a tragic life (given that tragedy involves the subject participating in her own tragic destiny), I wish to encounter the work of Alina Szapocznikow under the sign of trauma which will, nonetheless, impress itself into the changing forms of her innovative aesthetic experiments that traverse recovered memories of interrupted modernisms, brutal post-war abstractions that themselves register cultural trauma, and onto Pop, Nouveau Réalisme and postminimal hybridizations and new materials.

Alina Szapocznikow did not live to see her life’s work through. Imminent death seems to have speeded up certain tendencies and engagements with anti-forms while detouring her from other longer considered questions about equilibrium and volume that had preoccupied her initial involvement with sculpture. Given the abrupt foreclosure of a longer career by premature death, how could we now, as we belatedly restate her place in the history of twentieth century art, perform what Ettinger in a feminist and Matrixial move calls transcryptum, lending our perspective of the afterwardness of feminism and Holocaust awareness to this work that seemed brilliant, but indecipherable, in its own moment?

Thus we need the information about Alina Szapocznikow’s life in order for us to tune into the unsaid, as well as to that which surfaced in her artwork. Szapocznikow’s sculptural work shifts from solid, carved and moulded forms into progressive dissolutions, distintegrations and disruptions of inside and outside that testify to the belated ‘surfacing’ of the latent trauma of the unspeakable violations of the human body that she had witnessed during her teenage years, assisting her doctor-mother as a nurse in ghettos and camps before she became an artist ‘after Auschwitz’. I speculate that the unconscious propulsion of Alina Szapocznikow towards sculpture was initially an escape from what she had seen ‘in the Real’.

At her liberation in 1945, Alina Szapocznikow did not go ‘home’ to Poland. She went to Prague. It seems she was at that point not aware that her mother had also survived. She thus felt that she was entirely alone: the last of her own world, her own family in a post-Jewish Europe. (She would later encounter cousins in Paris.) Penniless, without much education, she trained to become an artist by producing sculpted bodies that are modelled and constructed as relatively whole entities. Traditional sculptural practice and materials, carving stone, casting bronze, moulding plaster, construct and secure imaginary integrity. Sculpture is by definition form-creating, sometimes monumental, producing a volume that takes its place in real space, repopulates the world. Her work exhibits a restorative will to create whole forms, reparatively to carve and model whole bodies, remade into solid figures in hard or permanent materials.
like plaster and stone. This desire was paradoxically legitimated precisely by the emergence of a public culture of monumental figurative sculpture in post-war Stalinist Poland. But then, as part of an equally lively Polish avant-garde, the nature of her forms and materials gave way to more abstract forms, rendered in materials like malleable cement that explored more formless, dissolving and abjecting effects, but which nevertheless turned permanent and remained upright. By the early 1970s, however, we are confronted in her oeuvre with works that no longer have volume or form, but feel like crushed casts. Made experimentally with industrial materials such as the new polymer, polyester, works are poured, viscous, transparent and sometimes invaded by ready-made, photographic images. Some appear now as hardened relics or, worse, suggesting dried, even detached fragments of skin (Plate 12). Such a transformation from the solid and the contained to the fragmentary, transparent and detached cannot be explained as a progressive teleology shaped alone by shifts by the artist's maturing engagements with the artistic cultures of Prague, Warsaw and Paris. Nor are they symptoms of what Krauss and Bois would, in 1996, finally name as the counter-trend of twentieth-century modernism: the formless – Bataille's *informe* and touching on what Georges Didi-Huberman would concurrently explore as the archaeology of the imprint in modern art, *L'Empreinte.*

The mutability of her own body forced the artist to negotiate or even, shall we say, accede to the return of the repressed in a secondary encounter with trauma that released the encrypted source of the emerging dance of death that characterized her work, the play of eroticism and mortality that so radically distinguishes her work even from those with whom she is now being art-historically connected. I wonder if this is the source of the after-affect that so confused even her admiring critics?

Encryption

In studying melancholia occasioned by profound loss, psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok argued that the loss, sometimes not even one's own but inherited from other generations or from surroundings, can induce a psychic entombment of unspeakable secrets deposited in the specific life-histories of individual subjects which bypass signification. The crypt forms a kind of hyperlinked network between sounds or between syllables or between visuals through which the encrypted trauma, however, continuously leaks. Abraham and Torok identified a 'poetics of hiding' that has implications for understanding the relays between trauma and aesthetics. My suggestion is that we might well consider the ‘movement’ in Szapocznikow’s work from solid to molten, from formed to disintegrating, as indications of both the psychic entombment of trauma and the paradoxically affecting aesthetics of
dissolution by which its encrypted traces ‘surface’, not as a known story that
can be consciously ‘expressed’, but as that which operates its poetics of hiding
and forced disclosure through displacement into de-signified materiality and
(de)form(ation). Yet the work is saved from abjection by the artworking of
aesthetic transformation borrowed from, but never completely liberated by,
consciously deployed artistic resources offered in contemporary develop-
ments in the surrounding art worlds.

Alina Szapocznikow was, of course, not alone in daring to mingle sexuality
and death. Their intersection was one of the central problematics of much
that was significant in culture in the twentieth century, certainly after Surrrealism and after the writings of Georges Bataille. But, I suggest, the sources
of her initiative are not phantastic, or phantasmatic, but traumatic. We can
also understand the conjunction of eroticism and death as the result of what
Freudian psychoanalysis disclosed about the dialectical operations of human
subjectivity and desire oscillating between the pleasure principle and the
death drive. Furthermore, in a broader cultural perspective, such contradic-
tory psychic forces intersected with the destructiveness of the novel, industri-
alized World Wars while at the heart of the Third Reich’s regime of terror, Jean
Améry placed a sexual perversion: sadism. Such socio-cultural attentions to
the modernity of Eros and Thanatos need also to be juxtaposed to the ravages
of our special modern diseases, primary among which is cancer that attacks
many organs, but frightens us most when it takes over those associated most
with our sexual identities and erotic pleasures.

As the epigraphs insist, Szapocznikow chose the body as her central
problematic as an artist while ‘Auschwitz’ was as much the terminus for the
European artistic tradition based on the pathos formula of the emotionally
expressive body as it was for real bodies, precisely because of what happened
in that real event to millions of human bodies, destroyed in industrial genocide
or forced to endure and die from the concentrationary regime of dirt, disease,
starvation, exhaustion, cold, heat, and a systematic assault on the moral,
psychological and social structures of human subjectivity and personality. To
have survived by not being gassed or shot as a Jewish European is not to have
escaped. The witness-survivor, pace Primo Levi who disclaimed being the real
witness because he did not endure either mass murder or become the abject
walking corpse – named in Auschwitz slang a Muselmann – is indeed the bearer
of continuing hell of being split between what one has seen and known and
endured and the world to which one has returned without being ever able to
communicate any of it to those who never saw it and could never imagine what
has once been real ‘beyond imagining’. What does making sculpture based
on the body mean not only in the epoch ‘after Auschwitz’ but as the bearer of
its imprint? To answer this question, we need to return to an earlier moment
of epistemic rupture in Western culture’s imaginary of death and the body.
Confronting Death in 1521

In 1521 but dated 1522, Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543) painted a chilling rendering of the Christian theme of Christ's entombment, titled *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (Figure 50). Relentless in its horizontality, the compressed space allocated to the corpse is oppressive. The painting’s extended rectangle increases the sense of enclosure, entombing the cold, yellowing and tortured body with its distorted features and contorted hands still registering the prolonged agony endured prior to and during an excruciating death.

According to Hegel, Christian thought and theology and hence iconography circle around the paradox of the natural death – the death of the body – and its overcoming through one death – a sacrifice made out of such divine love that death itself is overcome once and for all. The Christian narrative moves swiftly through a redemptive sequence of suffering, death, entombment and resurrection over three days. In artistic representations, bystanders registering gesturally or facially the appropriate grief and astonishment, doubt and joy, typically attend to focalize the moment of suffering, deposition from the cross and then resurrection. The body that is the subject of and subjected to this passage through death back to life is more often than not represented as the figure of pure and heroic pathos in which suffering becomes the transient physical ordeal that will lead to resurrected and eternal beauty as a result of the divinely appointed victory over human mortality. Michelangelo’s drawings of the Crucifixion would be the apotheosis of this tendency. Holbein’s painting, however, arrests the Christian narrative at a moment that is hardly ever pictured – after the crucifixion and before the resurrection. Mathis Grünewald envisions the tender entombment as a predella to his Gothically brutal *Crucifixion* (1506–15; Figure 51). Grünewald’s and Holbein’s afflicted bodies form a counter-imaginary.

In her study of melancholia, *Black Sun* (1982), Julia Kristeva devotes a chapter to Holbein’s dismal painting exploring his aberrant figuration of the dark and unattended, unwitnessed, rarely represented stage between entombment and resurrection. She places the work in its cultural-historical moment of early sixteenth-century European humanism and iconoclasm which marked the emergence of Protestantism and its novel theology. Hans Holbein the Younger is the subject of this moment; his intellectual, theological and artistic significance is stretched between the desolate, ascetic and lonely image of the derelict, dead Jesus and his other famous work, the *danse macabre*: the dance of death, a parallel commentary on human mortality, its defiance and disavowal.²²

At the junction of Catholicism with its spiritual understanding of the death of Christ and novel Protestant insistence on the reality of suffering,
this painting, according to Kristeva, offers us ‘an unadorned representation of death’ which conveys to the viewer ‘an unbearable anguish before the death of God, here blended with our own, since there is no hint of transcendence’: everything save a tiny touch of light on the toe produces a feeling of permanent death. Christ’s dereliction is seen here at its worst.

Kristeva senses that, in Holbein’s confrontation with the entombed body, ‘Humanization has reached its highest point’. Thus she concludes that Holbein’s vision is the Renaissance vision of ‘man subject to death, embracing death, absorbing it into his own being, and enjoying a desacralized destiny that is the foundation of a new dignity’.23 Holbein was not melancholic, but rather the painting is the register of the melancholic moment of its creation that witnessed a ‘loss of meaning, a loss of hope, a loss of symbolic values, including the value of life’. The structure of the painting proposes itself to a ‘solitary meditation of the viewer in disenchanted sadness’. Despite the novelty of oil painting and its potential, this act of painting the entombed Christ poses a question: ‘is it still possible to paint at that point where the body and meaning are severed, where desire disintegrates?’

Holbein’s chromatic and compositional ascetism renders such a competition between form and a death that is neither dodged nor embellished, but set forth in its minimal visibility, in its extreme manifestations constituted by pain and melancholia.24

I am using Kristeva’s reading of Holbein’s image and its moment to make visible an even more radical rupture in representability associated with the chronotope ‘Auschwitz’. For the truly thoughtful, ‘Auschwitz’ rendered it impossible to maintain the relations between Western aesthetic conventions for representing the human body in its mutable and mortal condition and what had actually happened in the real. Aesthetic models were exploded by the dreadful transformation if not obliteration of human death brought about by a novel crime: racially targeted, industrialized genocide coupled with totalitarian experiment to extinguish the human in bodies subjected to a lingering dehumanizing dying in the concentration camps.

In his second reflection, in 1962, on the question of the barbarism of aesthetics ‘after Auschwitz’, Theodor Adorno, quoting Sartre from his play Morts sans sépulture (The Unburied Dead) (1946), argued that something had happened in the real ‘when men beat people until their bones break in their bodies’ (Sartre) which act of inhuman brutality seems to stand in for that to which Adorno had given the generic name of a time and a place: ‘Auschwitz’. The real, having happened, was so atrocious that metaphysical speculation, imagining, was henceforth knocked out completely.25 In his third and final return to the question of art’s situation ‘after Auschwitz’, in Negative Dialectics of 1966, Adorno elaborated on his argument that what had happened in
‘Auschwitz’ had changed the conditions of all human dying. Reversing the one sacrificial death that according to Christian thought might save all humanity, mass murder went beyond the merely cruel and sudden ending of a life. The death camps did not ‘murder’. They manufactured corpses from which were extracted a range of resources desecrating the very body whose dignified and respectful disposal after death defines human culture.

Artist-bystanders, however, who felt compelled to comment upon the rise of Nazism or its aftermath, continued to draw upon the iconographic and stylistic resources of Western Christian imagery of death, despite being Jewish or communist: Picasso in his painting *The Charnel House* (1945, New York, Museum of Modern Art), responding to liberator photographs of the tangled bodies found in concentration camps, or Chagall in his pre-Holocaust series using the image of a Judaized Christ to denounce the new wave of persecutions of European Jewry, beginning with his *White Crucifixion* (1938, Chicago Art Institute). The novelty of the event, however, evades the pre-trooped conventions, exposing the inadequacy even of Gothic expressionism or the desolate melancholy of Holbein because they belong to a moment before the radical alteration ‘in the real’ of the nature of all human death because of the nature of administered annihilation of some within the human community.

We find a similar problem in the work of artist survivors of the concentration camps. The Slovenian artist Zoran Music (1909–2005) (Figure 52) was a prisoner in Dachau in 1944/45. Music recast the Holbeinian confrontation with the skeletal body and anguished features of the imaginary Dead Christ to represent the figure of the *Muselmann*. His witness drawings and later paintings from memory are not, however, of corpses but of the terrifying novelty of the concentrationary universe: human beings who cannot be securely defined as living or dead. Degraded, starved, diseased, the inmates of a concentrationary universe hover in a state of non-human life that is not-yet-death. Czech artist Bedrich Fritta (1906–1944) (Figure 53) one of the famous group of artists in the Terezin camp/ghetto – in which Szapocznikow endured eighteen months – draws with vivid Expressionist extremity the unclothed bodies of starved men lying in the three-layered bunks as if they already lie in Holbein’s tomb but in triplicate, destabilizing our encounter with what we cannot establish as corpse or still living man.

Trained modernists, Fritta and Music still draw on the Gothic-modernist paroxysm of pain translated into twentieth-century modernist Expressionism. As such, they can only repeat existing ways of imagining suffering through aesthetic distortion, rather than seeking to create utterly new forms through which to meet the novelty of the circumstances Adorno would explore in his final reflections on ‘after Auschwitz’. Holbein’s extraordinary gesture in painting the desolation of the entombed and dead Christ invites a reading of
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a painting that opens on to a shift in cultural history of the Western Christian imaginary at the beginning of humanism and Protestantism. Yet Holbein’s model proves inadequate to the enormity of the event ‘Auschwitz’ precisely because after what was done and seen, the human body could no longer be retrieved to signify the deeper horror of the destruction of the human perpetrated by the Nazi state, even in such frank abjection as Holbein’s vision of the battered incarnated divinity who would, none the less, promise to defeat death. What happened in ‘Auschwitz’ was at once a trauma for Western culture, henceforward without means of knowing it through available significations or images – hence an event beyond thought or imagination – and for those individuals who lived through and witnessed the exterminatory or concentrationary universe, carrying it with and in their own bodies.

What does it mean to live after Auschwitz? What does it mean to have survived? Is it living on, after but always oriented towards those who did not? Is it living with unbearable knowledge but also with the imprint of the real upon the entire sensorium of the survivor’s body?

Surviving: debates

In 1976, American scholar Terence des Pres published his study The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps. His text draws on both fiction and testimonies to build a detailed picture of the unspeakable conditions suffered in both Hitler’s and Stalin’s camps. His purpose, however, was to trace a will for life that produced the unimaginable: the survivor. Des Pres’ argument troubles me, but the evidence he assembles is overwhelming. The book honours the extraordinary courage and endurance of men and women who fought actively against the systematic destruction of their humanity through self-maintenance, care for others, solidarity and even revolt, holding onto language and memory, willing themselves to survive to testify. From this particular material Des Pres derives a general lesson for humanity and the world: that there is something resilient in humanity capable of withstanding everything in the name of life. This argument echoes Robert Antelme’s profound testimony to the unbreakable bond uniting ‘L’espèce humaine’.

Paradoxically, in tracing this comforting thread through the memoirs and novels, Des Pres has to assemble a terrifying picture of what was endured. His most telling chapter is entitled ‘Excremental Assault’ which ends with the scene of the survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising who had hidden for days in the foul sewers beneath the city and emerged ‘strange beings, hardly recognizable as humans’. Yet even here Des Pres finds the comfort: ‘life and will, as if these shit-smeared bodies were the accurate image of how much mutilation the human spirit can bear, despite shame, loathing, the trauma of violent recoil and still keep the sense of something inwardly inviolate’.
Why do we seek comfort in such beliefs of the indomitability of the human spirit? Not all survivors attribute survival to will or the power of life; not all preserved a sense of something inwardly inviolate. We do not have any comments from Szapocznikow nor other evidence about Szapocznikow’s experiences between 1939 and 1945. But that of which she could or would not speak publicly was nonetheless utterly significant for she was a survivor – sustained, we know, by being able to remain for some period with her mother, thus to be recognized by an other and protected in ways that subsequent studies, particularly of women's experiences and survival, have shown to be often decisive. Her project for the monument at Auschwitz-Birkenau is significantly the pairing of a protective mother and a small child. But her work, despite her evident capacity to reclaim life as a survivor, refuses to allow the past to be cleansed.

Before becoming Alina Szapocznikow

In most accounts of Alina Szapocznikow’s artistic career the briefest mention is made of her youth which involved the death of her father when she was twelve in 1938, the loss of her brother in 1939 (he died in Terezin in 1945) and the process of surviving two ghettos, a brief possible but undocumented stay in Auschwitz, a longer incarceration in Bergen-Belsen and finally, we think, eighteen months in Terezin. During these desperate years between 14 and nearly 19, she worked beside her mother, a doctor, as a nurse, witnessing not only her mother’s and her own suffering and constant danger, but the diseases and afflictions of those subjected to starvation, brutality and untreated infection. The anguish of these years and the violent destruction of the world into which she had been born must constitute a locus of massive trauma. There is little record. So let me revisit the chronology and life-story, not to mine it for explanations of the artworks, but to establish the generational and geopolitical landscape against which it was created, that haunts the work that did not ever represent it, that indeed was made to assert life in defiance of it.

Alina Szapocznikow was born to a middle-class professional Polish-Jewish family in Kalisz, Poland on 16 May 1926. The family lived thereafter in Pabianice, just outside Łódz. Her father, a dentist, died of tuberculosis in 1938. Losing sight of her brother at the very outbreak of the war in 1939, Alina Szapczenikow and her mother Ryfka (Regina), moved through a series of ghettos and camps surviving liquidations and death transports.

Thus, like Janina Bauman, author of the telling memoir of her adolescence surviving the Holocaust in and outside the Warsaw Ghetto, Winter in the Morning (1986), Alina Szapocznikow was thirteen, on the cusp of womanhood (also like Anna Frank who was 13 in 1942 when forced in to hiding) when Germany invaded Poland and began its campaign to subordinate the Polish
nation as a slave state and to eradicate Poland’s large Jewish population. She effectively lost her teenage years, secondary education, coming of age socially and sexually; her adolescence comprised memories or amnesiac obliteration of life in two ghettos, then possibly Auschwitz and definitely Bergen-Belsen, and finally Terezin, each location more ghastly than the last. Auschwitz-Birkenau was a factory of death but the Auschwitz system as a whole was also a slave-labour complex and a concentration camp; Bergen-Belsen, founded in 1943, was a German concentration camp not manufacturing instant death but producing a slow and agonizing dying through starvation, overwork, lack of sanitation and rampant disease. 50,000 prisoners died there. It was there that Anna Frank would perish, aged fifteen, in April 1945 from typhus, malnutrition and despair.

Terezin was a ghetto. Using a barracks town built in 1780 to house 5,000 soldiers and supply the fortress that protected Prague from the North, Terezin was made into a ghetto for the Czech and then for other European Jewish populations, housing up to 55,000 people. Regular deportations were made to Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau, and in conjunction with the extreme conditions in Terezin itself it is calculated that 97,297 people died there from disease, malnutrition and violence. 15,000 children died in Terezin; only 93 children survived this ghetto. In addition, distinguished figures like German Liberal Rabbi Leo Baeck, too prominent to destroy, were sent there, and these prominent persons included known artists, musicians and writers for whom people might inquire. Hence, the inmates generated a remarkable cultural life of theatre and opera. The Austrian modernist, Frederika ‘Friedl’ Dicker-Brandis (30 July 1898–9 October 1944), student of Johannes Itten and Bauhaus teacher, was sent to Terezin in December 1942. There she taught art especially to assist the children: much of their work survives, over 4,500 drawings. She was deported to Auschwitz and was killed on 9 October 1944. Several other artists were employed in a technical drawing office and they secretly documented the horrors of life in the crowded ghetto. When they were betrayed to the SS, the artists were tortured to discover the whereabouts of the incriminating drawings. Some had their hands broken so as never to be able to draw again. Bedrich Fritta (1906–1944), Leo Haas (1901–1983), Malva Schalek (1882–1944), Charlotte Buresova (1904–1983) and Otto Ungar (1901–1945) are just some of the names of artists whose testimonies in art survived, though as these dates reveal the artists often did not.

Artists were also used by the SS to create the great hoax that presented Terezin as a model town created to protect the Jews from the war. This came about because a transport of 456 Jews from Denmark (those who had not managed to be taken to safety in Sweden) was sent to Terezin and the King of Denmark, Christian X, demanded that the Red Cross be allowed to visit his compatriots. The camp was prepared for the inspection by delegates –
one from the Danish and two from the International Red Cross – on 23 June 1944 by false shop fronts being painted like a movie set to suggest ordinary consumption and trade. Gardens were planted. Children were given unheard of food and required to call their guards ‘Uncle’ and complain of receiving so much. The visitors were shown special accommodation allocated to the ‘prominent’, which were bearable compared to the overcrowded barracks, and performances were staged. So successful was the deception – that the Jews of Europe were being well cared for – that Hitler commissioned a propaganda film along the same lines to be made between August and September 1944 titled *Terezin: A Documentary Film of the Jewish Resettlement*, directed by a Jewish prisoner who with the crew and cast was later deported to their deaths in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Narratives of dates and figures, even references to some of the artistic representations that dared to document the horrifying truth of this ghetto cannot bring us to understand what the experience was for Alina Szapocznikow. Yet we must hold onto whatever indications we can glean of six years of terror, defying daily death and dealing as part of a medical team with the horror, as we approach the emergence from this history of the young woman who chose to leave Poland and become a sculptor, to work with her own body, forming mirrors, however idealized or deformed, for the body as the imperative figure of post-‘Auschwitz’ human being.

Following liberation in May 1945, Szapocznikow opted to remain in Czechoslovakia, changing the spelling of her name, claiming a Czech birthplace and moving to Prague as a citizen. In Prague, she initially worked with several artists on a project to restore Baroque sculptures. In 1946 she enrolled in the arts and crafts school in Prague to study sculpture under Joseph Wagner (1901–57). I read this as a fascinating gesture of defiance and reclamation: sculpture involves carving or moulding or otherwise making figures – whether figuratively or abstractly. It is perhaps the art form most physically involved with the body: the body of the maker and the body that is made figuratively or abstractly. To restore eroded sculptural forms and eagerly to learn every skill in creating the solid and the monumental face and body of the human being carries an excess freight for a survivor who had been witness to the atrocities and sufferings she did not want to remember.

The rediscovery of the broken link with the European avant-garde centred in Paris was intense in Prague art circles, enhanced by the memory of Czech surrealism from the 1930s. In 1948 Szapocznikow moved to Paris, enrolling in the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, attending classes in the studio of art deco sculptor Paul Niclausse (1879–1958). Working to support herself in masonry while also studying, Szapocznikow lived largely in the extensive Polish expatriate cultural community. She was overcome with a potentially deadly illness in 1949 from which she almost died in early 1950;
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peritoneal tuberculosis left her unable to have a child. In 1951, she moved to a
now-Communist Poland offering greater opportunities for work to artists in
the new state. She returned to Paris finally in autumn 1963, having stayed in
Poland to be with the mother she had refound who died in 1961.

During these Warsaw years Szapocznikow won many prizes and commis-
sions within Poland and was internationally recognized in biennial exhibitions
at Venice (1962, where she represented Poland), France and USA, as well as
having a monograph show at Zachęta in Warsaw in 1957. The sphere of art in
post-war Poland was both public and intensely political, even prescriptive. The
scale was monumental and memorial. The sculptor entered and sometimes
won competitions that were frankly socialist realist, even Stalinist, while also
submitting projects for the International Auschwitz Memorial Competition in
1959 and for memorials for the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Jewish-Polish identity
vied with participating in the making of a culture for a new communist nation.

Janina Bauman’s second memoir, A Dream of Belonging (1988) provides
relevant context here. It is a frank and revelatory account of being a Jewish
survivor and a Communist in post-war Warsaw. In 1945, Janina Bauman and
her husband, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who had survived the war in the
Soviet Union whither his working-class family had fled before the German
invasion, chose not to emigrate but to remain and build the new socialist
dream of Poland, a ‘dream of belonging’ that slowly turned sour. Bauman’s
memoir opens a window into the intense cultural life of the still materially
devastated country, the energy of their social and intellectual worlds despite
poverty and real material limitations, the place of cultural institutions and
their ‘administered’ hence framing controls. She is very frank about working
with this emerging regime – she read film scripts for the State Film Produc-
tion, even blocking a project by Andrzej Wajda. Then she tracks the ultimate
disintegration of her youthful hope for a better society as the screws of Stalinist
bureaucracy crushed all genuine socialist hopes. She also documents the
persistent anti-Semitism that would eventually be politically resurrected in
the mid-1960s, depriving Zygmunt Bauman of his professorship and driving
his family secretly to escape in the night in 1968. In Warsaw at that date,
Szapocznikow was witness to this terrifying return of the past in March 1968.

One work that indexes something of this changing political climate and
at the same time marks a confluence of encrypted past and political present
is Szapocznikow’s sculpture Exhumed 1957 (Figure 54). It is at once a political
condemnation of Stalinism and a tribute to László Rajk, the Hungarian politi-
cian murdered in 1949 and rehabilitated during the Hungarian ‘thaw’ in 1955.
The forced confession and show trial of Rajk in the Hungarian Stalinist regime
of Mátýás Rákosi’s anti-Titoist purges had been used as the justification for
the crack-down that followed. Once Rákosi had to admit Rajk’s innocence,
his legitimacy began to weaken, leading ultimately to the fated Hungarian
uprising in 1956. Originally exhibited as *Rehabilitation*, the title *Exhumed* replaces rehabilitating a reputation with the drastic realism of representing an exhumed and hence decomposing body. This is not resurrection in the Christian sense. A buried past whose actual physical form must come somewhat horrifically to light is uncovered. The torso is shown upright as if the figure is rising but without arms or complete legs; the body is at once an amputated fragment and a figure of defiance, yet the damaged skull-like face voids the site of identity and humanity. Critic Urzula Czartoryska places this work in conversation with other post-war sculptors, pushing the form of the body to its formal limits, such as Germaine Richier, Henry Moore, Alberto Giacometti, Kenneth Armitage, Lynn Chadwick: all of whom Czartoryska suggests were ‘facing the twin obligations to forms and materials of modernism and the politics and history of a failed modernity’. She also suggests that this combination produced a more viable compromise in painting daring to rely on brutal materiality such as we find in works by Jean Fautrier, Wols and Dubuffet. As an association generated by the form of *Exhumed*, Czartoryska brings in the charred and petrified bodies of Pompeii as well as broken bronze sculptures recovered from the Mediterranean around that time. She also suggests that *Exhumed* is not only ‘private memento of [Szapocznikow’s] own experience of dealing with the dead, but also an unparalleled accusation’. Referencing directly the tortured and executed of Stalinist terror, Szapocznikow may also be invoking the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Warsaw Uprising whose remains were discovered in the rubble of the city as it was being reconstructed:

*Exhumed* evokes the searing images from Soviet newsreels, soon to be circulated after 1955 in Alain Resnais’s *Nuit et brouillard*, of charred bodies found in the open pyres of Auschwitz (Figure 55). It seems, that along with the recently buried past now rising to the surface both materially in Warsaw and in the political thaw after Stalin’s death, Szapocznikow’s own knowledge of death and dying was surfacing. *Exhumed* is a turning point as it begins a process, linked with her use of malleable cement that allows for an initial working with a pliant material that will ultimately set as hard as stone while retaining the bodily imprint of the sculptor’s handling even as the sculptures formally evoke decay and distintegration.
In 1963 Szapocznikow’s move to Paris brought her into contact with the circle of *Nouveau Réalisme* around the critic Pierre Restany. These artists were playfully interested in the machine age and into the signs and materials of contemporary urban life and its visual culture. Szapocznikow began to make combines, breaching the discrete space of sculpture with objects, embedding Soviet and German military relics of the Second World War, one of which *Spiky* was shown in the exhibition *Auschwitz* (25 January–10 February, National Theatre in Warsaw). She began making body and face casts in 1965. In 1966 she worked in marble quarries at Carrara in Italy reclaiming marble for her sculptural practice – as did Louise Bourgeois in these years – but she also began to make works using polyester, making casts from parts of her own body, those of her friends in this new material, some of which she illuminated with electrical wiring: her breasts and lips series date from this time (Figure 43). Pierre Restany writes:

Plastic casts, until now the last stage of the artist’s opening her eyes to the real world, bring a new element of transparency and light effects to Alina Szapocznikow’s technical repertoire and means of expression. Forests of bright red mouths, extensive dunes of torsos with nipples glistening like pearls, luminous spheres of breasts heavy with electric glow – are among the wonders of a new *Jugendstil* … These all too beautiful bodies dispose of their primitive sensuality for the benefit of some kind of transcendent magic of objects.³⁴

In 1966/67 Szapocznikow embedded photographs into polyurethane. In 1967 she had a one-woman show in Paris curated by Pierre Restany that travelled to Warsaw, Stockholm and Copenhagen. Witness to rabid anti-Semitic attacks in Warsaw, she was also in Paris for the May 1968 events. In that summer she returned to carving to make monumental repeating stomachs from a cast of a friend in Italian marble. But she also began using polyurethane foam to make works called *Expansions* and *Pollution*.

By 1969 she was exhibiting all over Europe and listed among the figures in European post-war art. Pierre Cabanne would also write of the very bodily art works being made at this time:

Yet experimenting with the body, to which she has become attached as to a ‘totally erogenous zone’, was not devoid of a feeling of repulsion, because all flesh carries within it its own decease. The flesh is vulnerable to the same extent that it is glorious, joyful and desired. In Alina’s fetishist catalogue eroticism blends with exorcism. One never knows if breasts and thighs emerge from a bed destroyed by lovers’ embrace or from the mud of Hiroshima, if they belong to the realm of love or death.³⁵

In 1971 she wrote her own manifesto about art and the everyday, and did her sculptures in chewing gum which were rephotographed by her husband
and presented as *Photosculptures*. She had a solo show in Geneva in which she realized a spatial arrangement called *Disintegration of Personality*. Critics puzzled over the dramatic juxtapositions of body casts and masses of black polyurethane foam (Figure 42):

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Is Alina’s a pessimistic vision of the world, in which man is absorbed by matter? Does Alina want to immortalize living matter in a casket made of dead matter, or does she in a fit of self-adoration want to immortalise Alina? And yet in her last works the artist seems to raise the question of narcissism to a general theme. The form of her body increasingly loses individuality and becomes an object. Her abdomen becomes a cushion, a serial object of general use and module whose composition is changeable. Narcissism moves from irony to sarcasm.\(^\text{36}\)

In 1972, she was offered the Chair of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Nice but declined on grounds of her health. Later in that year she returned to hospital for her second operation. In 1973 she was moved to a sanatorium in southern France where her secondary bone cancer caused increasing paralysis and agonizing pain and left in her a state of extreme agony. She died on 2 March 1973 aged 46, and is buried in Paris at Montparnasse Cemetery. Another of the post-war generation of Polish intellectuals, film-maker Andrzej Wajda, perceptively wrote a kind of epitaph:

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That she had long been seriously ill I found out only a couple of days before her death. But that none of us knew about it, that you couldn’t tell when looking at her, I see as normal. When you go through the kind of things she went through as a child, life is neither good nor bad. It appears in cruel brightness and leaves no room for sentimentalism. This means not suffering but expressing suffering, and not returning to the past, unless in order to answer the question of what one is today \(^\text{37}\).

Carnality and sexual difference

How will we read this artistic project, dealing with life and death, sex and destruction, while overshadowed by a specifically feminine encounter with mass annihilation? What of the trauma of fatal disease attacking a locus of her sexuality and symbol of her femininity?

As we have already seen, the French critic Pierre Restany is typical – and both very French and very masculine – in affirming, from his personal encounter with Alina Szapocznikow that

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Alina loved life completely, without mental reservations. She loved it with her mind and with her heart, with the sensual fullness of her body, a woman’s body.\(^\text{18}\)
Was this love of life identified by Restany the spontaneous and mindless outpouring of the woman’s body, of woman as body? To accept such a proposition would be to fall prey to the essentialism in Restany’s concept of the artist as a woman. Was the constantly smiling face of the survivor of atrocity that we see in many beautiful photographs of Alina Szapocznikow not a sign of ‘natural feminine’ joie de vivre so much as a reaction to, if not a defence against, the traumatically real encounters with death that the artist had endured at different points in her all too brief life?

Writing in 1966, Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno declared that ‘Auschwitz’ introduced ‘physical death into culture’. Do we yet fully grasp what he meant? Writing on the adolescent experiences endured by Alina Szapocznikow and the secondary trauma of her own mortal illness to which she succumbed in 1973 when she was 46, Pierre Restany avers:

During the Second World War at 16 (sic), she was deported and that early experience of suffering and death marked her for life, but she emerged from it alive and beautiful, yet with no illusions. Her work was to be but one long scream of revolt against the genocide of the flesh and ineluctable calamity of evil; it was to be testimony and a premonition. The memory of the camp was to be replaced by a baleful premonition of cancer which would claim her at the age of 47 (sic) … (my italics).

In Restany’s dramatic text, we have three vital clues to a reading of Alina Szapocznikow’s artistic project. Restany interprets her work as at once mute (she does not speak of her past) and deafening (the work is itself a perpetual scream.) It is, therefore, a silent scream (wordless, inarticulate yet viscerally intense at the level of its aesthetic affectivity) and a different kind of testimony (bearing witness through its particular forms and materialities) to an ethico-political revolt against what fascism had done, and she had seen, that was a genocide of the flesh.

If Adorno, the survivor removed from the actual experience of ghetto, camp and endurance, knows intellectually and politically that new forms of physical death disabled philosophical transcendence, Alina Szapocznikow knew that this was a genocide of the flesh. But she does not know it: for its traumatic reality is not accessible to knowing. Thus Restany is identifying, even before the language of trauma analysis emerged to name it in this way, the singularity of the manner in which body and the new plane of existence post-Auschwitz are inscribed; or rather, as I am suggesting, encrypted into sculptural deformation by Alina Szapocznikow. Restany evokes the horror and pain burned into the flesh of those who were also frozen, starved and abjected by filth and disease. But this ‘bare life’ of the human body suspended between living and dying has been formulated, in the case of Alina Szapocznikow, not by attempting to make art represent this genocide of the flesh, expressionist-
Traumatic encryption: sculptural dissolutions

cally or cubistically remarrying the body. Hers is a sculptural practice that
succumbed, creatively, to the process of its own undoing/impossibility, its
entanglement with contradictions that could not be kept apart.

Sculpture is the least propitious but the most necessary site for this battle
against representation that is nonetheless to become grotesquely eloquent and
tenderly violent. Encountering, enduring, surviving the horror of attempted
racist genocide are given a kind of aesthetic anti-inscription in Szapocznikow's
work because the attempt to remake the body through sculpture unravels
from within itself, not representing the damaged body but performing the
impossibility of restitution in the face of that history.

Thus Restany presents Szapocznikow's work as a repetition that invokes
trauma. Trauma is not merely horror; it is rather the always unthinkable, the
endlessly unrepresentable, and the eternally immemorial that does not go
away but haunts those other events or objects that we do make. Yet, it seems
that the aesthetically evoked corporality of an artistic practice could or did,
by means of its (de)forms and novel manipulations of non-aesthetic materials
from the world of machines and industry, bear witness, if mutely, to the past of
horror and its current residues in modern machinic society that needed to be
silently mouthed yet also insistently enfleshed even in mutilated, bound, emaci-
ated, diseased forms. Indeed, modern horror since industrially manufactured
killing began with the First World War, atrociously exposes human bodily
vulnerability to technological and chemical violence. Hence the silent scream
registers the will to expunge the pain from the body, while the body fails to
provide the sound for the discharge of its pain and becomes the site of its
encryption. It breaks even as it longs to be desirable and desired. Restany
recognizes a potent force in the plastic work of Alina Szapocznikow's sculpture
that finds a visual form for both the screaming body and the traumatically
arrested silence in face of the unspeakable.

The life and work of Alina Szapocznikow stages the collision of different
kinds of encounter with death that is not at all abstracted from sensuous,
embodied subjectivity. That is why aesthesis, a form of knowing and an
economy of affects that holds the sensuous, sentient and reflective together
without the Christianocentric division of reason versus flesh, does not become
a site of consoling beatification. It is instead a means to encounter the
traumatic residues of real, and sometimes awful, actualities.

At the other end of the string of her ultimately shortened life, Alina Szapoc-
znikow endured the premature claiming of her body's vitality by breast cancer
waging its secret and internal war against its subject's own desire to live on. She
became the patient in a hospital, subject to intrusive and deforming surgical
procedures, drawing a series of her terrible agony and her own surgically
scared body (Figure 56). Before she underwent mastectomy, she made casts
of scrumptious breasts that float free and replicate, sometimes accumulating
like piles of candy, offering a non-maternal and non-eroticized appeal to the oral. Restany continues:

All humanist discourse, all the cosmic vision of the artist, is written in the *carnal memory of the body*. In the same way that her woman's body was, so each human body is the receptacle of life's experience. All Alina's work is dominated by this biological sense of history … Anatomy … is the organic foundation of her language. With the same organic gestures, the flesh of her sculptures registers the passage of time and the determinism of its destiny. 

Transcending the normalized sexism of Restany's good but benighted intentions towards an artist because she is a woman to whom he attributes some biological destiny because of her sex, we can nevertheless glean a profound insight from his writings. *Feminist* readings of sexual difference and of the body that is in fact psychically shaped by phantasies (rather than by spontaneous knowledge of anatomy) help us to understand the dramatic collision of history, the carnal and the aesthetic without recourse to ideas of biology and anatomy. In the light of the later twentieth-century theorizations of the centrality of the body, from phenomenology to psychoanalysis and feminism, Restany's thoughts about the art of Alina Szapocznikow sets off a fascinating rewriting of Freud's misunderstood statement that 'anatomy is destiny'.

Freud did not argue that physiological anatomy predestines gender absolutely. In the famous essay in which he declared 'anatomy is destiny' he was explaining the phantasmatic structure of the Oedipus Complex. The phantasizing child attributes the psychological meaning of difference (presence/absence/having/not having/wholeness/mutilation) to a minor detail of bodily difference, thus *investing* anatomy as a support for a purely logical dilemma of acquiring a sexed identity in relation to a binary logic of presence/absence. Anatomy is not the cause of sex differences: it becomes its imagined site and as subjects we are trapped within that imaginary order signified by the phallus as arbiter of sexual difference. What Freud does offer us, therefore, is the important insight that corporeality is charged with psychological significance, and is shaped in phantasy by which the imagined and also the pleasured body is integrated into psychic life. Thus anatomy is not destiny on its own accord; but historical destinies can be written into anatomy, as the whole anti-Semitic trope of the Jewish body reveals. Race thinking inflicts its hatreds into the skin, nose, ears, hair, sex of those it racially others.

I want to take Restany's phrase – *the carnal memory of the body* – into yet another direction that touches on Jewishness and the body in a different register. In his book *Carnal Israel*, cultural theorist Daniel Boyarin has identified the different concepts of the flesh in Judaism and Christianity. Christianity fell under the profound ascetic influence of Pauline doctrine and encouraged the mortification of the flesh as the only road to the transcendence of the spirit.
symbolized by the risen, death-defeating Christ-God. As a result Christianity has tended to condemn its ‘father’ religion – Judaism – and hence the Jews themselves for being too carnal, and for too comfortably inhabiting the living, desiring, reproductive and working body, instead of disowning the physical body in favour of spiritual transcendence of the soul. It would be tempting, therefore, to hear in Restany’s fervent affirmation of carnality in the work of Szapocznikow an unconscious trace of this old divergence between Jewish and Christian sensibilities towards the body. But there are problems in such an assertion.

Restany’s idea of a carnal memory, however, runs the risk on the one hand of affirming an anti-Semitic stereotype about the fleshliness of the Jewish people, and notably about the sexuality of *la belle Juive*, and on the other of imposing a typically patriarchal, gendered stereotype: woman as flesh. Hence the combination of being Jewish and woman, above all, creates for Szapocznikow an image of pure flesh, mortified and mortal. This phantasy of the Jewish woman’s carnality can only operate imaginatively in a very different manner from Christian theology of the incarnation of the Word associated with the canonically sacrificial masculine body in Christian culture represented by the masculine image of the pathos of the crucified Christ to which I have already pointed in the discussion of Holbein’s *Dead Christ*.

So how can I work through this tangle of carnality and mortality, flesh and death, gender and Jewishness, overdetermined by an abhorrent historical deformation of death associated with Nazi racialized genocide, but equally haunted by deeper cultural tropes: Christian thought about Jewish bodiliness and phallocentric phantasies about woman as mindless, material flesh?

**Skin**

Alina Szapocznikow was never tattooed with a prisoner number. Nevertheless, the question of skin, rather than flesh, emerges in her later works finally to deter the desire expressed by Restany and others for the living woman they palpably saw in the person of the artist herself.

In 1971 Alina Szapocznikow created a trio of works all titled *Pamiatka I, II, III*. The French title is *Souvenir*. The Polish word always refers to an object, not to remembrance. Souvenir II and III share the forms of the *Tumours* and lie on surfaces. But *Souvenir I* is different (Plate 12). Like *Herbarium* (Plate 11) and *Alina’s Funeral* (Figure 57), *Souvenir I*, shown here in an installation titled *Souvenir for a Wedding Table for a Happy Woman*, hangs on a wall (Figure 58). Made of polyester, glass wool and photography, measuring 75×70×30 cm, *Souvenir I* is attached to a wall like a relief. Yet it has three-dimensional qualities. Like a sheet of dessicated newspaper, it curls into space. Unlike newprint, it is not fragile, but hard and fixed in its form. Two protruberances bulge
outward from its surface. Into the polyester have been embedded traces of two photographs already conjoined into a photomontage (Figures 59 and 60). The archive shows us two photographs from the 1930s which the artist marked up for reprinting. She chose only one for this work (Figure 59).

Dominating the right-hand side of the work is part of a family holiday snap showing a young girl, in a bathing costume, sitting on a man’s shoulders, apparently smiling at the photographer. The ambiguity derives from the heavy shadowing of the original black and white photograph taken in sunshine which makes the child’s the eye sockets become skull-like deep hollows. In the transposition of the photograph to the photomontage and then to this embedding, they now appear as smears of blackness in the flattened enlargement into its crude component masses of dark and light. The photographic image has been suspended in and this is melded with the polyester. The resulting effects of blurred transposition introduces the uncanny suggestion of a death’s head. The happy image of before also becomes overshadowed with after. Derived from a family photograph from the early around 1932, the relic of this past is a freighted artefact, a haunting trace of a disappeared world of integrated, modernizing European-Jewish civilization in pre-war Poland. It appears to be one of only two images in the surviving photographic archive that shows the artist’s pre-war childhood and the only one that portrays her father who died of tuberculosis in 1938.

The British artist Judith Tucker (b. 1960), herself a child of a German-Jewish refugee mother, growing up displaced in Britain, also works from a rescued photograph that shows her mother, Eva, as a young child on a seaside holiday in Ahlbeck, Germany in 1932 (Figure 62). Taken the year before the very beach on which the child was playing was forbidden to her because racializing persecution of Germany’s Jewish citizens forbade public space to its Jewish citizens, the photograph of her mother’s lost childhood resonates with the legacies of traumatic loss and forced migration that still shapes those who belong to what is named as ‘the second generation’. Marianne Hirsch identifies in a whole generation of artists and writers a condition of post-memory that links past and present through the mediation of the indexically potent, analogue photograph that carries the past into the present through the uncanniness of the indexical image.46

In her early inclusion of the photograph as a ready-made of history, an image that bears a historical meaning of catastrophe even as it commemorates happier times, Szapocznikow’s Souvenir I also anticipates these later artists’ use of photographs as transports of memory. But she also connects with a very different use of the photograph that we find in the work of the Israeli-French painter artist Bracha Ettinger (b. 1948; Figure 63) who, as I have already suggested, has posited the possibility of art functioning as ‘the transport station of trauma’.47 In her painting practice Ettinger takes a found
image from the family album representing the time before she existed, passes it through a photocopier that is interrupted before the ashen grains forming the replication can be heat-sealed. Ettinger uses the emerging/disappearing spectral trace of the past in order to intensify the affect of the borderspace between two moments. She has worked repeatedly from a photographically arrested moment in 1938 in Łódz, Poland when a smart young couple and their friend walked freely down the public streets in confident anticipation of their modern future, smiling into the street photographer’s camera (Figure 64). They also stand on the edge of an abyss which severs that modern street scene from the artist’s own beginnings as the child whom this young couple bore after they had survived the annihilating terror in which their place in Europe was brutally eradicated and their companion destroyed. In this work on deep purple paper their ghostly trace shares its space with another archival image, one of the few direct visual documents of Nazi mass murder, from which Ettinger rescues a group of faces, one turning in mute appeal before her imminent destruction to the photographer ‘shooting’ the procession of naked women and to the viewers coming after the death that followed this ‘shot’. Before and after moments also reach out to new times of retrospective encounter with these traced pasts.

Alina Szapocznikow’s *Souvenir 1* (Plate 12) differs from the postmemory work of Tucker and the trans-temporal compassion of Ettinger. The photograph is not just a record of another time, place and generation from which the artist is severed. Captured in the freeze-frame and frozen time of the artist’s own self ‘before the event’, a moment is now sealed into a chemically created simulcrum of skin, like an image tattooed by this process (Figure 58). It is hard not to evoke one of the atrocious remnants of National Socialist sadism in which human skin was harvested from corpses, especially when that skin bore a tattoo. In the new surface Szapocznikow has made of photographically imprinted resin, her photograph has in fact been superimposed in an intermediary stage onto a found image that represents what was to come for this smiling child still so confidently perched on invisible shoulders. In order to make the montage of the two images, the father, who once supported his child has been cut out (Figure 61). Death suspends her over a void. The archive has a copy of the original photograph already incised for the extracting of the child from the father’s shoulders. Like Ettinger’s work which removes the companion striding with her parents-to-be from the reworking because he did not survive, Szapocznikow marks the loss of her father in isolating the child from the original photograph. Her legs now dangle into the space of the second source photograph, which operates, however, on the horizontal axis.

This image carries a heavier freight. It is the image of a dead woman (Figures 60 and 61). Between a tangle of emaciated limb lies a woman with her arms crossed over her breasts in a more formal presentation of a dead
body. Her head lolls back and the slackness of death has made her mouth fall open. Her eyes may not be closed. We do not know the source of the image.\textsuperscript{48}

Szapocznikow scholar Agata Jacubowska argues that what we are witnessing in 1971 is a visual connection being made between herself as a child 'before' and an image from the event itself, as seen and recorded by outsiders entering the space of the camps from which Szapocznikow was finally liberated in 1945. Szapocznikow had repeatedly touched on the Shoah through engagement with public monuments for Auschwitz and the Warsaw Ghetto during the 1950s. But then Polish national memory had claimed Auschwitz I, with considerable justification, as the site of a Polish suffering because many Polish intellectuals and resisters were sent to the concentration camp of Auschwitz I. The death camp of Auschwitz II: Auschwitz-Birkenau was different. Instituted as an overflow camp in spring 1942, it was rapidly expanded and became the site of mass industrial extermination by Zyklon B, eventually having five crematoria to dispose of the 900,000 Jewish and Roma victims killed on this site. But images of unburied corpses are not icons of Auschwitz; they are the evidence of the concentration camps in Germany where in the last weeks starvation and disease produced daily deaths in the thousands. But what is significant is Szapocznikow's choice of an image of a dead woman, inserting her own childish leg so that it first overlays (see Szapocznikow Archive no. sz XIII.152) and then (sz XVII.73) touches the shoulder of this feminine corpse.

This ghastly visage of abandoned and desolate death is repeated three times in \textit{Souvenir I}. As we can see in the photograph showing the original condition of the work in 1971 (Figure 58) the face of this dead woman is also embedded in the excrescence or protruberances bulked by glass wool that bulge phallically from the abdomen of the child. To the left the face has been flipped and 'looks' towards the smiling child. Emerging out of her belly is a close-up of the face now inverted in the vertical axis. Jacubowska suggests that the presence of this image indexing the horrors of exterminatory genocide and the concentrationary terror has moved from the public and monumental, typical of the 1950s work, to the personal and intimate, possibly as a result of catastrophe then facing the sculptor not from an external threat that killed the camp victims, but from an internal menace that was killing her. The protruberances that bulge from this skin-like sheath evoke the cancerous tumours growing another kind of deadliness out of life-forces gone crazy. Alina Szapocznikow had been living with the menace of cancer since 1969.\textsuperscript{49}

The little child's own womb has been replaced on the photomontage with an image of a 'tumour' and now this skin, identified with the concentrationary past is bulging with a disease that is killing her. The smile of the hopeful, happy child is countered by the repeating image of the open-mouthed woman whose deathly grimace takes on new power as a screech of pain: the silent scream Restany imagined.
Thus the woman’s face becomes its foreclosed other, the counterpoint of the smiling child who makes us see behind the glamour of the modern consumer image an echo of the horrific face of modernity. Once placed on the horizontal axis in this work, and juxtaposed with the only image of the pre-‘Auschwitz’ era, when the child still had a father and the world still functioned without death, disappearance and genocide, and placed in this yellowing polyester resin encasement, apparently curling with age, yet generating horrendous growths to disfigure its surface, *Souvenir I* – here connoting ‘memento’ – enters into a different register of affect. The after-affect seeps through the play with history, memory and the image to produce an after-image that is, in effect, the one that her art was made to blot out, but which, in its curious echo of Holbein’s ghastly dead Christ, performs a powerful iconological gesture.

Szapocznikow’s chemical skins of melting sculptural form turns her engagement with *Nouveau Réalisme*, so engaged with ordinariness and popular culture, back to the intersection of the machine, media and modernity. That image of death was itself created in and by the media, and served to fix it in cultural memory as an image, even for those who, like Szapocznikow, had themselves witnessed such processes traumatically as prisoners in the concentrationary and exterminatory universe. This close-up of a dead woman offers a post-Christian encounter with the kind of (in)human death created by fascist deadliness from which we can derive no narrative of resurrection or redemption. Instead it poses only the endless question of fidelity to a new aesthetic encounter with suffering, the ethics of perpetual witnessing and the life politics of determined resistance to the terror that created it.

I want to introduce one final association between self and skin through the writings of the French resistance fighter and concentration camp survivor Charlotte Delbo (1913–85) whose tattooed skin indelibly carried the marking of her dehumanizing in Auschwitz and Ravensbrück. In her attempt to explain something of the paradoxes of trauma that resists common memory, and is indelible, constant, inescapable, Delbo’s writing invoked two different dimensions of skin.

Explaining the inexplicable. There comes to mind the image of a snake shedding its old skin, emerging from beneath it in a fresh glistening one. In Auschwitz I took leave of my skin – it had a bad smell, that skin – worn from all the blows it had received, and I found myself in another, beautiful and clean, although with me the molting was not as rapid as the snake’s. Along with the old skin went the visible traces of Auschwitz; the leaden stare out of sunken eyes, the tottering gait, the frightened gestures.  

In this first metaphorical evocation of skin, Delbo writes of the liberated survivor shedding her dirtied, abjected and tortured camp non-self like a snake shedding its skin for renewal. The new Charlotte Delbo emerged, clean,
boundaried, warm, fed, apparently returned and normalized; she learned to use knife and fork, a toilet, was able to bathe, say hello when walking into a room, even eventually to smile with both eyes and lips. She even learned to be able to smell again after being steeped in a fetid odour of diarrhoea and the soot and smell of burning flesh from the crematoria at Auschwitz and Ravensbrück. In a counter-image, however, Delbo suggests that the traumatic real of the camp cannot ever be shed; it is merely buried or blocked off by a toughened membrane that attempts to cover over the abyss of endlessly vivid traumatic sensations.

Rid of its old skin, it’s still the same snake. I am the same too, apparently. However …

How does one rid oneself of something buried far within; memory and the skin of memory? It clings to me yet. Memory’s skin has hardened, it allows nothing to filter out of what it retains, and I have no control over it. I don’t feel it anymore.\(^5\) (my emphasis)

This skin over this abyss is, however, sometimes breached; the membrane that divides that the present from other time and place, whose sensations defy words and their power to structure a journey away from unbearable experiences, disintegrates.

Auschwitz is so deeply etched on my memory that I cannot forget one moment of it.

So you are living with Auschwitz?

No I live next to it.

Auschwitz is there unalterable, precise but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self.\(^5\)

Delbo affirms that at any moment she can feel suddenly and completely plunged into the total sensorium of an arrested and ever-powerful time and place that interpenetrates with her current moment and refuses the very concept of a past separated from the present.

Unlike the snake’s skin the skin of memory does not renew itself. Oh, it may harden further … Alas, I fear lest it grow thin and crack, and the camp get hold of me again. Thinking about that makes me tremble with apprehension.\(^5\)

No longer a linear subject, then and now, Delbo attests to feeling that she is a vertical composite, a layered being who may collapse unexpectedly into the encrypted place which may emerge unbidden to engulf her and make time dissolve. The memory is in the skin (or the muscles of the concentrationees, as David Rousset writes); it is both reality and metaphor.
In this underlying memory sensations remain intact. No doubt, I am very fortunate in not recognizing myself in the self that was in Auschwitz. To return from there was so improbable that it seems to me that I was never there at all … No, it is all too incredible. And everything that happened to that other, the Auschwitz one, now has no bearing upon me, does not concern me, so separate from one another are this deep-lying memory and ordinary memory. I live within a twofold being. The Auschwitz double does not bother me, does not interfere with my life. As thought it weren’t I at all. Without this split I would not have been able to revive.

Delbo shifts again: ‘The skin enfolding the memory of Auschwitz is tough. Even so it gives ways at times, revealing all it contains.’ Her concept of deep memory is crucial here. ‘Deep memory preserves sensations, physical imprints. It is the memory of the senses. For it isn’t words that are swollen with emotional charge.’ She compares the word thirst shared between those who have known Auschwitz thirst and the everyday feeling that makes one feel like having a cup of tea. In dreams, she says ‘I physically feel that real thirst and it is an atrocious nightmare.’

Freudian psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu proposed the skin as a primary form of the ego. For Anzieu, the skin is the carnal ground for the formation of an ego that imagines itself initially as an integrated whole precisely through the phantasy of the clean surface and the impenetrability of skin as a boundary between self and world. Skin psychically defines the ego’s space and its outer limit, its join with the world. Skin allows the ego to imagine itself as intact, contained and discrete. Thus skin emerges as a psychically powerful element of subjectivity and hence a site of psychic and physical vulnerability.

Enveloped in its own skin, memory for Delbo lives beneath a hard layer that isolates the ever-intense, traumatizing event, but maintains it so that the self is experienced as living beside this other, yet ever-present event that happened to a self that has been alienated by means of this internal boundary, a boundary that is in fact the scar tissue of traumatic events written sometimes literally but always psychically etched on the sensing body. Yet this membrane cannot be trusted to maintain the boundary between the encrypted sensorially imprinted trauma and the living subject. It is significant that the book from which I have been quoting was the last collection of poems and sketches Delbo assembled, as she lay dying from a fatal cancer.

Charlotte Delbo wrote of the book she felt compelled to write, None of Us Will Return:

It’s a book that belongs to me intimately. I had the will to write it, the need to write it. A need that everyone had over there: to tell, to tell the world what it was. I wrote, wrote in one stretch. Carried. And the book came out of me from a deep inspiration.
Delbo wrote in French: C'est un livre qui me tient à la peau du ventre. This is a French idiom that invokes an intense attachment through the image of skin of the belly; it cannot be literally translated. It reminds us that to have something deeply inseparable from the self is understood to relate to the skin of one's belly, a phrasing that is very suggestive given Alina Szapocznikow's later work on bellies: la peau du ventre is the very site of the self in this French idiom. Delbo's first book written immediately about her Auschwitz-Ravensbrück experiences, None of Us Will Return was published in French in 1965. Perhaps Alina Szapocznikow might have known it. As Delbo finally allowed a book she had written in the immediate aftermath of liberation to see the light of day, did Szapocznikow sense a new climate in which her own unspoken 'deep memory' might find a world to meet it?

At the other end of the spectrum, the use of a new polymer, polyester, in Souvenir 1 links Alina Szapocznikow with a moment in sculpture internationally when melting, flowing and congealing industrial substances were explored by many artists. These industrial materials offered fluid materials that solidified in ways that provided sculpture with temporality and even its own mortality through decay in place of monumentality. In these processes sculpture could shift from one state to another, soft becoming hard, translucent becoming opaque, flowing becoming arrested, the rigid seeming to melt, the melted becoming fixed. Eva Hesse specifically delighted in the intimations of human skin produced by molten latex in its initial and light-reflecting state that would, however, eventually dry, becoming brittle and increasingly opaque. We could argue that the inherent alterations typical of this industrial material introduced into art a means of conveying a sense of human ageing, of time that metaphorically makes the viewer of such self-altering works confront irresistible human finitude: the physical qualities of the work's material would ensure that the work could not but undergo decay and would, as in the case of Hesse's latex pieces, eventually 'die'. For Hesse's miraculous but now brittle work Contingent (Plate 13) one test piece in latex survived in its unchanged, original state to remind us of that elastic evocation of skin that ends its life brittle and unforgiving. Szapocznikow created the hard and brittle from beginning; time has faded the image of death encroaching on the ambivalent child.

In trying to track the trajectory from Szapocznikow's carved forms to such works as Souvenir I, and beyond to Tumours and Herbarium, possible resonances with other key shifts in sculpture that can be discerned in the 1960s which provide the necessary artistic framework for its very possibility, I am fundamentally posing the question: what would it mean to become a sculptor, working on the human figure 'after Auschwitz'?
outrageous assaults upon the body and the destruction of the human that the artist had not only witnessed but lived in her body: the creation of something worse than death, the organically living but no longer human being: the living corpse. Carving and fashioning almost classic forms of sculptured human faces and bodies was an impulse to disown that novelty, to recreate a lost phantasy of bodily integrity that had underpinned Western art since the Renaissance reclaimed a classical figuration of the body by making stony and bronze skins modelled from solid clay, plaster or carved from ancient stone. Ultimately it was unable to hold. Post-traumatically, Szapocznikow's work yielded to a deeper recognition of the real rupture in history and hence in art's refractions of history that focused on both the really brutalized body and the suspension of the idealization of the virtual body that is art. I am suggesting deeper new realism in the traumatic encryption of the agonizingly bodily event and physical assault of the industrialized genocides of Jewish and Roma/Sinti peoples of Europe, that personally affected Alina Szapocznikow as a child and teenager.

I have tried to plot a trajectory in Szapocznikow's work from unprocessed entombment within, towards a radically different kind of aesthetic resurfacing, of the residue of encrypted trauma. In her forties, Alina Szapocznikow created sculpture that evoked the senses of pain, disgust and impossibly erotic physicality in a troubling collision. It is as if her escape from the comforts initially offered by sculpting itself disintegrated, but brilliantly, under her own hands.

To call attention to the specificities of Alina Szapocznikow's work as the creation of a Jewish woman survivor of the Shoah must not enclose her or her work in any limiting identity. Szapocznikow's work was at once too late – the belated emergence of its deep traumatic kernel – and too early for this surfacing to be culturally legible in a culture that was itself still traumatically disavowing the meaning of the Shoah and had no means of reading its deeper implications for and already in art itself. Perhaps only at the conjunction of elaborated trauma studies, philosophical reflections of the meaning of Auschwitz for humanity and aesthetics, and feminist theories of sexual difference, can the potency of Alina Szapocznikow's work come into view as Ettinger's transcryptum:

The transcryptum provides the occasion for sharing and affectively-emotively recognizing an uncognized Thing or Event. Art as transcryptum gives body to a memory of the Real consisting in virtual strings and memory traces of the oblivion of the Other and of the world … Our post-traumatic era becomes, by virtue of this art trans-traumatic. 60 (My emphasis)

If the current international museal and commercial interest in Alina Szapocznikow finds only delight in her sexiness, or surprise at her formless abstraction, and does not or cannot find the means to sense the radical nature
of the work that ‘gives body to a memory of the Real’ in the face of mortality, politically encompassed as well as internally corrosive, this artist will not have found her time and place, once again. In the Virtual Feminist Museum, I hope, the dissolution of solid forms into curling skins of imprinted trauma may acquire the space for their after-affects and after-images to become legible in their pathetic, tragic and terrifying splendour.

Notes
4 As Amelia Jones pointed out to me, it is troubling that like other artists working in the 1960s with these materials, such as Eva Hesse and Hannah Wilke, Szapocznikow also succumbed prematurely to cancer.
6 To highlight this missed encounter, see Circa 1970, an exhibition of works by Louise Bourgeois and Lynda Benglis at Cheim and Reid, New York, July/August 2007.
7 The show Alina Szapocznikow: My American Dream, at Broadway 1602, New York, September to December 2010 assembled and exhibited all the documents relating to this project.
8 Vanessa Corby, ‘Don’t Look Back: Reading for the Ellipses in the Discourse of Eva Hess[e]’, Third Text, 57 (winter 2001/02), 31–42. Corby examines the ways in which issues of Jewishness and Holocaust trauma were unacknowledged in initial feminist studies of Eva Hesse during the 1970s–90s. See her book Eva Hesse: Longing, Belonging and Displacement (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010). 
11 For a detailed feminist reading of Hannah Wilke’s gendered and ethnically loaded associations in her use of chewing gum as branding and marking, see Amelia


17 The phrase, ‘l’univers concentrationnaire’ was created in 1945 by David Rousset, a French political deportee to German concentration camps. See Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (eds), *Concentrationary Cinema* (London: Berghahn, 2011).


Memorial bodies


29 See *In Darkness* (Agieszka Holland, 2012), a film about Lvov Ghetto survivors living in the city’s sewers.


33 Czartoryska, ‘The Cruel Clarity’, 16.


48 Jola Gola has suggested that the image is from Soviet newsreels and reports of unburied dead bodies from Madjanek or Auschwitz, camps the Red Army liberated in 1944 and 1945 respectively.

49 The artist was diagnosed with cancer on 17 January 1969.

Charlotte Delbo, *Days and Memories*, 1.


Charlotte Delbo, *Days and Memories*, 3.


Benglis managed to find ways to stop this disintegration.
