

**Anna Kérchy**

**Queering the gaze in the museal space. Orshi Drozdik's feminist (post)concept art**

*Queering the gaze and feminist counter-spectacularity*<sup>1</sup>

“Queering,” according to its OED definition, signifies “spoiling or ruining (an agreement, event, or situation)” but lately, in the past few decades, has come to denote an interpretive strategy, a gesture of applied deconstruction, used in literary and cultural criticism with the aim to reevaluate consensually set significations, canonized masternarratives, and normativized cultural scripts. Throughout a systematic “queering” process, fixed meanings can be challenged as illusory products of the Foucauldian ideological mechanisms of “truth-production” (Foucault 109), while a plurality of an alternative perspectives and reality-versions can be explored by focusing on artistic representations, discursive performances, and lived experiences of a more fluid spectrum of gender identities beyond the patriarchally prescribed, heteronormative reproductive sexual economy. The assumption is that the destabilization of ready-made truths about static gender identities and sexual orientations (with a fresh focus on the queer continuum and LGBT people’s lives) entails an overall revisionary process foregrounding the fallibility of any epistemological endeavor and the need for multifocal models for mapping reality. In our post-millennial age, “queering” has become a buzz-word of cutting-edge academic research: among the hundreds of hits on an Amazon title-search one finds an impressive variety of topics ranging from *Queering Anarchism* addressing and undressing the functioning of anti-totalitarian power and desire (Shannon and Rogue 2013), *Queering the Pitch* in search of a new gay and lesbian musicology (Brett and Wood 2006), *Queering the Countryside* tackling new transnational frontiers of rural queer studies (Gray and Johnson 2016), to *Queering Health* embarking on critical challenges of normative healthcare (Zeeman and Aranda 2015), or *Queering the Grimms* rereading classic fairy tales in search of transgressive subtexts (Turner and Greenhill 2012). A general goal of these different kinds of queering projects – all threading theoretical rigor with an activist agenda – is to scrutinize systems of sex/gender/sexuality and socio-cultural meaning in radically different, off-center, and revealing ways, which also allow for new ways of seeing the world in its ever-changing complexity.

A crucial concern of queered analytical gambits relates to the gendered distribution of power positions within the regime of spectatorship and visibility (that hierarchically orders the active masculine spectator above the passive, eroticized, feminized object to be looked at). This is a particularly pertinent issue because ocular perception constitutes a major phenomenological, empirical basis of human knowledge formation, voyeurism is ultimately affiliated with epistemophilia, whereas the all-seeing, panoptical “Eye of Power” is internalized by the modern civilized subject in a self-conscience that exercises constant surveillance over one’s own deviant desires and culturally prohibited psychic contents (Foucault). In a metaphorical sense, queering is all about hijacking the normativizing gaze, a feat of critical re-vision, Adrienne Rich associates with the feminist mission of “looking back, seeing with fresh eyes, entering an old text from a new critical direction,” by means of an “act of survival” for the marginalized (Rich 127).

Museums – offering for public display a collection of artifacts canonically deemed of artistic, cultural, historical, or scientific importance – hold a privileged role in shaping cultural memory through highly disciplined forms of spectatorship. They work as ideological state apparati in Louis Althusser’s sense of the term as they are institutionally circumscribed, safely regulated loci preserving everything that is worthwhile to be seen, known, and aesthetically appreciated under strictly regulated codes of conduct of cultured scopophilic-epistemophilic delights. (In the museal space it is forbidden to shout, run, eat, or to enter into any physical contact with the artwork elevated to realm of the sacred, bordering on the

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necrophiliac's admired fetish object.) This disciplined, distanced, reasonable and sublimatory 'museal gaze' (an artistic experience Nietzsche coins Apollonian and contrasts with the Dionysian enrapturement in his dichotomic view of interpretive attitudes) gains rather conservative gender implications in most national museums' permanent exhibits where the majority of masterworks were created by male artists and display (especially in the case of some genres, like the nude) female subjects, hence inviting viewers to identify with the agile male gaze that traps the objectified, eroticized female muse within a spectacle.

However, since the exhibited treasures may comprehend a hybrid collection preserved for an eternity, transgressing thinkable geographical, historical, temporal boundaries, the museum also meets Foucault's criteria of heterotopia, a strange 'elsewhere,' an ambiguous, non-totalisable, 'dis-ordered' site enigmatically falling beyond normative socio-political spheres and incongruous with conventional topographical assumptions (Foucault 1984, 46), a potential site of meditative self-reflection, cathartic epiphany, and critical revision. In line with this, Andreas Huyssen's definition of the museal gaze implies an inherent queering of the look, as it allows for a transitory re-enchantment via a ritualistic re-connection with the past that resists the progressive dematerialization of the world driven by virtual realities of computer networking. For Huyssen, the postmodern museum is a space of creative forgetting, where the cultures of this world can "collide to display their heterogeneity, even irreconcilability, to network, to hybridize to live together in the gaze and the memory of the spectator" (37).

My aim in the following is to analyze multiply-layered queerings of the gaze, exploring a female artist's subversion of the museal, male, and medical gaze, which aestheticize, eroticize, and pathologize the feminine subject respectively and map her quest for new modes of self-expression made by women, for women, and about women within and beyond the confines of the exhibit hall. My case study examines how internationally-acclaimed, New York-based, Hungarian feminist artist Orshi Drozdik tests intermedial representational frames to experiment with the gendered body's dislocations within physical, psychic, artistic, discursive, performative spaces with the aim to problematize the self-disintegrating spectatorial post-identity's interpretive agency.

Orshi Drozdik studied painting and started her career as a conceptual artist with daring performance art pieces (like *Identity*, 1975, *Nudemodel* and *Individual Mythology* 1975-77) which thematized the disciplinary demands imposed upon the woman artist by the state socialist regime, the academic institution, and masculine hegemony alike. Despite her quick success in Budapest, she emigrated to Amsterdam as early as in 1978, driven by the desire to learn and test herself in the international arena. She moved to New York in 1980, and gradually earned an international reputation with major exhibits worldwide (Sao Paolo Biennale, Sydney Biennale, Tyne International). Her artistic oeuvre is indebted to poststructuralist semiotics of subjectivity: she elaborates on the major theoretical endeavors which rethink the self-sufficient, homogenized, exclusionary identity-model of the Cartesian tradition – Foucauldian ideology-criticism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and a little Derridean deconstruction. Her views have also been influenced by third wave feminist thinkers (Haraway, Spivak, and especially Luce Irigaray) whose key-texts she introduced as editor-translator to the Hungarian reading public in a collection meant to work as an explicatory manual to one of her major installations *Brains on High Heels (Sétáló Agyak)*. Her work is characterized by a singular diversity: she makes drawings, paintings, sculptures, photographs, performances, installations using a wide range of materials glass, porcelain, plaster, rubber, metal, and most importantly her own feminized body (constantly questioned in its engendering) complemented with metanarratives in various genres, ranging from feminist theoretical commentaries upon her oeuvre's creative-visual-political potentials to poems or loveletters in which she addresses her artwork in an intimate, surprisingly personal, confessional tone.

According to the critical consensus, Drozdik's diverse, heterogeneous work is united by a singular feminist perspective (see Schuller, Baglyas), but I prefer to call her project of challenging our ways of seeing a *queering of the gaze* that unsettles such hierarchically organized binaries as spectator vs spectacle, subject vs object, artist vs model, male vs female, objective scientific insight vs subjective

aesthetic sight, pathologizing vs eroticizing view, etc. with the aim to contest exclusionary identity-categories caught within the hegemonic, heterosexist matrix of visibility. Among the dualism's transgressed by Drozdik's *queering of the gaze* we find the blurring of the East and West divide via a bilingual, transnational multifocality defining her work that is strategically exhibited alternatively on both sides of the Atlantic, and in particular the US and Hungary between which she performs her individual feminist 'movement'. The strength of the ties preserved with her home country are illustrated by the intensity of her artistic transactions regularly importing/exporting her work from New York to Budapest, where she remains a professor at the Painting Department of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts (MKE) and a regular member of the National Széchenyi Academy of Letters and Arts. Just in the Fall of 2015 she had four ongoing exhibits in the Hungarian capital: *Individual Mythology, From Free Dance to Performance* in Bajor Gizi Museum of Theatre History, *The Anatomical Venus* in Semmelweis Museum of the History of Medicine, *It's all Over Now, Baby Blue* in Fluxus Gallery, and *Stripes II* performance in Fészek Club.

Drozdik's artwork can be associated with *iconoclasm, counter-spectacularity*, and the rebellious feminist act of *looking-back* to resist the despotism of the male gaze. On the one hand, along the lines of feminist film theoreticians, Doane and Mulvey, she problematizes the artistic representation of women as eroticized objects offered to the male gaze's fetishistic, sadistic desires and questions the succeeding masculinization of the active spectatorial position and the limiting of the female onlooker within her own narcissistic self-contemplation or a failed mimicry of male fantasies of all-seeing, all-knowing possessiveness. On the other hand, Drozdik discloses the male gaze's manipulations in the sphere of canonization (and the unequal distribution of power positions), pointing out that woman's deprivation from the agency of seeing has led throughout art history to the denial of her creative potentials, her reduction to the status of the sitter, the muse, the background (see Johnson 17), her banishment onto the canvas as object to be displayed. However, on criticizing women's dislocation within the realm of the history of art and spectatorship, Drozdik does not only lay claim on an empowered identity position of the artist-spectator, but she also posits herself historically, identifying with the traditionally spectacularized femininity in order to subversively revamp this re/location from within.

#### *Peepholes in the canvas, political change in the blink of an eye*

Her *Venuses. Body Curves and Draperies* series displayed in Budapest Gallery in 2007 summoned precisely these trademark iconoclastic ideas. The canvases deprived canonized masterworks of their easy figural aesthetic delights by featuring, stylized repetitions, digitally photo-manipulated fragments, perplexingly montaged torsos and close-ups, or merely allusive body-curves of/from famous representations of Venus, the mythological goddess of love and beauty and the universal symbol of Femininity. The eroticized look was frustrated by the disruption of the integrity of the nude body cut-up into pieces which did not make up a coherent whole but rather reminded spectators of the violence of their museal gaze imposing unwanted meanings upon the spectacle which could nevertheless be never fully possessed because of some elusive significations symbolized by puzzle pieces missing from the iconic image of Naked Truth.

These artistic fragmentations and fracturings, as Gabriella Schuller noted, recall a memorable act of feminist iconoclasm when in 1914 suffragette Mary Richardson at the National Gallery in London attacked and slashed with a meatchopper she smuggled hidden in her muff into the gallery perhaps the most famous Venus of art history, Velazquez's painting *Rokeby Venus* (also known as *The Toilet of Venus, Venus at her Mirror, Venus and Cupid*). Her attack aimed at mutilating an artwork epitomizing woman's sadistic, fetishistic enslavement as object of desire by the male gaze: she said she "didn't like the way men visitors to the gallery gaped at it all day long" (Steinberg 10). I believe it is noteworthy that the similarity of Drozdik's and Richardson's act reside in the duality of their perspectives, their bifocal vision simultaneously problematizing woman's artistic representations and her lived experiences' real presence

alike. Mary Richardson's attack against the artwork epitomizing woman's enslavement by the male gaze was actually meant as a gesture of protest against the public prosecution of Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of Women's Social and Political Union. It was an outcry against the "artistic as well as moral and political hypocrisy and humbug" that protects and idolatrizes "the *picture* of the most beautiful woman in mythological/art/ history" but willingly denigrates and destroys Pankhurst, "the most beautiful character in modern history" and other "beautiful *living* woman" (Anonymous 9) who happen to see beyond the hegemonic male gaze. Richardson called her slashes on Venus's body "hieroglyphics" of a counter-writing indecipherable for her contemporaries but "expressing much to the generations of the future." (Richardson 1914) Yet, ironically, the scenario Richardson meant to challenge was reenacted by journalists who described damages in the painted female nude with a criminological, anatomical terminology used in cataloguing injuries in a real crime cases, as if the "cruel wounds," "broad lacerations," "clean cuts," "incisions," and "ragged bruises" were inflicted on an actual female body by the felon "Slasher Mary" (Nead 2). The slashes in the canvas stage masculinized spectatorial blindness, along with the double standard applied to certain supportable and other insupportable acts of violence.

In her series titled *Lipstick Paintings a la Fontana* (2003/10) the holes punctured in the canvas of Drozdik's fractured Venuses re-enact Richardson's slashes in beauty's painted body. Via a multiple mise-en-abyme we witness how Drozdik sees Velazquez through Richardson's eyes who recognizes in Venus Pankhurst and all living beautiful women, like us. In a series of mirrorings woman looks at woman she can identify with and desire without losing her subjectivity or gaining her agency at the cost of otherings. The circularity, and fleshly redness of the holes recalls French feminist Luce Irigaray's notion of "the speculum of the other woman:" female sexuality remains a dark continent only if regarded in masculine terms, but a feminist peek deep inside our selves – redefined in an empowering manner by starting out from women's corporeal differences – allows for anatomization to become a means of self-discovery. Vaginal iconography denotes here more the surplus of desires than a symbolical lack (contrary to the assumptions of Freudian psychoanalysis).

The blank scarlet holes within Drozdik's lipstick paintings remind of peep show slots inviting all spectators to occupy the position of the male gazer commodifying corporealized femininity. Yet, paradoxically, they also seem to function as *gaps* within the conventional visual narrative as if to suggest an attempt at writing beyond the patriarchally propagated, heterosexist happy-ending compulsively objectifying women. They invite to look beyond the artlover's pity over the wound as an affront to the fetishized Venus' integrity, and to note the silent screams resulting from the insults living women have had to face (framed within delimiting myths of Femininity). They recognize defacement as a potential protest against these insults, highlighting Richardson's claim that "Justice is an element of beauty as much as color and outline on canvas" (Richardson 1915, 10). The blank holes symbolize the *blindspots* in our very act of seeing, contradicting the masculine hegemonic fantasy of an omnipotent, panoptical, invisible, but all-seeing spectatorial position that Donna Haraway calls the "cannibal-eye" "fucking the whole world" with the "god trick" (183). Drozdik's visual art projects suggest that there is no place from where we are not seen, and no place outside the system where we are not made to occupy a spectatorial stance inevitably locating us in an ideologically infiltrated regime of visibility, where positions of spectatorship and to-be-look-et-ness are distributed conforming to prevailing power interests.

Drozdik's *queering of the gaze* foregrounds the theatricalized carnal aspect of our locatedness within the hegemonic regime of visibility. She sheds light on spectacularity as a performance in her *Lipstick Painting à la Fontana*. Slashing or puncturing the surface of monochrome painting is clearly an homage to Lucio Fontana's established artistic strategy. Yet this "act of creative vandalism" (see Kérchy 2014) also challenges established notions of femininity and art. The thick layers of lipstick smeared on the edges of the holes or rubbed onto the entire canvas remind us how women's make up functions as an obligatory mask of Femininity that nevertheless can be removed and redrawn at will, given that the lipstick is not an essential but merely a "metonymic marker of one's becoming-Woman" (Schuller 2007).

The vaginal iconography of the scarlet splotches of lipstick marked wounds provides a vivid sense of the tangible textile of the vulnerable human skin to evoke the *embodied* nature of our spectatorial positionality. Drozdik puts into practice Irigaray's theoretical insistence on tactility as a fundamentally feminine experience apt to substitute the supremacy of oculo-centrism, and to replace the aggressive domination by the male gaze with the reciprocal and sensible *touching* as a new model/metaphor of a more egalitarian, pleasurable, queered spectatorship and spectacularity. Analogous to the iconic image of the two lips of the vulva constantly touching each other in Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One*, when a woman looks at the image of another woman (here, Drozdik's fragmented female nudes) she can both identify with and desire her without losing subjectivity, thus her look/s caress both the other woman and herself. Like when she touches she is also being touched, here when she looks she does not merely call to life through her perception and cognition the object seen as part of (her) reality, but her reality is also thoroughly affected by her sight, her perspective, her blindspots. It is not only that she shapes the thing she sees with the help of her interpretive consciousness attributing a certain meaning to it, but the thing she sees also shapes her, as it is invested with a capacity to look-back. When she looks, she also sees herself being seen, and sees herself seeing. Beyond pure narcissism, this is a recursive, reciprocal project highly respectful of the other recognized as potential part of the self (as the other always sees me as the other). The recurring gesture of Drozdik's abstracted female nudes touching themselves is an emblematic signifier of this revision.

This kind of logic also helps us to reevaluate the passivity conventionally associated with the artist's model, presumed to serve as a passive object worth nothing without the artist's creative genius that turns her into art. Instead the model muse should be regarded as a co-productive agent, exercising an inspirational energy that makes her worthy to be seen, commemorated on her own right. Even her vulnerable faulty humanity deserves respect as a more genuine memento of her corporeal being than the final artistic perfection clad onto her throughout her metamorphosis on/to the canvas.

On the whole, seeing as perception is never simply a rationalistic, individualistic but an *re/imaginative* and collaborative process; whatever inspires us to see beauty also unveils something beautiful in ourselves, we are caught within a complex network of mutual mirrorings. Whereas seeing traditionally has stood for believing, i.e. knowing, *touching* might stand for a careful understanding that being seer and seen are utterly exchangeable, concomitant, complementary positionalitys.

An important constituent of the *queering of the gaze* in/by Drozdik's art resides in the act of *looking back* that signifies reclaiming an empowered positionality for women within the realm of visibility and spectatorship by various means. (1) By hijacking the objectifying male gaze with a subversive *counter-spectacularity*, revealing the looked-at as onlooker, or a *masquerading mimicry* blurring her as sight and stressing the onlooker's potential clandestine looked-at-ness. (2) By reclaiming women's visual agency with an *alternate view-from-elsewhere* (De Lauretis 25) keeping in mind the temporality and historicity of identity while benefitting from the continuity of tradition. (3) By taking on the responsibility of *witnessing* to it, to past, present and future alike. (4) Thus conquering the masculinized institutional museum space with a queered, feminist perspective allowing for *differential re/visions*. All these meanings of *looking back* are enacted by Drozdik's numerous artistic role-playings.

#### *Visual artistic role play: the Anatomical Venus looks back*

However, her doing away with binaries and exploiting the relativity of ambiguities on simultaneously occupying the spectacle (object) and spectator (subject) position does not so much aim at realizing the postmodernist fantasy of the freely gender-bending post-identity's endlessly ecstatic self-destabilization. It rather aims at "exploring the history (herstories) of the creation of consciousness of the self in different cultural, racial, gender, historical and geographical situations," wishing to understand the interactions of the Foucauldian technologies of power and technologies of the Self with the various technologies of gender (De Lauretis 1987), and to explore "how we are structured to mold ourselves –

historically (see Drozdik, *Manufacturing the Self. 19<sup>th</sup> century Self*, 1993), intellectually, emotionally (see Drozdik, *Manufacturing the Self. Medical Venus*, 1993, *Manufacturing the Self. Body Self*, 1993, 1994, 1995, *Manufacturing the Self. Convent*, 1993) and cosmetically (see Drozdik, *Manufacturing the Self. Hairy Virgin* 1994) – into standardly gendered social identity positions prescribed by social, economic and political forces. (see [www.orshi.hu](http://www.orshi.hu))

Drozdik's diverse fictional alteregos portray her as female artists or artworks from different times and places with the unchanging aim to challenge the medical and museal male gaze's normatively pathologizing and/or eroticizing and/or aestheticizing disciplinary powers. In her 1974-7 *Individual Mythology*, an avant-garde offset print-series of herself, she takes on the role of Isadora Duncan to photographically re-enact how she creates modern dance by rejuvenating classical ballet with a stress on improvisation, emotion, and the human form, whereas the freeze-framing of dance-movements signals the limits of representation.

A decade later in 1984 she creates the figure of Edith Simpson, an 18<sup>th</sup> century female physician and philosopher inspired by 17<sup>th</sup> century scientist Anna Conway Finch as well as hundreds of photographs of objects displayed in science museums worldwide. In her project entitled *Infinite Dystopia*, the fictive persona, autobiography, and mock-scientific instruments of Edith Simpson revamp the objective scientific perspective of Enlightenment discourse responsible for creating hierarchical dualisms axiomatically determining Western institutionalized ways of thinking, (body/mind, healthy/ill, observer/observed) distinctions underlying our exclusionary, sacrificial models of identity and visibility/spectatorship alike.

Her artistic alterego from the 1990s' *Manufacturing the Self. Cosmetic Body. The Embodied Logos* project introduces Oshi Ohashi, a young NY based Japanese concept artist and ex-fashion model whose line of beauty products called CONFIDENT critically re-stage the dangers of interiorizing normative idealistic self-images propagated by beauty industry promising consumers happiness and power while hideously reinforcing the ideology of looksism, sexism, ageism, and ableism.

In my view, Drozdik's most exciting fictional alterego-artistic persona is a piece from her *Infinite Dystopia: Manufacturing the Self* series called *The Body Self: Medical Erotica* (first exhibited in Tom Cugliani Gallery, New York, 1993 and most recently in Semmelweis Medical Museum, Budapest, 2015). It is a mock plaster, rubber casted life-sized sculpture of the artist's body modeled after Clemente Susini's 18<sup>th</sup> century Anatomical Venus, a wax anatomical model bearing all physical markers of ideal feminine beauty, initially used as a visual aid, demonstrative tool for male medical students' instruction, and later as a popular attraction of Victorian science museums. The Anatomical Venus' double purpose of education and entertainment thus perfectly illustrates how the pathologizing medical and the aestheticizing museal male gaze overlap to find pleasure at the sight of the passive female body, utterly objectified as patient, corpse, artwork, food-for-thought served – on a dissection-, dinner-, or gynaecological table, or museum-exhibit-container – to the self-proclaimed impersonal, objective, knowing, illusorily disembodied touch of the enlightened, masculinized gaze whose sadistic, necrophiliac, fetishistic, erotic excitement and hunger for power or domination is masked by/as a desire for knowledge. A counterpart to the female flaw of scopophiliac curiosity, the medical-museal male gaze's scrutiny is presumed to be impartial, rationalistic, nearly disinterested, preoccupied only with the appropriate re/production of truth. As for the Venus, an embodiment of perfect femininity, she is represented with eyes half-closed, voluptuously surrendering herself to death, to the dissector, to the onlooker. She fully abandons herself by literally opening up for a total penetration, since her abdomen and thorax can be opened and her internal organs can be removed to simulate the anatomical dismemberment. In a rather grotesque manner, she rests in peace, and in her pieces, circumscribed by the medical gaze, ruthless and precise as a surgical knife. By turning the Anatomical Venus into a sculptural self-portrait Drozdik illuminates the irony of the original work's being exhibited under the label "Know thyself!": she foregrounds the questions 'Whose self is actually scrutinized here? Which selves are regarded to be worthy to produce knowledge and which as worthy to be known? Can the sight seen be more telling of the spectator than the spectacle?'

Drozdik discloses and challenges how the scientific discourse and gaze model reality in the name of a rationality and objectivity to create truth and order willing to reinforce the prevailing hegemonic structures of power and meaning. She introduces the ultimately-subjective, positively biased, emotional, confessional voice, the private partial perspective and the intimate relationality of vows of love and devotion into the medical-museal space, by surrounding her Anatomical Venus(-self), instead of surgical instruments of dismemberment, with a series of silver plates balanced on thin sticks as if in a circus act and engraved with loveletters with an anonymous and absolutely ambiguous sender and addressee. The ambiguity of these loveletters' voice is remarkable. We can read the words as records of the doctor-artist Susini's desire for his wax model. The text can be deciphered as the manifestation of the dissected Venus' devotion to the all-seeing but invisible (absent) dissector-spectator who both dismembers her and reassembles her into meaning (this might just as well be the ventriloquist voice of the doctor himself). The lines resonate with the museum-goer, collector, art-enthusiast's yearning for the exhibited artwork. They might also spell out Drozdik's confession to the Anatomical Venus, her amorous artistic alterego with a seducing potential for self-recognition.

My Dearest,

I asked for your tongue and you thrust into my mouth. You were like a blade. You cut my words in half. With your tongue in my mouth I could not think of myself. I have to use your tongue to describe my feelings. You heard your words from my mouth. I love you and it's difficult to live without you. I know you love me too.

Your Love

The passionate messages decorating the silver plates, freezed in a delicate balance on top of a multitude of metal canes, include lines like the above ones – clearly referring to Luce Irigaray's twisted confessions in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991) – to highlight the loveletter's genre- and gender-bending discursive ambiguity. Addressed to another the love-letter serves the construction of the self in terms of a self-destabilizing troubling of the distinct, individual "I" and "you" replaced by a collective, amorous "we" called to being via the performative speech act of the vow of love. Phallogocentric, patriarchal discourse is subverted by a desire to touch the other as myself, myself as the other, replacing the impersonal, pseudo-objective diagnostic discourse's disidentificatory, domineering naming with hypocorisms, terms of endearment gently caressing tongue, heart, mind and skin alike. The loose pearls scattered on the loveletters as if freed from the original Venus sculpture's choker-like necklace and the silver plates balancing in thin air as if to mock gravity both represent the dissemination of fixed meanings and subjectivities. They stage Elizabeth Grosz' concept of *desire as locomotion* (Grosz 133) flowing beyond the binary logic of absence versus presence, to shatter the myth of desire as infinitely insatiable yearning for an irreplaceable loss. The logic of domination, compensation, or string-like linear narrativization's homogenizing framing are troubled from within. (The love-letter quoted above also appeared in Hungarian in one of Drozdik's short stories published in *Thirsty Oasis. Anthology on Female Sexuality* in a novella that thematized – in a confessional tone, from the insider perspective of the muse, and through the real-life case studies of Cellini, Susini, and Yves Klein – how the exploitative relationship of male artist and female model have prevailed throughout the ages up until women's awakening to their own creative potentials.)

The installation's transmedial shifts trouble the interpretive process by making us decode the loveletters' written text as image and sculpture which invite visual and tactile sensations, urging to 'read' with one's fingertips. Instead of postmodernist disintegration, fusion of sensorial stimuli (touching and seeing) guarantees the integrity of the embodied artistic experience. Drozdik's sculptural self-portrait as Anatomical Venus does not only remove the original's glass-case that served to forbid any physical contact between spectacle and spectator, but her model also half lifts her hands as if about to touch herself,

the Susini Venus, or the onlooker, whom she looks, with eyes wide open – unlike the original Venus – straight in the eyes, to let gazes mutually touch each other. The way Drozdik describes in a love-letter to the Venus her first ecstatic encounter with Susini's Anatomical Venus in the Medical Museum of Vienna reflects a similarly non-domineering, reciprocally satisfactory queering of the gaze:

[...] my glance slid through your silky, shiny skin. The sight of your naked beauty was perplexing, shook me to the deep marrows of my bones, slight tremors vibrated my body, sweatdrops like pearls ran down in the valley between my breasts, your beauty was insupportable, I could not move, stupefied by the recognition of our identity. I lifted my camera to my face, touched the button with trembling fingers, but could not move, I felt paralyzed, as if my spine fossilized, and in that threatening chasm I could only stare at you, on realizing myself in you. All glass-panes reflected my image, I could not see anything else in this fragile hall of mirroring, just you and my own reflection, looking at you. I could not take your photograph, became still myself, rigid, I took a deep breath, gave orders to my limbs, rocked my body back and forth, I started spinning, sensing to become one with you. I lost my sense of time... my love for you is a devotion beyond erotic longing. My vision transformed into a sensual commemoration. The sight of your body makes me recall you, recollect you, remember and re-remember you. I project you within my cells, my organs, my whole body. You grow within me, within the depth of my innermost being. I exhale you. I transform your body in/to mine. I cannot separate myself off from you. Your ecstasy is embodied in my own flesh. ... I keep my eyes open to observe my spectators' desires. ... I mould Narcissus through Pygmalion. ... Will I be able to love that other who is neither fully you nor me?... Will you understand my love? (translation mine, Drozdik 1993)

#### *The bifocal pleasures of the camp look*

Drozdik's art examines the gendered subject's discontinuity and integrity alike, tackling "horrific pleasures layered in institution, knowledge, (...) order (and disorder) seducing, excluding, equivocating" us ([www.orshi.hu](http://www.orshi.hu)). She continuously stresses that her experience of cultural displacement enabled her to understand the complex, interrelated processes of technologies of power, -self, and gender, and necessarily surfaced in the *bifocal spectatorial point of view* invited by her work. Her art proves to be polymorphic on accounts of being decoded as post-feminist art in U.S. exhibits, while in Hungary, where the category of post-feminism is highly problematic if not meaningless (feminism has not been fully accomplished yet, so it cannot be surpassed) it is regarded postmodernist, experimental, and woman-centered. This bifocal perspective is supported by the difference between the titles of the same show displayed on the two sides of the Atlantic. An installation made up of a dozen brains in stilettos treading in each other's footsteps in a circular arrangement bears in a New York art gallery the title "Brains on High Heels" to efficiently evoke the ambiguity of gendered embodiment and enworldedness, whereas in Hungary the title "Walking Brains" spells out more explicitly the physical and intellectual agency deemed incompatible with the conventional view of femininity but revealed as a significant ground for the self-reflective and self-ironic woman-artist's self-definition. Drozdik's *counter-spectacularity* matched with a *bifocality* starts out from a traditionalist, patriarchal, heteronormative femininity aiming to re-present (it with) a slight difference apt to trouble the binary, exclusionary logic of spectatorial identification and objectification.

This queering of the very representational process introduces in the long run a *feminist camp gaze* that plays on uncertainties, ambiguities and polysemies while thoroughly criticizing the normativized perspective of the canonized self-same. *Camp* is an ultimate queer expression: originally a French slang term denoting the "exaggerated pose" of female impersonators and prostitutes of the 'joy divisions' following military encampments to provide soldiers sexual services, later it described aesthetic choices and stylistic attitudes of pre-Stonewall gay men. (OED defines camp as "ostentatious, exaggerated,



affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to or characteristic of homosexuals.”) Finally, it was brought into mainstream and academic attention by Susan Sontag’s 1964 essay “Notes on Camp” as a general aesthetic category, a mode of representation or an interpretive perspective based on (or rather debased by) ambiguity and self-irony. Sontag contrasted the traditional high culture’s emphasis on truth, natural beauty, harmony, and seriousness, its straightforward relation between intention and performance and moralistic aspect (in case of *avant-garde* art a tension between moral and aesthetic passion) with *camp* sensibility’s revelry in artifice, exaggeration and the unnatural, its love of theatricalization, self-irony, playfulness, and an aestheticizing stylization overwhelming or mockingly contradicting the content. From the 1980s on, postmodernist feminists and queer theoreticians re-interpreted Sontag’s “disengaged, depoliticized, apolitical” (Sontag 277) concept of *camp* as a political category with ideology-critical and identity-political potentials (see Kocic-Zámbó 49). They unanimously emphasized its significance as a mode of *performance* (differing from kitsch which denotes simply an *object*) apt to denaturalize, to disclose the cultural constitution of norms, canons, aesthetic/representational standards, and means of visibility.

As Drozdik’s Anatomical Venus self-portrait illustrates by combining medical, museal, meditative, orgasmic, parodic, and political gazes, *feminist camp* sees everything self-reflectively and in quotation marks, regarding both Being and Art as Playing-a-Role, aware – besides pleasures – of the responsibilities involved in playing the game. As a result, the queering of the gaze does indeed succeed in making a difference.

A similarly complex spectatorship is invited by Drozdik’s latest exhibition *It’s All Over Now Baby Blue/ Most Mindennek Vége Baba Kék 2013/15* (Flux Gallery, Budapest, 2015) started out from a revisiting of Yves Klein’s 1977 performances with ‘female body brushes’ and ended up with strategically building on a number of canonized artistic traditions and techniques in order to subvert them and charge them with new feminist meanings. Her “vertiginous eclecticism” adopts an impressive range of systematically organized art historical allusions: recurring non-figurative abstract patterns revisit the Malevichian suprematism’s attempt to invest painting with spiritual, meditative meaning associated with orthodox icons, and to go beyond the simple visual representation of objects to communicate a pure artistic feel by embracing the ‘thing itself’, the presence of materiality itself on the canvas. Instead of Malevich’s blacks and whites, the softer colors of baby blues and pinks, and the more fragile, feminine shapes of triangles, pyramids balancing upside-down, on their tips evoke the lesser known Olga Rozanova’s Russian avant-garde cubo-futurism, especially her green stripe paintings, as the marginalized female suprematistic counter-tradition. The title of the exhibition quotes an eponymous Bob Dylan song – often interpreted as a farewell to a lover, to the audience, or the artist himself who marked with this song the end of his career as an acoustic guitar-playing protest singer – but among the many adaptations, Marianne Faithful’s performance, featured on the exhibit’s website, seems particularly important for Drozdik as a female artist, as the gender switch in the performer’s persona may attribute different meaning to lines of the lyrics like “The empty-handed painter from your streets is drawing crazy patterns on your sheets.” The bedsheets’ crazy pattern perfectly emblemize woman’s body-writing, as an alternative mode of self-expression: the thin layers of pale pink paint on the canvas embody feminine fleshly vulnerability, while the multiplicity of identical shapes echoed in neighboring canvases stage the abundance attributed to feminine verbliness, sexuality, or corporeality – and in this case, the copious creativity of the wildly associative female mind. The lightness of baby blue emerges as a more docile alternative to Yves Klein’s thick and textured application of ultramarine blue that represents for Drozdik violence, erotic exploitation, and women’s silencing since – as she thematized in her literary writings – throughout his performances Klein painted on female models’ naked bodies to have them walk, roll, and sprawl upon his blank canvases. The photomontage painting “Your blue is my body 1978/2013” shows the ghostly apparition-like figure of Drozdik’s past self witness a scene of Klein’s abusive art actions: the creative agency of his painting with/on female bodies is problematized, as abstract blotches of

Klein-blue corrupt figurative representation, while the personal aspects of the political, individual lived experiences' stakes of the art historical are foregrounded. This creative commentary on the canonical marginalization of female artists also makes a reference to one of Drozdik's earlier seminal works, a large sized (183 x 411 cm) oil painting triptych *Art History and Me* (1982). She used on the side panels two stripe paintings appropriated from Barnett Newman to surround her own naked body depicted in the middle in a trompe l'oeil-like doubled manner. The title of the performance, "I TRY TO BE TRANSPARENT (TO ART HISTORY)," accompanying the exhibit also expressed the challenges women artists face in attempting to find an ideal interpretive community and to carve for themselves a place in art history.

The camp queering of the gaze comes from the fusion of the critical, ironical, and playful tones, and the invitation of the audiences to gain visual delight from the contrastive multifocal view of the original (Dylan, Klein, Malevich) and the feminist revision (Faithful, Rozanova, and overall Drozdik revamping them). As the exhibit's press release claimed, the artist strategically plays the confusion of one-, two-, and three-dimensionality and the implication of the fourth and fifth dimensions to challenge canonized art historical dogmas, to trouble spectatorship and criticize the prevailing codes of visibility. A systematic use of chance is a major strategy underlying the il/logic of the collection. Drozdik's intermedial projects (fusing painting, performance, photo-collage) perform a clever queering of the gaze by challenging fixed binaries (good/bad, real/fake, painting/video), undermining dualistic thinking and prejudices resulting thereof, fusing the individual and the institutional, the assumed and the concrete, the rebelliously destructive and the creatively de/reconstructive, with the aim to combine artistic practice, theoretical agenda, and meditative mission (Drozdik 2015) – to propagate a plurality of self-reflective yet euphoric perspectives.

### List of Images

*Lipstick paintings à la Fontana*, 2002.  
*Manufacturing the Self. Anatomical Venus*, 1993.  
*Your blue is my body 1978/ 2013*.  
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