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Plush intimacies

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A mascot, a teddy bear, a toy. In contemporary culture, it is associated with something trivial, crude, superficial, infantile. As a topic of reflection, it rarely turns up in a serious discourse on contemporary art.

In popular culture and the reality of social life, there are plenty of toys and mascots. They fulfil very important functions. They are used as a central component of the visual identification of social or advertising campaigns etc. They turn up everywhere, where their characteristic meekness and accessibility play an important image-building role linked to their positive connotations. Their role in human life is invaluable, although the phenomenon in question has never been thoroughly considered¹.

Plush toys rarely find their way into contemporary art. In the rare cases when it happens, both artists and curators notice their considerable culture-forming potential. A good example here may be the exhibition *Kami, Khokha, Berni and Ernie (World Heritage)* held at the Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm in 2013, devoted to the Sesame Street characters – a globally popular series of education and entertainment shows for children. The exhibition curator emphasised that they facilitated discussion on very important and serious social problems in a uniquely accessible way. An example here may be *Kami*, a plush female figure from the South-African edition of the programme, which was the first HIV positive mascot in history².

¹ W. Phoenix: *Plastic Culture: How Japanese Toys Conquered the World*, Kodansha International 2006, s. 39.

² <http://www.tenstakonsthall.se/uploads/54-10-5-2012-EN-tensta-konsthall-hinrich-sachs.pdf>

The presence of mascots in contemporary art is usually related to its commercial aspects on the border of popular culture and design. An example here may be such brands as *Ugly Dolls* or *Hello Kitty* which have become cult objects of increasing symbolic potential³.

Making plush mascots the focus of attention in the project *Polish misia!*, the author Borys Makary has joined the niche cultural discourse described above. A series of photographs of bare-chested adult women kissing their teddy bears focalizes, like a lens, all the aforementioned problems related to the presence of toys in art, culture, as well as social and private life: infantilism, the connection with fashion, accessibility and meekness, erotic reification...

The first thought that comes to mind when reading the cycle is the „triviality“ of the scenes and the situation itself. Here is a young photographer inviting beautiful girls to pose half-nude and enter into an intimate relationship with teddy bears – he appears to be a not particularly serious and a bit perverse peeping Tom. On the other hand, the style of the scenes and the manner in which the women are posing remind of the imaging of advertising and fashion. Stylised, aesthetic photographs – sweet just like the teddy bears cuddled in them.

The preliminary level of the reading does not exhaust its meaningful content. Although teddy bears do not belong to the thematic *decorum* of high art, it does not mean that they do not have a critical potential.

The specific relationship between the woman and the teddy bear, a plush friend, is fundamental for the interpretation of the cycle. As the author explained in an interview, the project was inspired by the unusual phenomenon of closeness between adult women and the mascots that had been accompanying them since early childhood. These „long-term relationships“ are characterised by strong emotions.

³ See: Agathe Snow' exhibition *Hello Kitty* of 2007 at the Saatchi Gallery in London.

The point of departure for the project was, therefore, the perspective of a male observer of the phenomenon and an attempt to answer the question about the meaning of the relationship between the woman and the teddy bear. When starting working on the cycle, the author – in his own words – did not expect such a broad response on the part of the women he had invited to participate. For cultural texts, especially films, persuade that there is a certain shyness about and repression of such relationships in public contexts. Yet, the project succeeds in capturing this relationship on both visual and text levels. The invited women complemented the photographs with their own memories related to the presented toys. Many of them emphasised the loving nature of the relationship in question. Following this, the author posed a question about the role of the teddy bear as a substitute for a man in the woman's life.

The photographer notes *the sexualisation of contemporary life*⁴ and the woman's image in media. The women posing in the project apparently mimic the poses and behaviours observed in advertising and TV – revealing the need to *expose themselves and emanate sexuality*⁵. Hence, what we are dealing with here is "mediatisation" of intimacy – a kind of corporeal and emotional exhibitionism.

The result of the creative process – the photographs of women with teddy bears – needs also be perceived through the creative process as such. The photographer, a man, assumes the role of an observer. Even more than that: he convinces the posing women to behave expressively towards their plush friends. The resulting images are, therefore, an outcome of deliberate performative acts⁶ and are connected to the awareness of "being seen"⁷. Thus, we face here a type of theatrical self-presentation. Do the girls in the photographs behave in such a "rapacious" way towards their teddy bears outside the artistic context of the discussed project? From the viewer's perspective, the situation the models were invited to participate in is equally credible and incredible – created by the artist and determined by the model's behaviour.

⁴ U. Pieczek: *Polish misia – wywiad z Borysem Makarym*, [dostępne na:] <http://popmoderna.pl/polish-misia-wywiad-z-borysem-makarym/>

⁵ U. Pieczek: *Polish misia – wywiad z Borysem Makarym*, [dostępne na:] <http://popmoderna.pl/polish-misia-wywiad-z-borysem-makarym/>

⁶ Cf.: R. Schechner: *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*, Routledge 1993.

⁷ J. Berger: *Sposoby widzenia*, Poznań 1997.

The photo sessions resulted in the images which may also be interpreted in the context of the mascot fetishisation. The erotic nature of the girls' actions clashes with the "innocence" and "passivity" of the teddy bears. The infantilisation of eroticism in the cultural discourse is usually perceived as a kind of perversion – a behaviour on the borderline of social acceptability. In this sense, a possible repression of the discussed images from consciousness through their perception as trivial, frivolous or kitsch results more from the selection of the topic and does not impinge on the accuracy of the author's observations. A possible divergence of opinions regarding the critical potential of the project seems to stem from the exclusion of the processual aspect, which precedes the production of the photographs constituting the result of the creative act – somebody had to respond to the photographer's call... It can be said, then, that in the case of the project *Polish misia!*, "what" is shown is equally important to "how" it is shown and how it has happened at all, how was it possible?

It is difficult to conclusively determine the actual motivations of the women participating in the project, but the author himself seems to be fully aware of the dual nature of his artistic endeavours. The title of the cycle corresponds to its suspension between kitsch and sociological observation. *Polish misia!* refers to children's plays with the phonetic convergence of the Polish and English languages which are used following the principle of "a joke that is not supposed to be funny". On the other hand, however, the title of the project introduces the national context into the interpretation – a question about the Polish eroticism and sexuality. Do they exist, how are they doing? In which direction are they heading?

An intimate relationship with a toy has a parodistic effect, but simultaneously raises a serious concern. A teddy bear can be objectified, exploited. The expression of contentment (smile) remains on its face, no matter what is done to it. Its unshakable satisfaction resembles the image of the film Joker who dies smiling. Perhaps, this very feature settles the issue of the

attractiveness of teddy bears and the interpretational openness of the project devoted to them.