

# **Une Idée, une Forme, un Être – Poésie / Politique du corporel**

September 25 – November 28, 2010

**Ai Weiwei – Regina José Galindo – Teresa Margolles – Gianni Motti –  
Eftihis Patsourakis – Pamela Rosenkranz – Martin Soto Climent – Loredana Sperini –  
Alina Szapocznikow**

The exhibition unites works by eight international contemporary artists as well as by Alina Szapocznikow (1926–1973). The material qualities of these works are distinguished by their close contact with, or derivation from, the human body. In contradistinction to the mechanisms of visual shock in 1980s and 1990s Abject art, where corporeality was a central theme, the use of these materials can here be described as subject to rigorous formal aesthetic reduction. The result is a tension between the object's reduced form and the energy it is endowed with by the absent body. The renewed interest in how to transmit corporeality in works of art, in the 'imprints of the human,' opens art-historical, sociopolitical, but also poetic perspectives on art.

In the history of Western art, the human body and its 'traces' have long been a central topic—as an object of anatomical examination, for instance, or as a body of meaning to be venerated in the relic. To this day, the discourse around relics—be they body parts of a saint, his or her possessions, or objects that have been in contact with other relics—and the related discourse of the *vera icon* (the 'true image') play an important role in Catholicism, but also in Buddhism. The works included in the exhibition draw on these discourses, among other sources, taking them further toward an 'anthropology of the image' (Hans Belting). Unlike the *vera icon*, however, which is an object of veneration, the works shown in the exhibition are distinguished by their Janus-like character, permitting of a double reading: a sociopolitical one, but a poetic one as well. This double reading is made possible by an excess in the reduction of signification taking place on the formal-aesthetic level. In the simplicity of their gesture, the works refer to a conceptual-minimalist strategy while being charged with history. The concepts of the readymade and the *objet trouvé* likewise play an important role for the artists included in the exhibition. Their works can be read as repositories of knowledge, vessels of memory, or as performative works of art that also take up the idea of the contact relic in the classical sense.

The work of **Ai Weiwei** (b. 1957, Chinese) examines shifting values in Chinese culture and their political exploitation, which reached a climax in the second half of the twentieth century. The organized destruction of cultural assets during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) under the doctrine of 'replacing the old with the new' ended after Mao's death; yet the destruction and erosion of Chinese culture continues to this day, if now under the banner of economic progress. A central motif in Ai Weiwei's work is political and cultural violence. He often comes back to the form of the readymade; in the sculpture *Template* (2007), for instance, he used parts of destroyed Ming- and Qing-era houses (1368–1911) such as wooden doors and windows. How can the old survive without becoming a fetish and hence liable to exploitation? Ai Weiwei pursues this question in the group of works entitled *Vases*: he bought Neolithic vases and pots between five and seven thousand years old at antique markets and stained them with industrial paints, thus 'travestying' the antiquities, stripping them of their status as fetishes and transposing them from history into the present. Yet Ai Weiwei's art thus refers not to the blind destructive rage of the Maoist Cultural Revolution; his simple and yet effective gesture reactivates multiple levels of narrative in the vases: their past existence as antiquities as well as their survival, but also their future life in the new context of art.

**Regina José Galindo** (b. 1974, Guatemalan) first became known for her performances in the tradition of Body art. In her performance *Yesoterapia* (2006), for instance, the artist had her body put in a plaster cast for five full days; in *Himenoplastia* (2004), she underwent hymenoplasty, or surgical reconstruction of the hymen. José Galindo's works point to the continuing prevalence of patriarchal social structures and the discrimination of women they entail, social injustice, censorship, and state power. The work *La Conquista* (2005)—two long hair wigs, presented on poles painted white—symbolizes the ongoing exploitation by the Western 'colonial power' of women in countries of the Third World and emerging nations: one of the wigs was made out of the hair of Guatemalan, the other, of Indian women. José Galindo thus refers to the fact that many women in these countries are compelled by economic hardship to sell their long hair to the beauty industry, forfeiting what is for them an important symbol of their identity. The artist herself speaks of a modern form of 'scalping'—which was originally a demonstration of power used by the victorious conquerors. The work suggests violence against women on yet another level if we consider the so-called femicides,<sup>1</sup> the systematic murder of women, a phenomenon that has been widespread especially in Mexico (Ciudad Juárez) and Guatemala (Guatemala City) since the turn of the millennium. Their bodies are cruelly mutilated, and the murderers often cut their hair in order to sell it.

Since the early 1990s, the artist and forensic medical examiner **Teresa Margolles** (b. 1963, Mexican) has volunteered at a morgue in Mexico City where numerous victims of violent crimes, many of them unidentified, are brought in every day. These circumstances define the situation out of which Margolles creates her works, which often consist of 'leftover substances' from corpses. There is often a dynamic and tense interaction between the sober formal aesthetic of her works and the viewers' highly emotional responses. Yet the artist is not primarily interested in provocation; rather, she aims at a critique of a social injustice that extends even beyond death. Margolles's works thus fuse an indictment of this injustice with aspects of catharsis and the intention to honor the dead. The anonymous bodies that arrive at Mexico City's mortuaries every day often disappear into mass graves or are cremated; the same happens to the deceased whose families cannot afford a proper burial. The uses of the dead body, the changes it undergoes, and its eventual dissolution become symbols in Margolles's works for systems of value in which we can read social and political structures; at the same time, these works, by virtue of their transposition into the White Cube, also function as a form of recollection. Another integral component of each work is an explanatory statement—in the case of the work *37 cuerpos* (2007), it reads as follows: "Remnants of threads used after the autopsy to sew up bodies of persons who have suffered a violent death. Each thread represents a body."

The central strategy in the work of **Gianni Motti** (b. 1958, Italian/Swiss) is directed not so much toward the aim of creating a physical work of art; instead, he seeks to circulate stories that, through viral dissemination, will develop into more and more elaborate legends and rumors. This subversive and ephemeral form of behavior swings back and forth between the rational and the irrational, between irony and provocation. In 1997, he took the place of the then-absent Indonesian ambassador to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, where he initiated a debate about ethnic minorities; on another occasion, he portrayed the cult leader Raël (2004). In the exhibition, the work *Mani Pulite*—a bar of soap allegedly made out of fat from Silvio Berlusconi's abdomen—is shown for the first time since 2005. Berlusconi has undergone liposuction in 2004, after which Motti claimed to have received the fat. On the one hand, *Mani Pulite* is an ironic commentary about a tragicomic political figure who milked the story of his cosmetic surgery for its publicity value, and on the other hand on political news coverage. Berlusconi exemplifies how the body can be employed for politics. By mixing liposuction, lifting, and hair implants with democracy, freedom, his affairs, miracles and religion, he brings the cult of the body to the verge of caricature. Furthermore, the work's title refers to the bribery affairs that rocked Italy in the early 1990s. The bronze *Belgium Landing (First Step in Belgium)* (2010), by contrast, would appear to be rather atypical of Motti's art. Invited to participate in an exhibition, the artist traveled to the country for the first time. As he exited from the airplane, his first footprint was preserved at his request: he stepped into a bed

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<sup>1</sup> The term refers not to killings in domestic settings but to murders that take place in the public space. In 2001, twelve sex workers were killed in Guatemala City; sexist and misogynistic messages were carved into their bodies. These first murders triggered a series of imitation crimes. Between 2001 and 2008, over 3,000 women were murdered.

of unset cement. The resulting imprint is not only a humorous reference to the traditional culture around the 'footsteps' of stars during representative visits; it also points toward Belgium's history as a colonial power.

The works of **Eftihis Patsourakis** (b. 1967, Greek) address issues such as remembering and forgetting, the writing of history and its dissolution. Several series of works are based on family photo albums the artist buys in junk stores. The photo album is, within the private sphere of the family, the place where history is created par excellence; but it remains active only so long as there are descendants who sustain this process by telling oral histories. Photo albums act as witnesses to past existences and moments; they also trace family trees. In the ongoing series *Curtain* (2009), however, Patsourakis works not with the found photographs or the main pages of these albums; he instead uses the glassine-like separators inserted between the pages to which the pictures are attached. Due to their fragility, these sheets are especially prone to tears and creases. The artist is interested in these subtle traces people inadvertently create as they browse in the albums; he uses various neon colors to bring them to relief-like prominence. This formal-aesthetic intervention also engenders a new tension: the neon colors, which we associate with the future, with 'modernity,' contrast with the nostalgic activity of browsing, of refreshing memories, as well as the wear this activity causes to the object and the unintended new traces it leaves.

Features of formal aesthetics such as reflections, foldings, Möbius bands, and voids are of great importance in the works of **Pamela Rosenkranz** (b. 1979, Swiss), which often strike the viewer as rigorous and conceptual: she ties these features to a discourse on the presence and absence of bodies that draws on contemporary philosophy. The photogram has been among the artist's media for years; with its tactile aspect, it is especially suitable to this discourse. Unlike the photograph, which is created using a camera, the photogram is the result of an immediate exposure of photosensitive material such as film or photographic paper—the medium, that is to say, comes in direct contact with the object to be depicted. In her series *Spills* (since 2007), the artist chewed on a variety of medications, from an antidepressant to vitamin pills, before spitting what was left of them onto photographic paper, where this act left a unique expressionistic imprint of pill residue and saliva. The series of color photograms *More Core* (2010) similarly relies on pills, which are here used as they are and placed directly on the photographic paper to create an arrangement that can be read as an abstract representation of a pair of eyes. Seen from afar, the garishly colorful pairs of dots recall the eyes of androids in science fiction movies such as *The Terminator* (1984). This seemingly ironic reference created by the colors of the pills—originally designed to prevent unintended ingestion—is not accidental, if we consider that these chemical substances are considered protagonists in the modification of mind and body.

In his objects and sculptural installations, the artist **Martin Soto Climent** (b. 1977, Mexican) uses mostly simple objects and things he finds in the street or buys at thrift stores. He arranges these objects—which are sometimes unaltered, sometimes subject to minimal interventions—in new constellations to create sculptures or installations in the exhibition space. In *Desire* (2009), Soto Climent uses eyeglasses cases, which he folds to make it look as though they lasciviously stuck out their tongues. Such recontextualizations draw on ideas developed by the Surrealists and their relation to the object: they already examined the object as a fragment of recollection—as a possible way of evoking individual memories rather than socially sanctioned ones, of prompting and developing the beholder's own associative imagination. Yet this function required a gesture performed by the artist to charge the object with power, a transmission of energy comparable to that which constitutes the contact relic. The object breaks free from its intended purpose; it is meant to astonish and surprise. As André Breton described it in one of his manifestos: "Objectivation de l'activité de rêve, son passage dans la réalité."

**Loredana Sperini** (b. 1970, Italian/Swiss) first became known for her drawings and embroideries representing delicate figures and groups of figures about to dissolve as they grow out into rhizomatic networks, suspended in a timeless spatial situation. The medium of manual embroidery—a highly traditional and time-consuming craft—served Sperini as a particularly suitable formal-aesthetic equivalent and medium for the 'retardation,' the almost frozen temporality of her work. Rendering time and its instability visible is one of Sperini's central interests. In 2007, she begins work on a new group of pieces, a series of small

sculptures made of remainders of porcelain figures she arranges in new configurations. Not unlike the embroideries, these objects represent strangely hybrid bodies. The individual pieces of porcelain are taken from hills consisting of debris heaped up after World War II. Even today, people dig in these hills for valuables. By using this material, charged with history and human experience, Sperini addresses the 'body trauma' of the twentieth century.

With her semi-figurative amorphous sculptures made of polyester and polyurethane, **Alina Szapocznikow** (1926–1973, Polish/French) is one of the past century's most important protagonists of a post-Surrealist physicality between poetry and trauma. (Other such artists include Eva Hesse, 1936–1970, and Louise Bourgeois, 1911–2010.) During the 1970s, she created several works distinguished by their conceptual character. Her 21-part photographic work *Photosculpture* (1971) is based on the idea of documenting a piece of chewing gum and the transformations it undergoes over the course of an afternoon as the artist chews on it—chewing becomes in this work an act of continuous creation, but also of destruction. The results are bizarre shapes not unlike those of her sculptures; they also recall Ernst Haeckel's highly artful depictions of nature. The photographic documentation of the *Cendrier d'ambiance* (1972)—a performance never implemented in the exhibition context—was created for a group show curated by Annette Messager; the artist had already been diagnosed with cancer. The experimental arrangement is of striking simplicity: during the opening, a piece of butter was to serve as an ashtray. The intrusion of the glowing cigarette butt into the soft mass becomes a poetic metaphor, one that also permits a feminist reading—symbolizing the antagonism of fire clashing with water, but also their synthesis or fusion.

Curated by Raphael Gyga

**ARTIST'S CONVERSATION WITH LOREDANA SPERINI:** On Wednesday, October 27 at 7 pm, Loredana Sperini will come to the exhibition for a conversation moderated by Raphael Gyga.

**ARTIST'S CONVERSATION WITH PAMELA ROSENKRANZ:** On Wednesday, November 10 at 7 pm, Pamela Rosenkranz will come to the exhibition for a conversation moderated by Raphael Gyga.

**LECTURE: JUDITH WELTER, FAMA VOLAT – SPEKULATION, GERÜCHT UND ANEKDOTE ALS KÜNSTLERISCHES MATERIAL:** Based on the positions represented in the exhibition, Judith Welter, art historian and Collections Manager of the migros museum für gegenwartskunst, will speak on Wednesday, November 24 at 7 pm about the ephemeral in contemporary art.

**PUBLIC GUIDED TOURS** will take place on Sunday, September 25, Sunday, October 10, Sunday, October 24, Sunday, November 7, and Sunday, November 28 at 3 pm; and on Thursday, October 7 and Thursday, November 25 at 6:30 pm.

**GUIDED TOURS FOR FAMILIES:** On Sunday, October 3 and Sunday, November 7 at 1:30 pm. These guided tours take ca. 90 minutes and are designed specifically for families, including a hands-on approach to art.

**HOURS:** Tue / Wed / Fri 12 noon–6 pm, Thu 12 noon–8 pm, Sat / Sun 11 am–5 pm. Free admission Thursdays 5 pm–8 pm.

[migrosmuseum.ch](http://migrosmuseum.ch) // [hubertus-exhibitions.ch](http://hubertus-exhibitions.ch)

The migros museum für gegenwartskunst is an institution of the Migros Culture Percentage.