

FRIEZE



Aneta Grzeszykowska



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Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Selfie #10*, 2014, Inkjet print

Contemporary art has a problematic relationship with big anthropological, psychological and existential questions. In the immediate postwar period it was customary to discuss ‘the image of man’ or, inspired by Sartrean existentialism and Freudian psychoanalysis, to argue about the ‘thrownness’ and the repressed drives of the human individual. Since the context-loving cultural turn of the 1960s, on the other hand, the focus has been on power structures, economic and political processes, the impact of media, or socially and culturally constructed identities. Thus, when the renegade art critic Hans Belting published *An Anthropology of Images* (original published in German in 2001; the English edition in 2011), he was promptly accused of taking an ahistorical, apolitical, anthropocentric approach by addressing such suspiciously fundamental issues as the analogy between bodies and media or the genesis of pictures out of body painting and masks.

In her brilliant series of photographs *Selfie* (2014), the Polish artist Aneta Grzeszykowska addresses anthropological and existential questions similar to those raised by Belting: what relationships exist between identity and mask, man and beast, presence and representation, image and death? What may initially come across as rather dry and dusty subject matter actually becomes a highly refreshing antithesis to our current staple diet of transculturality, planetarity, art sociology, and so forth, not least because of its impressive visual impact.

For *Selfie*, Grzeszykowska – who came to prominence in the 2000s with photographic works including *Album* (2005) and *Untitled Film Stills* (2006) – used pig skin to make replicas of her face, limbs and body, which she then photographed in close up. In the museum’s new exhibition format entitled ‘Situations’, combining white cube and online presentations, all we saw were inkjet prints, not the

replicas themselves. Some of the photographs show the process of making the anthropoid-animal skin sculptures. We see Grzeszykowska's hands painting the mouth on the 'mask' of the artist's face, holding up a 'cast' of the artist's breast, or showing replicas of the artist's eyes to the camera – work on the self as work on someone else and something else.

Contrary to what the title suggests, then, *Selfie* is not about smartphone self-portraits. In an interview with *Magenta* magazine, Grzeszykowska argued, not unlike Belting, that the urge to make images (of oneself) is not specific to the present: 'This mechanism is part of human nature'. In spite of such timelessness, Grzeszykowska's morbidly precise series is richly intertextual, recalling among other things, the polyester sculptures of Alina Szapocznikow, Man Ray's photographs of people and masks (e.g., *Noire et Blanche*, 1926) and, less strikingly, the work of Cindy Sherman, whose *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80) Grzeszykowska appropriated and reinterpreted in 2006. Concerning the obvious references to the body art of the 1960s and '70s, Grzeszykowska's body-centred works with their abundance of bare skin (including *Black*, 2007; *Headache*, 2008; *The forward stride splits*, 2008) are different insofar as they resist creating an impression of tortured self-referentiality. Even when she bares herself to the camera, Grzeszykowska's aesthetic is cool, controlled and distanced, pointing to the body in general. 'I have a wholly practical and technical relationship with the body', she said in a video interview with *culture.pl* magazine. Beside the focus on process that characterizes many of her works, it is precisely this attitude that protects *Selfie* from drifting into mystification. Like Belting's *Anthropology of the Image*, Grzeszykowska's series is only ahistorical in a superficial sense. In fact, it forges a link between timeless and contemporary questions, thus underpinning Belting's theory that 'the meaning of pictures cannot be reduced to their current meaning, because we continue to spontaneously relate them to basic anthropological issues.'

Translated by Nicholas Grindell