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Prenatal Defenses. On the Hapticity of Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's Objects, Poems, and Prose

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An Artist of the Hands: Outline

More than anything else, Krystiana Robb-Narbutt was an artist of the hands. Her extraordinary, minimalist art has been assigned to surrealism, outsider art, naive art, or compulsive expression of grief.¹ Elements of body art, second-wave feminism, and political resistance associated with the student protests of 1968 have all been detected, as has escapism expressed in her homemade cabinets of curiosities. The artist exhibited at the Pokaz, Kordegarda, and Milano galleries. In 2003, her individual exhibition *Nostalgia Is Elsewhere* was held at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art, and in the final years of her life she presented her installations at the Festival of Jewish Culture on Próźna Street in Warsaw. The only monograph

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1 Izabela Kowalczyk, "Krystiana Robb-Narbutt i Krystyna Piotrowska" [Krystiana Robb-Narbutt and Krystyna Piotrowska], in *Reprezentacje Zagłady w kulturze polskiej (1939 – 2019). Problematyka Zagłady w sztukach wizualnych i popkulturze*, ed. Sławomir Buryła, Dorota Krawczyńska and Jacek Leociak (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2021), 426. If not stated otherwise, all quotations from Polish are translated by the author of this article.

on Robb-Narbutt's output,² published after her death, introduces only some of her works, those associated with the visual arts, without offering a more general picture of all the artist's creative practices. When we call Robb-Narbutt an artist of the hands, we must also consider her writing, focused on miniature poems published in three slim volumes – *Ziemia dotyka anioła. Ścieżka słów* [Earth touches an angel. Path of words],³ *Jest jest inaczej* [It is it is otherwise],⁴ and *Wiersze ze stacji Skoo* [Poems from Skoo Station]⁵ – as well as short autobiographical essays first printed after the author's death in 2012. Unlike the graphics, objects, and installations, these have not been subject to critical analysis. They probably also did not concern the poet herself, as many of them give the impression of ephemeral, occasional literature encrypting a specific, scarcely important event. Together, Robb-Narbutt's epigrams and brief prose pieces form a locket of her anxieties that, despite said publications, were seemingly not intended for the public eye.

Robb-Narbutt's texts and arts are linked by the same "thinking hand," which, according to Juhani Pallasmaa, symbolizes a broad and undervalued medium of knowledge that is in a sense much more fundamental than the eye, associated as it is with touch, the first sensory form of cognition, used by living beings still in the prenatal phase of their development.⁶ This is a hand sometimes using a pen, and other times a nib dipped in Ecoline, writing texts in lines, creating graphical structures with dots, forming props in cabinets, arranging objects bought at flea markets in the artist's studio, soaking boards in paint; a hand capable not only of designing a space but also using it to philosophize.⁷ The workshop places no

2 Dorota Jarecka and Wanda Siedlecka, eds., *Krystiana Robb-Narbutt. Rysunki, przedmioty, pracownia* [Krystiana Robb-Narbutt. Drawings, objects, studio] (Warszawa: Fundacja im. Krystiany Robb-Narbutt, Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2012).

3 Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, *Ziemia dotyka anioła. Ścieżka słów* [Earth touches an angel. Path of words] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Galerii Zachęta, 1997).

4 Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, *Jest jest inaczej* [It is it is otherwise] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Nowy Świat, 2002).

5 Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, *Wiersze ze stacji Skoo* [Poems from Skoo Station] (Kazimierz Dolny: Dom Michalaków, 2002).

6 The process of multi-level formation of knowledge about the world through touch among organisms developing in their mother's womb is described by the psychologist Martin Grunwald, a specialist in research on hapticity: *Homo hapticus. Dlaczego nie możemy żyć bez zmysłu dotyku* [German: *Homo Hapticus. Warum wir ohne Tastsinn nicht leben können*], trans. Ewa Kowynia (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2019), 21–42.

7 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2009), 24–45.

restrictions on the choice of material, work tools or technique. The poems and objects are created in the same head, using the same hands, by the same tools and at the same desk. Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's "thinking hand," understood as an identifying feature of her lengthy, painstaking work, performed with impressive patience, is much more than a symbol. It is in fact an indicator of the most important problem the artist tackled: that of touch, touching and not touching, and subsequently also issues of what should remain untouched, withdrawn from the social circulation of art, removed from direct contact with the viewer, partly or fully obfuscated. The artist uses it to entirely change the face of relational aesthetics. She does not so much unseal the rules of capitalist economy, creating a post-Marxist rift nullifying the principles of demand and sales,⁸ as search for a storage place, shifting the entire weight of contact with others from their eyes to their touch – especially hands seeing mutual contact with the object that cannot be fully accessed by the audience looking at it. To paraphrase Serge Daney, we could say that every form of Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's art is a hand touching itself, and indirectly also the spectators observing the touch – but separated from the object and its creator by a pane of glass, boards, the secrecy of poetic metaphors and initials. As Vilém Flusser wrote, "when the hands reach out toward the world with open arms, fingers spread, palms facing one another, and when they come across something, then distinguishing an object from a person does not come easy to them. Unless in the encounter with this thing they recognize themselves in it, and recognize another person."⁹

In this article I will be interested in the sources and forms of Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's work, their distinct differences from the art and literature of the so-called second generation (the children of Holocaust victims and survivors), and also the aims of this project – to the extent that they can be distinguished given our incomplete knowledge of the artist's biography and respecting her silence regarding her own and her family's privacy. In the last part of the article, I will show how Bracha L. Ettinger's concept of the matrix can be used to understand the shelters that Robb-Narbutt produced for all kinds of objects, from the literal item to fantasy. Following Julia Kristeva, I assume that since we were all born prematurely, and project our fears onto things trying to get rid of us or shake us off by leaving us to our own devices, the mechanical work of the hands on things might have the task of overcoming the primal fear of loss of contact with a thing, but also overcoming its

8 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Presses du réel, 1998), 24.

9 Vilém Flusser, *Kultura pisma. Z filozofii pisma i obrazu* [Writing culture. From the philosophy of writing and image], trans. Przemysław Wiatr (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Aletheia, 2018), 37 (translated from the Polish).

innate ambiguity as a vessel for impurities or waste.¹⁰ The protection that Robb-Narbutt builds for her fears, transformed into material post-sacred forms such as relics, reliquaries or reliquaria, but also mountains, gravestones, cases, casks, caskets, or trinket boxes, also has its source in imagining art as a permanent prenatal phase, an endless pregnancy. Every type of fear is then taken care of and sheltered under the (symbolic) skin of a growing, pregnant belly. The actual size of this refuge determines the structure of the artist's *objets d'art* – they are only visible behind or together with a curtain, undercover, with a protective (even transparent) shield, creating an integral whole with them like an abdominal wall with the growing fetus. The idea of protection given to fears is also expressed in Robb-Narbutt's texts, and in the article I will therefore show how the poems and prose manifest haptic and tactile sensations, together with the artist's other works creating an extensive structure of prenatal defenses.

Thumbelina's Psychobiography

Krystiana Robb-Narbutt was born on February 19, 1945, yet it was the nightmare of the first years of freedom that had the strongest impact on her work. This hypothesis does not tally with the reflections of art critics, who trace the sources of the artist's ideas mainly to the Holocaust, but neither does it exclude this account. The complexities of Robb-Narbutt's life began soon after her birth, when, for unknown reasons, she ended up at the Franciscan convent in Laski, near Warsaw, without her mother.¹¹ At this time, her father, Ignacy Robb-Narbutt, a soldier in the People's Guard, left-wing social activist, and writer, was demobilized and fell into political disfavor, forcing him first into hiding, then to leave Warsaw¹² and withdraw from public life. He returned only in 1951. The direct threat to life, itinerancy, and poverty ("Warsaw, Saska Kępa, an interior in which scarcity is known,"¹³ wrote Adolf Rudnicki about Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's parents' home) must have had an acute effect on

10 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 11.

11 I thank Piotr Mitzner for this information, provided to him by Robb-Narbutt, although it is not included in any written biographical sources on the artist.

12 The details on Ignacy Robb-Narbutt come from Andrzej Krzystof Kunert's biography of him at <https://www.ipsb.nina.gov.pl/a/biografia/ignacy-robb-narbutt>, accessed March 10, 2022.

13 Adolf Rudnicki, *Krakowskie Przedmieście pełne deserów* [Krakowskie Przedmieście is full of desserts] (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1986), 195.

all four members of the family (Krystiana's brother Jacek was born in 1949). Robb-Narbutt's father died when she was 13 years old. He left behind a collection of brief memoirs and stories, entwined with a thick thorn of autobiography that today in many places is unclear, but also uninterpreted¹⁴: "I read the stories of Ignacy, my father, [...] there are so many threads tangled with Ignacy's life, I feel that strongly, but I know nothing – there is so much of me there, the syntax, storytelling, so much of him, I feel it and so much is unfulfilled,"¹⁵ his daughter recalled in 2003.

The poem "[an unknown woman recalls]" from the volume *It Is It Is Otherwise* alludes only indirectly, but very perversely to these events. The poet dubs her autobiographical figure Thumbelina, creating a narrative that could be called psychobiographical:

an unknown woman recalls
 her childhood
 when her father laughed often and heartily
 and loved her so much
 – he wanted to shut her in a matchbox
 (like Thumbelina)
 so they'd always be together then the father stopped laughing
 but didn't stop loving her
 now in old age he comes
 for her - perhaps you'll come to me -
 he says
 she's grown unaccustomed to his presence
 she prefers to stay with the assembled
 knick-knacks - it's not time dad -
 she whispers
 and imagines his smile¹⁶

14 Ignacy Robb-Narbutt's literary oeuvre comprises two volumes of prose published posthumously: *Ludzie i wydarzenia* [People and events] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1961) and *Łabędzie gniazdo. Wybór pism* [Swan's nest. Selected writings] (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1963).

15 Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, "Tam i z Powrotem" [Back and forth], in Robb-Narbutt, *Cień dotyka mnie. Wiersze i proza*, ed. Piotr Mitzner and Marta Tomczok (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2023).

16 Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, "[nieznana kobieta wspomina]" [unknown woman recalls], in Robb-Narbutt, *Cień dotyka mnie*.

Nothing in this poem is clear – neither the authenticity of the memory nor the purpose of blurring the authorship. All that remains evident is the connection between the father's departure from the narrator's life and her adult life among tiny objects. If we look at this poem as a singular poetic personal psychodocument, we can trace in it a process of reparation. Like the one discerned by the authors of the article "Późne skutki wczesnej traumy. Psychoterapia Ocalałych z Holokaustu" in the poems of Mrs. W, who survived the war as a tiny baby abandoned by her parents.¹⁷ The objects that appear in her works, presented to therapists during sessions, are seen as a signal of a return of symbolization destroyed by trauma, but also a return of memory itself, with which the patient cut off contact in early childhood (with regard to her memories of war). The character of Thumbelina, understood as a figure of reparation, can therefore help us to understand some of the sources of Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's work, but above all to see her as the development of the plot of the fairy tale, whose heroine is a lonely child forced to fight for her life against monstrous animals.

Read with the fate of Jewish children during and immediately after the war in mind, "Thumbelina" becomes a horror fairy tale, showing the array of extreme situations they could find themselves in as symbols (encounters with a toad, mouse, mole).¹⁸ The dream of the father from the poem "an unknown woman recalls" alludes indirectly to such situations, but also interferes with them, as Thumbelina is to be plucked out of them and shut in a box where she will be completely safe. The fantasy about the tiny girl put away in a matchbox by her father is much more complex – it can also be read as fear of oppression from him, fear of the thanatic role he might play in the future (the father-death), but also the dream of being continually hidden or living surrounded by objects reminiscent of such hiding places. Robb-Narbutt's psychobiographical poem omits more than it discloses, but it highlights an important issue in the artist's works – the symbolic role of miniature things regarding the question of protection. These objects, the poem suggests, are probably not for resolving conflicts, but mitigating or partly stopping them. The poem therefore recognizes certain conflicts, but does not resolve them.

17 Katarzyna Prot-Klinger and Krzysztof Szwejca, "Późne skutki wczesnej traumy. Psychoterapia Ocalałych z Holokaustu" [Late effects of early trauma: the psychotherapy of Holocaust survivors], in *Psychoanaliza w cieniu wojny i Zagłady*, ed. Ewa Kobylińska-Dehe (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), 301–323.

18 Hans Christian Andersen, "Little Tiny or Thumbelina," in *Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2010), 587–602.

No Touching

The question of things in Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's art has its source in her early drawings of shapeless beings resembling human embryos and fetuses. The artist's interest in such forms was probably informed by her private experiences of miscarriages.¹⁹ According to Ewa Kuryluk (who studied with Robb-Narbutt), the subject of early pregnancy, and especially miscarriage and abortion, was a taboo in 1960s and 70s Polish art. "At the Academy [of Fine Arts in Warsaw – translator's note] we painted Kapist pictures – no one touched those things."²⁰ Robb-Narbutt turned embryos into a kind of symbol – she began to see them everywhere: in the cobweb-like ground structures of the *Gniazda* [Nests] cycle from 1977–1979, the drawings from the series *I cannot be counted on, I will not defend myself* (1975), and particularly in the possibility of radically expanding the narrative technique of a picture. Dots became her personal expression of creation, corresponding to meditation and the search for a way out of the state of threat and feeling of fear.²¹

From tiny dots, Robb-Narbutt moved on to collecting things. These were mostly unwanted objects from flea markets and fairs, old, found items, examples of shadow architecture, made up of "objects that function on the margins of attention."²² Objects appeared in her art at the same time as drawings, in the 1970s, but, as Paweł Leszkowicz notes, they were mostly meant as a private gift not intended for the public eye.²³ These were usually small boards given to her husband or friends. The artist began to create more complex objects resembling installations in the 1990s, using such things as dried fruit or cookies from fairs. She would place the small objects in glass cases measuring 19.5 x 14 x 8 centimeters – tiny spaces which required great dexterity, patience and precision to make. Robb-Narbutt's best-known series of cases, exhibited at Zachęta and Próżna Street, is *Memory Fugue* from 2006. Alluding to Paul Celan's "Death Fugue," a canonical work of Holocaust poetry, the artist created seven cases dedicated to her family – her grandmother, brother, and mother's

19 This conclusion is prompted by Agata Jakubowska's essay "Staje się kamieniem. O wczesnych rysunkach Krystiany Robb-Narbutt" [It becomes a stone. About Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's early drawings], in *Krystiana Robb-Narbutt. Rysunki, przedmioty, pracownia*, 43–55.

20 Ewa Kuryluk, "Węgiel, embriony, ptaki..." [Coal, embryos, birds...], in *Krystiana Robb-Narbutt. Rysunki, przedmioty, pracownia*, 58.

21 Ibid.

22 Aleksandra Wasilkowska, *Shadow Architecture. Bazary i szalety/ Bazaars and Toilets* (Warszawa: Fundacja Inna Przestrzeń, 2014), 5.

23 Paweł Leszkowicz, "Przedmioty odnalezione Krystiany Robb-Narbutt" [Found items of Krystiana Robb-Narbutt], in *Krystiana Robb-Narbutt. Rysunki, przedmioty, pracownia*, 128–129.

sister, as well as her twins. The individual titles of the case sound like extracts from documents, but in reality are part of Robb-Narbutt's poetic practice, like other captions for objects, such as matchboxes: "The train Róża boarded was supposed to go to Switzerland," "It is lucky to die in your own bed three days before being transported to the ghetto," "There is nothing worse than a young, gray-haired Jewish woman," "Róża is worried about the twins," "In her hand she holds a card saying 'Does God see this?'," "How the twins might have played," "No one could cry or scream they buried him by the wall."²⁴ All these titles are also part of the memories passed on by Franciszka Narbutt, who was saved from the ghetto, to her daughter, and they mainly depict an imagined version of what could have happened to the family – and imagined doubly, by the mother and daughter. Only some of the cases are connected to facts. It is worth noting the impulse from the imagination, which enlivens the artist's handiwork – it is intuition, suspicion, the desire to do something influenced by affect, and not memory or somebody's recollections. Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's art therefore does not fit into any memorial format (one of post-memory or blank spots),²⁵ but rather, as the title of the series suggests, is an escape from memory (or, also, her escape).

Telling Ewa Stawecka about one of the cases, dedicated to her murdered young nephews, the artist, the artist particularly summarized her searches for toys and difficulty in understanding how, and with what, children could play in the ghetto.²⁶ The conceptual work here was not about searching for reminiscences or documents, but searching for objects and combining her own affects with the fantasies they triggered. The other cases came about in the same way – the artist put inside them tiny objects such as sugar cubes, syringes, a toy train carriage, or an artificial rose, guided by the miniature properties of *objets trouvés*, which she replaced with "objects of return," found items from the past giving the descendants of a murdered family the chance to discover some part of the truth of their loved ones' horrific past.²⁷ By eschewing this possibility

24 From the documentation for the exhibition *Adoracja słodyczy* [Adoration of sweets] (Zachęta, 2014). Material in the archive of the National Art Gallery made available to me by Piotr Mitzner.

25 Katarzyna Bojarska wrote about various types of memory of the second generation in the context of Robb-Narbutt's art ("Robb-Narbutt – spotkanie z resztkami" [Robb-Narbutt – meeting the leftovers], in *Krystiana Robb-Narbutt. Rysunki, przedmioty, pracownia*, 149).

26 *Krystiana Robb Narbutt, rozmawia Ewa Stawecka* [Krystiana Robb Narbutt, interview by Ewa Stawecka], accessed March 13, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGgHmNLLyyc&t=178s>.

27 Marianne Hirsch, *Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 204–211. Dorota Jarecka points to this

for the glitter of the accidental and kitsch object, Robb-Narbutt would be approaching the practices of André Breton, allowing herself to be carried by the uncanny towards the layers of previous experiences and “convulsive beauty.”²⁸ However, a found object, put inside a case and closed, ceases to be an ordinary object and becomes a relic,²⁹ a holy remnant not to be touched. The process of transforming it into a relic in Robb-Narbutt’s art partly alludes to the iconoclastic tradition of Holocaust discourse,³⁰ but it is simultaneously something more, the endeavor of thinking hands³¹ seeking to withdraw the materialized fantasy out of the sphere of touch into a prohibited area.

The artist also withdrew an object from the sphere of touch in two installations in 2006 – a crate and a stone circle titled *They Are in Me, I Am of Them*, exhibited on Próźna Street. In the first case, she placed family mementos – photographs of her parents, brother, and her husband’s family – into a wooden coal crate. The mirrored side walls of the crate reflected and reproduced their contents only if the crate was first illuminated – by a torch, for example. The objects that would allow Ewa Kuryluk to conduct a biographical investigation and produce a narrative surrounding it³² were here almost immediately immersed in the gloom of the reliquary (originally a coal box). As the latest photographs of the artist’s studio show,³³ the crate still stands there untouched, protecting and sheltering the documents.

meaning of objects of return in *Surrealism, realizm, marksizm. Sztuka i lewica komunistyczna w Polsce w latach 1944–1948* [Surrealism, realism, Marxism. Art and the communist left in Poland in 1944–1948] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2021), 330).

- 28 To quote the title of Hal Foster’s book. See Jarecka, *Surrealism, realizm, marksizm*, 345.
- 29 Ewa Kuryluk referred to the objects produced by Robb-Narbutt as “relics.” The artist herself and her husband, Michał Wejrlich, also used this term for collected and processed objects (from a letter to the author of this article from February 24, 2022).
- 30 Agata Stankowska, *Ikona i trauma. Pytania o “obraz prawdziwy” w liryce i sztuce polskiej drugiej połowy XX wieku* [Icon and trauma. Questions about the “true image” in Polish poetry and art of the second half of the 20th century] (Kraków: Universitas, 2019), 235–264.
- 31 Robb-Narbutt’s “relic-forming” activities are perhaps mediated in the ideas of Alina Szapocznikow, whose works were compared to reliquaries (Jacek Waltoś, “Alina Szapocznikow,” in *Zatrzymać życie. Alina Szapocznikow*, ed. Józef Grabski (Kraków: IRSA, 2004), 83).
- 32 Meaning the family photographs found after Maria Kuryluk’s death that allowed her daughter, Ewa, to learn about the Jewish part of the Kohany family, and subsequently, finding further documents, forced her to search for her biological father. Cf. Ewa Kuryluk, *Goldi* (Warszawa: Twój Styl. Wydawnictwo Książkowe, 2004); Kuryluk, *Feluni. Apoteoza enigmatu* [Feluni. The apotheosis of the enigma] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2019).
- 33 From February 2022 – courtesy of Michał Wejrloch.

Meanwhile, the circle of 10 small stones arranged on sand poured onto the parquet floor of a Próżna Street apartment was meant to symbolize the artist's family, deceased or murdered in the Second World War. On each stone, Robb-Narbutt wrote the name of one of the dead. Like the crate and the cases, the stones could be observed, but not touched. The idea of creating talismans or amulets from them also alluded to the traditions of Christian relics and the avant-garde's processing of them towards private totemism. This was the direction followed, for example – as Kuryluk mentions in *Art mon amour* – by Picasso, who left for Dora Maar many small objects, including stones, that he had collected during their shared trips to the sea and on which he had drawn her likeness.³⁴

The drawings, display cases and small objects can currently be found in Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's preserved studio in the Saska Kępa neighborhood of Warsaw. Critics have called the artist's apartment (and her summer house in the village of Skowieszyniek) "her greatest creations"³⁵ and "one big installation."³⁶ After Robb-Narbutt's death, the objects – still untouched, unmoved, fossilized – began to interact with dust, with some – as the photos reveal – covered in plastic sheets.

Fantasies of Touching

The sources of the ban on touching found in Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's poems are different from those in her art, much more real, even corporeal, but not always comprehensible. Their metaphorical expression in fact prevents analysis of the texts' haptic role without a knowledge of the biographical context so important in Robb-Narbutt's work. In one such poem, "I tell you about my head" from *It Is It Is Otherwise*, the poet is probably referring to her own experience of migraine, causing extremely strong headaches.³⁷ Calling it the "tree of good and evil," Robb-Narbutt both encrypts this experience using a pastiche

34 Ewa Kuryluk, *Art mon amour. Szkice o sztuce* [Art mon amour. Sketches about art] (Warszawa: Sic! [n.d.], 184.

35 Jacek Sempoliński, *A me stessto. Wypisy z dzienników 1999–2008* [A me stessto. Extracts from diaries 1999–2008] (Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2016), 157–158.

36 From a letter to the author of the article from February 24, 2022.

37 Perhaps it was these, and particularly strong medications, that caused Robb-Narbutt to fall into a coma of unknown etiology. She wrote about it in a poem: "It's all the fault of the southerly wind / in its gusts the rooster crowed three times / Peter betrayed the Lord / the deep-rooted apple tree of paradise / our longing for something unknown / brings coma – very close to death" (Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, "To wszystko wina wiatru" [It's all the wind's fault], in Robb-Narbutt, *Cień dotyka mnie*.

metaphor and weaves a much wider web of the analogy of her privacy with the Bible, one that allows her to live in an un-holy place from which God has departed, leaving individual, painful symbols: the ripped-out intestines of a lamb, a non-burning bush, forbidden fruit eaten for dinner, and above all the paradise garden in Skowiewszynek, in which the protagonists of Robb-Narbutt's poetry lived like Philemon and Baucis or Adam and Eve. Apart from tending to the plants, they are plagued by a sense of the inauthenticity of analogies, or a sense of their peculiar authenticity, reminiscent of carnival, a grotesque reversal of the order of things, the metaphysics of the fairground:

The blue amid the green of the walnut tree
 reveals a piece of oblivion
 as sweet and light as candy floss
 drawing you into close speculations
 that there is no God
 as Nietzsche exclaimed
 and what of us
 with M bustling around the garden
 leading the service of welcome to plants
 me hidden under the vine
 observing the cosmos of being on earth
 our old dog
 lounging in the sun
 with a gentle growl
 suggesting dreams of existence³⁸

Yet the candy floss-like oblivion seems much more real than a purely di-vine being – like said candy floss, it sticks to the face, melts in the mouth, a fun children's snack with extremely tactile characteristics. The sticky candy floss, as with the cobweb ground in the drawings about embryos, probably fascinates the poet not only because of its physical characteristics, but also its belonging to the culture of the fairground (bazaars and carnivals whose products the poet amassed). Something that glues might prove to be a protective material. In this context, "Stick together a poem" should be read as a manifesto of working with gluey matter:

Stick together a poem
 from the heavy scent of lilacs

³⁸ Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, "Błękit pośród zieleni orzecha" [Blue among the green of walnut], in Robb-Narbutt, *Cień dotyka mnie*.

the gentle beauty of meadows
 the cloud at the road's end
 with the glue
 the time of cobweb threads³⁹

Most of all, however, Robb-Narbutt expresses the fantasies of capturing the ephemeral using a few phrases about touch that could be called a haptic cluster. These are phrases like “earth touches an angel, an angel touches earth” or “the shadow touches me, I touch the grass – this is life.” It may be that in them the poet, a reader of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Robert Lowell, and Walt Whitman, was alluding to Alfred Tennyson’s concept of “a touch of earth.” As Tadeusz Sławek writes, “Tennyson’s *touch of earth* seeks to reconstruct in us an awareness of our most fundamental relationship with the earth, entailing a reciprocity of touching: humans touch earth, the touches humans. As the setting sun approaches the earth it colors with the most beautiful hues (*the low sun makes the colour*, Tennyson writes in the next line). This is the first meaning of *touch*.”⁴⁰ Robb-Narbutt understands this reciprocity in her own peculiar way – as a means to protect the impermanent, a way of connection impermanent things together – like the stone mandalas on Próżna Street. Her inscription, syntactically similar to phrases inspired by Tennyson, “they are in me, I am in them,” denotes a view of the absolute dispersal of her forebears’ spirits – in earth, water and air. Krystyna Piotrowska, who co-created the exhibition on Próżna Street with Robb-Narbutt, recalls that the artist “knew scraps of events from the stories about the family told by her mother, fragments too minuscule to be able to reconstruct the fate of individuals. She constructed her own narrative from them. She said that, given the few traces left from her relatives’ lives, she had the sense that her family were everywhere and that she had unlimited possibilities to find and recognize them.”⁴¹ The conviction that her relatives’ remains lingered on in the surrounding world may have led the artist to produce relics from found objects, which would in a certain

39 Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, “Ulepić wiersz” [Make a poem], in Robb-Narbutt, *Cień dotyka mnie*.

40 Tadeusz Sławek, “Cienie i rzeczy. Rozważania o dotyku” [Shadows and things. Reflections on touch], in *W przestrzeni dotyku*, ed. Jacek Kurek and Krzysztof Maliszewski (Chorzów: Miejski Dom Kultury “Batory”), accessed March 13, 2022, http://mediummundi.pl/teksty/slawek_cienie.pdf.

41 Krystyna Piotrowska, “Wspomnienie o Krystianie i jej udziale w Projekcie Próżna” [Memories of Krystiana and her participation in the Próżna Project], in *Krystiana Robb-Narbutt. Rysunki, przedmioty, pracownia*, 162.

sense enclose this total, intangible organicity of the existence of the dead – working with the hands to lend a form to ideas, which could then become almost equal to or complementary to reality.⁴² The traces of this conception are found particularly in Robb-Narbutt's autobiographical prose dedicated to her mother ("The shadow touches me / I touch the grass"), husband ("Me and me and actually Peter Pan"), and family ("There and back"). The prose form, employing vision and supposition, enables the protagonist to imagine physically impossible situations – contact with the spirit of her dying mother, watching her parents on their first date, interlocking hands with her mother and transforming into it and her (the mother and her hand). Especially this final gesture, told in the context of the scene of her death a few paragraphs later, makes a big, almost tactile-seeming impression (despite the counterfactuality).

I feel that I am becoming you, my hands are changing, on one I have a brown mark like you, we touch each other delicately, both protecting ourselves from pain. At home I pretend nothing is happening, I draw a pink cloud falling to earth, I marvel at the diffuse light – I know you would want that.⁴³

As Tadeusz Sławek writes, citing Tennyson, the touch of the earth, reciprocated when walking, is "the disclosure of the essential, fundamental, constitutive addition of earth in man."⁴⁴ In Robb-Narbutt's poetry, it is usually hard matter and intangible beings – the spirits of loved ones, human shadows, angels, that touch each other:

earth touches an angel
 the angel touches earth
 he is plastered with brown clumps
 brought from the field
 two plus two is
 four – reassured

42 Cathryn Vasseleu presents such a view in the introduction to Jan Švankmajer's *Touching and Imagining. An Introduction to Tactile Art*, arguing that touch unleashes the phenomenological imagination and expands multisensory cognition of reality. Cathryn Vasselau, "Introduction," in Jan Švankmajer, *Touching and Imagining. An Introduction to Tactile Art*, XXVI. Quoted in Marta Smolińska, *Haptyczność poszerzona. Zmysł dotyku w sztuce polskiej drugiej połowy XX wieku i początku XXI wieku* (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), 94–95.

43 Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, "Cień dotyka mnie / ja dotykam trawy" [The shadow touches me/I touch the grass], in Robb-Narbutt, *Cień dotyka mnie*.

44 Tadeusz Sławek, "Cienie i rzeczy."

he digs a hole
tired he folds his wings
the journey's end⁴⁵

As with her art, Robb-Narbutt attempts to make touching the impossible an absolutely real event. She therefore eschews the idea of *relinquere* typical of Christianity, convinced that man endowed with grace finds the image of God in himself,⁴⁶ in favor of the heretical temptation to be able to recognize the spirits of the forefathers everywhere and believing in their touch as an intuitive medium between her longing for the dead and incidental things or events in which their substitutes can be found. Marek Bartelik compared this temptation to the Aboriginal Australian belief in Mimi – spiritual ancestors living in the wilderness.⁴⁷ Robb-Narbutt takes readers on a journey through the land of the dead using vivid, sensual description, “gluing together” a text from ideas of colors, tastes and shapes:

You're standing together on the bridge, you small and fragile, oh, you're wearing that georgette dress. I loved it when you talked about it – just the word “georgette,” rustling, a little satiny, but also soft – georgette, I repeat, and see colored stripes – dark blue, a spot of red and sea green, circular at the bottom, top slightly slinky, smooth, short-sleeved, and on top the scarf that Róża brought you.⁴⁸

There is one situation in which the method of contact through imagined touch from words fails. This is the situation of imagining the Warsaw ghetto where the Cytryn sisters (the poet's mother and aunt) found themselves with the twins:

So often I wanted to look behind the wall and truly touch what happened there – how you could live after that – you gave birth to us, you believed in life after death – you said nothing. Is it like with poetry after the Holocaust. I constantly ask myself whether I, I would be able to get through it. I think my problems with

45 Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, “ziemia dotyka anioła/ anioł dotyka ziemi” [the earth touches an angel/an angel touches the earth], in Robb-Narbutt, *Cień dotyka mnie*.

46 Roman Mazur SDB, “Relikwie w Biblii” [Relics in the Bible], in *Relikwie. Fundamenty – rzeczywistość – perspektywy*, ed. Szymon Drzyżdżyk, Marek Gilski and Marcin Cholewa (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Scriptum, 2020), 25.

47 Marek Bartelik, “Krystiana Robb-Narbutt: A Platonic Death” (essay given to the artist's husband by the author). Courtesy of Michał Wejroch.

48 Krystiana Robb-Narbutt, “Tam i z Powrotem.”

starting the day come from the fact that a stone from that side of the wall is stuck in me – is it worth living or not – what a question, says M.⁴⁹

Analyzing Robb-Narbutt's most important artistic confession – “so often I wanted to look behind the wall and truly touch what happened there” – we must ask why the artist wanted to touch this reality. What was touch for her in this situation, if she only knew “scraps” and “fragments?” Why did she care so much about touching the ghetto, not seeing it? Perhaps touch here was something like a *tactus spiritualis*, an intermediary between the subconscious and consciousness,⁵⁰ building material reality based on intuition, faith, inspiration, and trust? Touch of the unreal might also have been important because of her growing awareness of the need to create protections for uncertain, dreamed or found experiences, objects and events, as it was to help produce symbols of them in the form of frames, reliquaries, and depictions of sheltering objects such as the mastaba that Robb-Narbutt began to paint in 1979 under the influence of her mother's death, or Kilimanjaro.⁵¹ I assume that the diversity of these depictions, belonging to various cultural orders, need not give the impression of chaos, but together with verbal narratives may create a system of these shelters aiming to rescue memories endangered by nonexistence, usually known only to the artist and associated with both her family history and her personal experiences.

Prenatal Art – Conclusions

“Krystiana often surrounded her drawings with frames. Many women artists have an inclination towards frames [...]. Perhaps enclosing and almost hiding the composition in frames is a kind of metaphor for female physiology?”⁵² Ewa Kuryluk's intuition seems accurate, although the “enclosing” and “hiding” should be expanded to include the (delimiting, generic, formal) frames of the poems, walls of the crate, stone circles, or even the cupboard with a collection of candles standing in the artist's studio. That which is hidden, meanwhile,

49 Ibid.

50 Smolińska, “Haptyczność poszerzona,” 95.

51 Meaning a cycle of paintings of the island-mountain, which Kinga Kawalerowicz calls “Stones.” This was initiated by Robb-Narbutt and Wejroch's trip to the Greek islands of Stromboli, Thira, and Patmos. Kinga Kawalerowicz, “Dokumentalistka małych iluminacji” [A documentarian of small illuminations], in *Krystiana Robb-Narbutt. Rysunki, przedmioty, pracownia*, 63.

52 Kuryluk, “Węgiel, embriony, ptaki,” 57.

would be both the murky knowledge about the family gassed at Treblinka and self-knowledge (about illnesses or fears). The lack of distinction between traumas in this case gives Robb-Narbutt's work an affinity with Bracha L. Ettinger's concept of the matrixial gaze, comprising a tangle of affective arousals. An arousal is different from anxiety: "it doesn't alert me to a danger for myself [...] it calls me to transgress my subjective boundaries while it signals that in fact my boundaries have already always been transgressed."⁵³ Arousals work at the same frequency as the vibrations of the growing womb – protecting a dependent object, they send signals to receptors and trigger a whole bundle of reactions of interest, engagement, and care,⁵⁴ which, reaching the surface of the art, make it into a trembling whole, a membrane, practically a skin. One such vibrating structure is the phantom net used by Ettinger in the paintings from the *Euridice* series. A very similar net can be produced in Robb-Narbutt's work by the frames, display cases, poems, and reliquaries, protecting that which is too impermanent or vulnerable to live independently.

As Griselda Pollock wrote about Ettinger's art, "its created aesthetic form resuscitates, on the other side of subjective formation, as an aesthetic dimension now, the potential of the archaic, matrixial stratum of pre-natal becoming-human that has been overlaid by postnatal, hence phallicising fantasy and thought, but which has never been entirely knocked out."⁵⁵ In Robb-Narbutt's works, the prenatal phase, that of sheltering and concealing experience, in fact becomes the main and only phase of presenting what is most important in art – objects withdrawn from direct contact with the viewer, associated with pain or trauma. Yet the reason why it is important is because it presents that painful, partly also assumed, untouched by the spectator or reader, experience using a box, cover or hiding place, as well as a poem, material and visual protections that do not so much virtually symbolize a shelter as actually create one. This shelter is not a temporary one, as in a pregnancy, but permanent, and what is being protected is not a simple translation of a growing and dependent being into art, not a visualization or symbolization of a growing fetus; on the contrary, it is a symbolic materialization of the non-living, absent, lost – various dimensions of death. This role of protection – recurrent throughout all the phases and states of matter of Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's work – make

53 Bracha L. Ettinger, "Uncanny Awe, Uncanny Compassion and Matrixial Transjektivty beyond Uncanny Anxiety," *FLS*, Volume XXXVIII (2011).

54 *Ibid.*

55 Griselda Pollock, "Trauma, Time and Painting: Bracha Ettinger and the Matrixial Aesthetic," in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, ed. Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 29.

it into a kind of maternal womb for memories endangered by non-existence, usually known only to the artist and connected with both her family history and her personal experiences.

One might ask whether Robb-Narbutt's artistic objectives are not too diffuse and non-uniform to mark them on "one matrix," find one system for them, or see them in focus. Such an opportunity seems to come from the artist's psychobiography referred to at the beginning, which absorbed not only fears from the time of the Holocaust and the antisemitism growing in Stalinism and the era of Władysław Gomułka, but particularly childish fears, seeking solutions in peculiar, miniaturized forms, and not in large, detailed narratives. This bitty, fragmentary nature of Robb-Narbutt's activities in fact forces us to see them as a whole, as foreseen by the poem about Thumbelina shut in a matchbox by her father. The expression of the artist regaining her agency seems to be a minor, albeit significant shift – the reason why she decides to create boxes, display cases or poems is probably so that she is not shut inside them, but herself does the shutting.⁵⁶

Translated by Ben Koschalka

⁵⁶ A remarkable coda to these reflections on shutting out of fear of being shut can be found in one of Aleksandra Zajęc's illustrations for Tina Oziewicz's book *What Feelings Do When No One's Looking*. It depicts tiny cages and furry creatures working relentlessly to make them, with the caption "Insecurities build cages." Tina Oziewicz and Aleksandra Zajęc, *What Feelings Do When No One's Looking*, trans. Jennifer Croft (New York: Elsewhere Editions, 2020). With just a slight modification, this is an excellent fit to Robb-Narbutt's works.

Abstract

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Prenatal Defenses. On the Hapticity of Krystiana Robb-Narbutt's Objects, Poems, and Prose

The article analyzes the idea of concealing and hiding painful, personal experiences – including those related to the loss of loved ones in the Holocaust – in the art and poetry of Krystiana Robb-Narbutt (1945–2006). The idea resembles the development of an embryo and later the fetus sheltered by the womb; a being unable to live independently outside the womb finds refuge in it, which gradually becomes more visible until it reaches a state when it is no longer needed and is left behind by the child. In Robb-Narbutt's art, the prenatal stage – the concealing of experience – reaches a state of autonomy, in fact becoming the main and only stage of presenting what is most important in her work: objects withdrawn from direct contact with the recipient and directly connected to some pain, someone's trauma. This stage is important precisely because it presents the painful – partly presumed – experience untouched by the viewer or reader and mediated through a hiding place, a box, or a stash, but also a poem, namely material and visual shelters that do not symbolize a concealment but indeed create it. However, this shelter is not temporary – as in the case of pregnancy – but permanent, and what is protected is not a simple translation of growing and dependent existence into art, nor a visualization or symbolization of a growing fetus. On the contrary, the shelter symbolically materializes the dead, the absent, and the lost, namely various dimensions of death. Present in all stages and states of Robb-Narbutt's work, such shelter makes her art a maternal womb for the memories threatened with non-existence, most often known only to the artist and related to the history of her family and her own, personal experiences.

Keywords

art after the Holocaust, motherhood, Bracha L. Ettinger, miniature, text materiality, hapticity, tactility