



View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

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abstract:

Introduction to the issue on the visibility and the politics of reproduction, particularly devoted to the reflections on various definitions of life, uses of technology and problems of identity (individual, social, sexual), as well as frameworks of parental involvement and care.

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Reproduction Tracks

The question of reproduction opens up a problematic area that brings together reflections on various definitions of life, on different ways of thinking about technology, on problems of identity (individual, social, sexual), and lastly on relations between subjects (human and nonhuman) which are increasingly perceived in terms of parental involvement and care. It is an inevitably interdisciplinary area, the traversing of which requires a willingness to discuss issues addressed by the natural sciences, reproductive medicine, the study of new media, and the fields of the social sciences and humanities.



Svenja Kratz, *SVKR-LM: Tumour Baby*, 2020, courtesy of the artist.

When opening up such a broad perspective, we were aware of the inevitable difficulties of covering it in an exhaustive manner. Hence, the figure of paths that can be traced without aspiring to show the full territory through which they lead and which they co-create. Constructing even a fragmentary image, however, allows us to see that the issue of reproduction, precisely as interdisciplinary and heterogeneous, touches upon the key problems of our times; it leads to the question of how we can understand and shape our existence in an increasingly complex world, where different images and levels of discourse obscure and uncover one another. The mechanisms of “obscuration” or “uncovering” described from the perspective of visibility also operate on the very subjects (forms of life), identities, desires, and interests of certain individuals or groups. Recovering or gaining agency – the sense of being represented (noticed) – is related to the efficiency with which we find a language for ourselves, visual or verbal, and make it available to others: “He who visualizes badly loses the encounter; his fact does not

hold," writes Bruno Latour, as quoted in this issue of *View* by Marta Zimniak-Hałażko, one of its guest editors.

The articles published in this issue are in large part testimonies to precisely such a search – an effort of the imagination to see (and show) something different, or the same thing in a different way. A new look gives a new identity, entails new obligations, and creates the need for new policies. On the other hand, we are still under the influence of historical images, whose inertia may turn out to be enslaving, but may also set a stable horizon of expectations and give the individual the support she needs.

"Monstrosities *demonstrate*," writes Ilana Löwy, punningly. monstrosity always tells us more about ourselves than about what we are looking at. This issue of *View*, dedicated to reproduction, speaks of the effort required to see – to imagine – that which is so utterly alien that it can only be thought of with difficulty. This work of imagination flows seamlessly into material work, which the authors speak of in terms of responsibility and care. The possibility of choice – of making a decision, taking a stand, even if limited by the matter of reality, established laws, or the horizons of social expectation – nevertheless implies the need for moral commitment and a willingness to bear the consequences of one's choices. Responsibility can be overwhelming; we are obliged to mother not only our biological offspring, but also every life that is threatened by exploitation, injustice, and suffering.

This idea of omni-responsibility and care, as a reverse and counterbalance to dominant patterns of exploitation and control, may turn out to be sadistic toward women themselves, women's destinies, and women's bodies. The overgrown figures in Svenja Kratz's work confront viewers with the fear of death, offer hope of joining the immortal cycle of nature, but may also represent the anxiety of the appropriation of the female body by reproduction. After all, the necessity of dealing with this awareness is also depicted in contemporary women's cinema, as mentioned by Marta Stańczyk, with such films as *Julia*

Ducournau's *Titane* (2021) or Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011). The protagonists of Marta Kosińska's article also speak of being overwhelmed by maternal responsibility. However, the newly formulated relations between what belongs to nature and culture – relations of continuity, not opposition – combined with a conscious effort of looking at and constructing the world and one's own identity, for one's own use, mean that we will not inevitably return to bloody images of female sacrifice. By committing ourselves to the responsibility for our own actions, we also reserve the right to refuse to take them and to care maternally for ourselves as well. The artistic practices and theoretical approaches described in this issue of *View* also show that the entities we care for are mortal, just like ourselves. Acceptance of our own and others' deaths, and sometimes the fact of inflicting them, are integral components of an understanding of life that does not entail its fetishization.

Ilana Löwy's article, "Fear of Monsters, 'Birth Defects,' and Medical Imagery: Visualizing the Unborn," which opens the **Close-Up** section, addresses the problem of the relationship between seeing and understanding – naming, interpreting, narrativizing – what one sees. While reconstructing the history of the progressive medicalization of pregnancy and the commodification of the fetus as a "child," Löwy also introduces a more intimate story whose protagonists are pregnant women. It is they who bear the most personal consequences of the way existing medical technologies are used and interpreted according to existing laws and customary medical practices. Leaving them free to make their own decisions, including what they do or don't want to see, seems to be the first – though not always sufficient – condition for them to find a language to tell their own story.

The article by Marta Stańczyk discusses the possibility of intersubjective representation of the female experience. The objects of analysis are films depicting reproduction, while the main point of reference is Agnès Varda's *L'opéra-mouffe* (1958), a film that the author considers pioneering in relation to later

approaches to feminism in contemporary women's cinema. The images of pregnancy and childbirth in Varda's work are as far from idealizing the "miracle of motherhood" as they are from being an expression of an equally patriarchal fear of reproduction as something abject and out of control.

The next two texts in **Close-Up** offer thorough analysis of selected areas of the Polish visual sphere related to reproduction. Barbara Dynda writes about the "Visuality of Reproductive Rights in Polish Feminist Zines after 1989," focusing on the period of turbulent social, political, and media transformations (of which zines are a particular expression), while Marta Zimniak-Hałajko in her "Images as a Resource of Polish Pro-life Movements" discusses the use of visual representations by opponents of abortion. "The power and weakness of images are contextual; images prove productive (and counterproductive) in ways unintended by their users," writes the author, also noting the ways in which images are received and how they can be negotiated. This negotiability becomes a point of departure for a positive project that gives agency to images as much as to pregnant women, and makes reflection on images of human pregnancy part of a broader discussion about the contemporary perception of life as an object of care.

This very topic – concern for existing and brought-to-life entities – returns as dominant in **Viewpoint**, where the presentation of Karolina Żyniewicz's artistic projects is accompanied by a discussion between the creator and a media and cultural studies scholar, Agnieszka Jelewska. In the increasingly daring practices of juxtaposing the work of scientists and artists, even within the arts-&-science movement, the theme of responsibility for the creations and objects of one's own work turns out to be fundamental. Żyniewicz and Jelewska refer to Bruno Latour's article "Love Your Monsters," in which the founding myth of modern technoscience, the story of Frankenstein's monster, traditionally read as a condemnation of

interference with nature, is interpreted as a call to care for what one has created.

The problem of reproduction, emerging from the work of Żyniewicz, encompasses both images of normalized human offspring (disturbingly disembodied), as well as (very carnal) closeness with nonhuman organisms, and finally the prolongation of one's own biological existence by means of laboratory entities created with the use of the artist's body cells. A similar approach to the question of motherhood, as much symbolic (created within the framework of artistic practice) as corporeal, can be found in the work of artist Svenja Kratz, who discusses her practice in the opening article of **Perspectives**. In the same section, the reader will find a conversation between Matylda Szewczyk – this issue's other guest editor – and Sarah Franklin, medical anthropologist and author of *Biological Relatives: IVF, Stem Cells, and the Future of Kinship*. Mapping the problems of reproduction, with its attendant discourses and imaginaries, the conversation focuses mostly on the problem of in vitro fertilization. Medical technology, simulating "natural" fertilization, at the same time, following the logic of simulation, questions the very idea of naturalness. Thus, it opens up a space for new social practices, in which the sense of belonging, responsibility, and care will be based on less normative and essentialist ways of understanding family or kinship.

The first text of the **Panorama** section, Joanna Mizielińska's "Non-Heteronormative Parenting Tactics in Contemporary Poland," discusses the fact that non-normative families and parenting practices in Poland are still invisible, marginalized, or masked (as a variant of traditional ways of thinking about the family). Another article, by Marta Kosinska, looks at this from the opposite side, so to speak. For its protagonists the phantasms of motherhood present in the Polish collective imagination did not withstand confrontation with the real, and also corporeal, difficulties of becoming a mother. This section closes with a contribution unrelated to the main topic of the issue.

This is Monika Gromala's "Presence: On Kafka's Paintings," where the author analyzes the ways in which portrait-images function in Franz Kafka's works, treating them as spectral figures of the "law" made present. Looking at the novels and shorter prose of the Austro-Hungarian-born writer, she draws attention to the positions of power, the systematics of control attitudes, and the tendency of the images themselves to undergo transformation and metamorphosis.

In the **Snapshots** section, readers will find three reviews: Przemysław Strożek discusses the monograph *Avant-Garde Museum* (eds. Agnieszka Pindera and Jarosław Suchan); Jan Szpilka offers a closer look at the anthology *Transgender Marxism* (eds. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke); and Sylwia Borowska-Kazimiruk critically examines Sebastian Jagielski's *Przerwane emancypacje. Polityka ekscesu w kinie polskim lat 1968–1982* [*Interrupted Emancipations: The Politics of Excess in Polish Cinema 1968–1982*].

The cover image of this issue of *View* comes from Svenja Kratz's *Posthuman Genetic Legacies* project. The image of the tree, as Sarah Franklin mentions, remains a powerful symbol, present in religious, scientific, and artistic traditions. We can probably say that it has been appropriated and used by them, just as trees themselves are appropriated and used by us. However, in Kratz's work it is the artist who mothers the tree, translating what is treated as weakness into strength; she also shows the other side of the classical canon of beauty and takes it over, or perhaps reclaims it. The relationship with nature here remains outside of the categories of power – it rather means mutual support and a conscious intertwining of fates.

The background and context for the work on this issue of *View* have been the ongoing crises, climatic, pandemic, and political, which were expressed, among others, by the increasingly far-reaching and restrictive Polish abortion laws, the persecution of

sexual minorities, or, paraphrasing the words of Sarah Franklin, the “selective” understanding of the sanctity of life on the Polish-Belarusian border. We are completing editorial work in the shadow of the cruel war in Ukraine. Its immediate proximity makes it difficult, if not impossible, to find an adequate language to reflect on reality. We are left without words, with the image of a tree, in which we find the tenacity that is characteristic of trees themselves; they do not allow themselves to be appropriated; they return in the most critical circumstances and grow again with full force. As in Joanna Rajkowska’s *Rhizopolis* (2021), the presence of trees allows us to see anew the relationship between man and nature as a continuum in which we seek literal and symbolic rescue.

*Editorial Team with
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