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MASCULINE-FEMININE FANTASIES: THE PHANTASMAGORIAS OF HANS BELLMER

ABSTRACT

In 2013, the publishing house Word/Image Territory [Słowo/ obraz terytoria] reissued the book *Bellmer, or The Anatomy of Physical Unconsciousness and Love*. On one of its final pages is Hans Bellmer's dedication, addressed to a surrealist painter. It reads as follows: 'When everything that a man is not joins him, then he finally seems to be himself'. This inscription is the focal point of this paper. The discussion will concern the aspect of Bellmer's work referring to the masculine-feminine fantasies, blurring of genders and the search for one's identity. It seems that the artist, who snatched a doll from a child's embraces and exalted it to the rank of a work of art, only to apply to it ball joints and a defragmented body so that its parts could be assembled freely, then locked this Pygmalion of his in erotic photographs or drawings, must have sought alienation. His efforts gave rise to phantasmagorias evident in each of his works. Experiencing the works of Bellmer raises a question which is complementary to the title of the paper: How much Hans is there in Bellmer?

KEYWORDS

Hans Bellmer, sculpture, body, intimacy, love, dolls, woman-child, BJD, surrealism, transgression, anatomy of picture, I-Other, stratification, animality, phantasmagoria

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Hans Bellmer, an artist undoubtedly considered one of the ‘titans of Surrealism’, is mainly associated with a series of sculptural installations involving life-sized, incomplete, rickety and extremely girlish BJD dolls, often with duplicate body parts.¹ Bellmer made them in the 1930s. It seems that, just as he influenced them (indeed, he was their creator and so-called ‘father’), he was seduced by them as well. This delusion must have had remarkable power which enticed him to further creation. Later in his working life, the artist gave up sculpture; however, he never parted with his dolls, but depicted them in other ways, presenting them in photographs, drawings and graphics [Illustration 1]. Besides these new forms, Bellmer created extremely erotic illustrations (e.g. for Bataille’s works).

It is from the period of his full creativity that his dedication, addressed to the surrealist painter, Leonor Fini, originates: ‘When everything that a man is not joins him, then he finally seems to be himself’.² The analysis of this quotation, based on the artistic activities of Bellmer, is the main objective of this paper. Probably Sigmund Freud would find him slightly weird. Undoubtedly, these words of his are insane. But to reach their core, one must start at the source, which means taking a closer look at the author of the quotation.

Bellmer was born in 1902 in Katowice. Today, searching for traces of his presence there, we find the school he attended (now Adam Mickiewicz High School), a black plaque with some words by John Lebenstein and a small cafe, the Bellmer Cafe. The austerity and strict discipline enforced by his tenacious father, an engineer, resulted in Bellmer being divided into two extremes: man as a master powerful enough to shape submissive matter, i.e. woman. In addition, Bellmer sees yet another form of female inertia, namely Earth, the mother of us all. Af-

¹ BJD is an acronym for a ball-jointed doll. It refers to a doll, fully articulated (yet not a theatrical doll), with ball joints and a body divided into parts. By stringing or pulling an elastic cord or a rubber band through all moving parts and tightening them appropriately, one can easily make the doll pose. Bellmer saw such a doll for the first time in Berlin’s Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum (now the Bode Museum); it was made at the beginning of the sixteenth century and was no bigger than the contemporary Barbie.

² K. A. Jeleński, *Bellmer albo Anatomia nieświadomości fizycznej i miłości*, Gdańsk 2013, p. 55.

ter all, he happened to live through both World Wars.³ ‘Like everyone, I was born with a very clear need for comfort, for unlimited paradisaal freedom. These limits were determined, for me, in the form of father, and a little later, in the form of a gendarme. Behind the warm and cozy presence of mother lurked the hostile authority of father, the enemy possessing arbitrary outer power’, recalled Bellmer.⁴

The father’s plan for his son’s life was not fulfilled. Bellmer had other plans. While in Berlin, he became fascinated by the ‘degenerate’ artists George Grosz and Otto Dix. The artists were considered ‘fallen’ since their ‘sick and degenerate’ aesthetics attacked Germany. The Germans perceived the Aryan race as the model of beauty. Instead of portraying strong, healthy and beautiful ‘superhumans’, both Grosz and Dix preferred to mutilate and deform their heroes. Bellmer used the skills acquired at the local Technical University in a way his father would not approve. Finally, in 1924, he dropped out of the university to lead the life of an artist. The following years were like constantly overlapping unconscious images. A series of coincidences and absurd events was confirmed when, in 1933, the artist began a construction which permanently etched itself into his biography.⁵ But before this artistic conception materialised, the artist’s mother gave him a chest containing his childhood treasures. The gift evoked strong emotions in him, instantly giving rise to free childish desires, not yet appeased by the consciousness of his own body.⁶

In the meantime, Bellmer married. His wife, Margaret, was older than him. Accentuating this fact was the presence of a very young cousin, Ursula, who had moved from Kassel to Berlin to attend a local school and to whom the couple let a room. The girl became the object of Bellmer’s erotic dreams,⁷ perhaps fuelled by the indisposition of his wife (who ultimately died of tuberculosis).⁸

³ L. Brogowski, D. Senczyszyn, Hans Bellmer, (in:) *Gry Lalki. Hans Bellmer Katowice 1902 — Paryż 1975*, ed. A. Przywara, A. Szymczyk, Gdańsk 1998, pp. 100–2.

⁴ Jeleński, *Bellmer*, pp. 6–7.

⁵ Brogowski et al., *Gry Lalki*, pp. 102 and 106.

⁶ R. Passeron, *Encyklopedia surrealizmu*, transl. K. Janicka, Warsaw 1993, p. 155.

⁷ Jeleński, *Bellmer*, pp. 10 and 13.

⁸ H. Bellmer, *Mała anatomia nieświadomości fizycznej albo anatomia obrazu*, transl. J. A. Kłoczowski, Lublin 1994, p. 63.

On one occasion the artist attended a performance of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, the famous opera by Jacques Offenbach, based on *Piaskun*, a novel by E. T. A. Hoffmann. One of the heroines was the charming Olympia, a mechanical doll. The artist 'knew' other 'living dolls' as well: the Dadaistic puppets of Emmy Hemmings, the wax figures of Lotte Pritzel or the life-sized doll made by Hermine Moos which resembled Oscar Kokoschka's beloved.⁹

The artist was also deeply impressed by the Isenheim altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald from Musée Unterlinden in Colmar. The Christ portrayed there is dead, disfigured and mutilated. Despite the grotesqueness of a body so depicted, it appears beautiful. Did this beauty lure Bellmer?¹⁰

There exists in Germany a cult of the perfect body. The year 1933 marks the rise to power of Adolf Hitler. At the same time Bellmer begins work on his *chef d'oeuvre*, the embodiment of his dreams of girls with large eyes that skitter away. This work would be a kind of counterweight and contemplation of body imperfections. It would be about 140 cm tall and would be given the life of a doll...¹¹

Bellmer never officially joined the Surrealists. However, his doll was enthusiastically embraced in Surrealist circles. After all, the doll reflected some sexual ambiguity. It combined innocence and consciousness, man and woman – whom it made either passive or destructive.¹²

But let us return to Bellmer's dedication, already mentioned: 'When everything that a man is not joins him, then he finally seems to be himself'.¹³ Hans addresses it to a certain Leonor Fini. However, she does not appear to have influenced Bellmer's life in any way. Izabela Rzyśko sees in these words an ideal reflection of the relationship between this talented painter and Konstanty Aleksander Jeleński, nicknamed Kot: 'they were a perfect fit for each other, a finite being'. There was one more important man in the artist's life: Stanisław Lepri.¹⁴

⁹ B. Krafft, *Traumwelt der Puppen*, Munich 1991, pp. 35 and 36.

¹⁰ S. Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, Cambridge 2000, p. 51.

¹¹ Jeleński, *Bellmer*, p. 105.

¹² A. Taborska, *Spiskowcy wyobraźni*, Gdańsk 2013, p. 54.

¹³ Jeleński, *Bellmer*, p. 55.

¹⁴ *Mniej są bliźniacze dwie połówki jabłka, niżli tych dwoje*. [accessed 9 January 2015]. Available on the Internet: <<http://przestrzenkultury.blogspot.com/2011/11/mniej-sa-blizniacze-dwiepoowki-jabka.html>>.

If one could say about Fini that she lived for what she created, i.e. she became united with her painting, then Kot was the master of word. His work read as if painted with the individual words of each sentence. It was pure craft, unique among its kind. Jeleński was also an art and literary critic and the most zealous reader of Miłosz and Gombrowicz. In fact, as Kłóczkowski put it, he was somebody who understood these writers from within. He wrote for the emigration monthly *Culture*; however, he never wrote a masterpiece.¹⁵

Stanislao Lepri was an Italian diplomat who became a painter under the influence of Fini. Lepri's paintings were metaphysical. They showed a world beyond reality: fairy-tale-like, yet sinister. The artist had a close relationship with Lepri until 1941. Eleven years later this charismatic duo was joined by Jeleński. Henceforth the three formed a fairly loose relationship, breaking all boundaries. All three were also associated with the Surrealists.¹⁶

Undoubtedly, Bellmer's dedication to Fini could have been related to her intimacy with Kot. To his last note, dedicated to this couple, Rzyśko gave a very appropriate title, a sentence borrowed from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: 'An apple cleft in two is not more twin than these two creatures'.¹⁷ These words seem confirmed in Jeleński's confidences, in letters to his friend, Jozef Czapski, in which he wrote about Leonor as a kind of phenomenon.¹⁸ But doesn't this inscription hide something more universal? Its essence can be also applied to our lives. Perhaps it is about what an important part in our lives is played

¹⁵ *Kot Jeleński — w zabawie i w bólu*. [accessed 9 January 2015]. Available on the Internet: <<http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,5044285.html>>.

¹⁶ P. Kłóczkowski, 'Rozmowy z Janem Lebensteinem o Kocie Jeleńskim', *Zeszyty literackie*, No. 32, Paris 1990, p. 122.

¹⁷ *Mniej są bliźniacze dwie połówki jabłka, niżli tych dwoje*. [accessed 9 January 2015]. Available on the Internet: <<http://przestrenkultury.blogspot.com/2011/11/mniej-sa-blizniacze-dwiepoowki-jabka.html>>.

¹⁸ An example of his correspondence included in issue no. 34 of *Zeszyty literackie* from 1991 includes the following words: 'Everything which is better in my nature is strangely connected with Leonor. Maybe also everything which is more difficult. Everything that is not superficial within me I owe to her. I feel for her great admiration and boundless tenderness. I know that to being so free, so completely honest and open, free of lies and at the same time so rich and with such impulsive reactions, such a need and ease of creation, it is worth "devoting" my own life'.

by love, regardless of age, enormous and mad, without rules and barriers... This is what enables us to come close to another person, and re-defines what it really means to be oneself.¹⁹

For the last two months of 2014, Leica Gallery Warsaw hosted a permanent exhibition of works by Paweł Jaszczuk, 'Kinky City' (in parallel with an exhibition of photographs by Nobuyoshi Araki). The artistic project is an extension of the earlier 'Shibari'. The photographer immortalised 'the night life of Japan'. Apparently, this is when people become more open and do not pretend anybody... Although the photographs by Jaszczuk appear to be liberated, however, they are incredibly light in their approach to the topic of human sexuality. Perhaps an average audience would find these pictures slightly primitive (dolls that look like anime characters, women in manga disguise, bodies tied with ropes or masturbating in the middle of a club). Nevertheless, Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss believe that primitivism reaches far beyond art; it is a liberation of our dormant instincts and our escape into nature.²⁰ Therefore, 'Kinky City' is about each of us, a story about the time when we can truly get rid of our all-day costume and feel ourselves. Jaszczuk's photographs express something similar to what is expressed by Bellmer's dolls:

This is a game for the initiated. Fantasy of the inner 'self', the second identity. Denying the everyday 'self', the 'other one' becomes released from what was imposed on them, from the conventions and purpose. Liberating oneself, one sets free what is hidden; what is worrying; what is forbidden: addiction, fulfilment, utopia (...) Normality disappears in the magic of the soporific fetish. The sexual underground seems to emerge liberated from the oppression of the system – a paradox – bodily pain – the reward for the suffering of the mind... Is this destruction? Escape? Liberation?²¹

Taking a closer look at the trunks of Bellmer's dolls, one notices that they usually consist of duplicated parts, often those down the waist. This may offer a deliberate connection: the artist wants to show

¹⁹ Taborska, *Spiskowcy*, p. 55.

²⁰ H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.-A. Bois, B. D. Buchloh, *Art since 1900. Modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*, London 2004, p. 64.

²¹ *Lounge* [accessed 9 January 2015]. Available on the Internet: http://issuu.com/loungemagazyn/docs/67.grudzien_14>.

that it is highly possible that we will not find ourselves in ourselves. Bodies like this have to seek themselves in another person... The artist shows the importance of this connection for women. His robust dolls were not a reflection of the artist's creative provocativeness but were created out of fear of the enemy, the one holding arbitrary outer power. This enemy was his father. The attacker deprives a man of something which must be regained; this means creating a bond with a person who will help him to regain himself. On the other hand, following the surreal way of thinking, woman needs man, because her own activity is only destructive.²² The link between Bellmer and the Surrealists is the Marquis de Sade and his interpretation of what woman is: nothing but a slave of man and the instrument of his fascination. Every fight she initiates against her partner is doomed to fail. Woman is inherently weak and inferior to man.²³

As Bellmer observed, we treat our own physical matter as a kind of coherent whole, a three-dimensional solid, covered with a layer called skin. This trunk is nothing but meat. It is a body constrained by cords, the same as those in a photograph of Bellmer's meaningfully entitled 'Keep in a cool place'.²⁴ However, the photograph hides something else. The cords go very firmly around the trunk, tying it tightly, as though from fear that the whole may fall to pieces. The strange anatomical divisions which appear on the body seek to break down the bodily symmetry we have assumed. A similar motif can be observed in works of others, e.g. Man Ray or Nobuyoshi Araki. Emily Craig²⁵ has stated that what we look for in a body, e.g. when cutting open the abdomen of a deceased person, is tight structures, with distinct shapes, but what we find is an 'indistinct mass of tangled intestines'. We do not accept being a shapeless mass because we do not want to lose control over our own bodies.²⁶

²² Taborska, *Spiskowcy*, p. 54.

²³ J. Łojek, *Wiek Markiza de Sade*, Lublin 1975, p. 56.

²⁴ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: Anatomy*, p. 186.

²⁵ Dr. Emily Craig, American forensic anthropologist and one of the world's most important specialists in this field, was a student of Dr. Bass, who founded an innovative facility (the so-called Body Farm) in the early 1970s, where the process of decay of the human body in a natural environment was studied in detail.

²⁶ E. Craig, *Tajemnice wydarte zmarłym*, transl. H. Pustuła, Cracow 2010, p. 37.

Meanwhile, the mind is not capable of explaining what it sees. What happens to the constrained body? What are these strange bulges? The body is passive, susceptible to our treatment, but it remains vigilant; it keeps watching us. While trying to liberate itself from the constraints, it starts to live. It hides some kind of secret which consciousness cannot reach. It ceases to be a unity. These strange bulges, wrinkles, and uneven skin texture are like infinite possibilities of transformation. Bellmer perfectly depicted the metamorphosis of the human anatomy using the extraordinarily movable BJD doll. A famous German art critic said that the doll is an unusually poignant design and one of the most compelling sculptures of our time. He saw a monster in the doll's face, which in an instant can change from girlish to degenerate.²⁷

The artist approaches human corporality in a shamelessly innovative manner. It is not enough to strip the body in order to make it an interesting object of exploration. Lebenstein notes that the carnal sphere of our lives is nothing short of boring. Everyone has own approach to it, because we all unquestionably have similar needs.²⁸ Bellmer talks without much embarrassment about the most intimate issues and serves them up in the form of art. However, he also reveals something else: the existence of the unconsciousness, different from that of Freud, i.e. physical unconsciousness: 'the positioning of arm and legs in which the dreaming body thinks that it is different than it really is, this kind of torpor which the shrinking limbs find to their liking; these strange states of absence, in which sometimes, in the dark, the body forgets how its legs or one of the arms have been arranged – all this brings to mind the existence of an unknown physical world, associated only with the body'.²⁹

Between the inside and the outside lies a certain reality. When the consciousness is asleep it is possible to look into the bottom of it, to penetrate deeply the physical human sensitivity which is asleep. It is not just a compact mass that Bellmer sees in the body, endowed with a certain indifference and severity, surrounded on all sides with the

²⁷ C. Klingsoehr-Leroy, *Surrealism*, transl. J. Wesołowska, Cologne 2005, p. 28.

²⁸ Kłoczkowski, 'Rozmowy', p. 119.

²⁹ M. Sporoń, 'Hans Bellmer — Okres śląski', (in:) *Gry Lalki. Hans Bellmer Katowice 1902 — Paryż 1975*, ed. A. Przywara, A. Szymczyk, Gdańsk 1998, p. 115.

coat of the skin. The body is rather a complex structure, with thousands of hidden possibilities for metamorphosis and transformation.³⁰

There is this immediate reality, e.g. physical anatomy (skin, glands, internal organs, tangle of veins, etc.), and there is another intermediate reality, e.g. the anatomy of love. The body leads the dialogue. Sometimes it simply takes some impossible forms, arranging itself in a particular way, enabling the contents that evoke these convulsive reflexes – reaction to touch, taste or smell – to become material. This materialisation is associated with manifestation. Bellmer realized that ‘the body can be compared to a sentence which encourages us to disassemble it and with an endless series of anagrams compose its true contents anew’.³¹ Only when we break the word into individual letters, arranging and assembling them back quite accidentally as a new word, will we achieve this free flow of language, free of any rules imposed from above. The same applies to the body treated as an anagram. Bellmer constantly disassembles the doll, and thus redesigns it again and again, an endless number of times. This doll, like Bellmer, always offers something new to be discovered, like one’s own body. This exploration remains forever different and unique.³²

The anatomy of desire is also given to us indirectly. By desiring one part of a body we automatically start thinking about another: a particular limb articulates itself in our conception. Plato placed the desires of the soul in the stomach. According to Bellmer, desire is a property of the body, but it is concentrated in the abdomen as well. This is the part of the body which articulates its other components. It is the abdomen, not the head, that is the central part of Bellmer’s doll. We can look inside her abdomen through the navel and elucidate in it the third reality mentioned by Bellmer: the anatomy of the image.³³

Only an overview of a larger piece enables us to perceive details we are not able to discern in individual segments. The body is not homogeneous, as consciousness constantly tries to convince us. The anatomy of image requires traversing the unconsciousness slumbering in our carnality. Bellmer presents us with a doll which has e.g. one abdomen,

³⁰ Jeleński, *Bellmer*, pp. 43–4.

³¹ Jeleński, ‘Hans Bellmer czyli ból przemieszczony’, *Zeszyty literackie*, No. 34, Paris 1991, p. 87.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 86–7.

³³ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: Anatomy*, p. 24.

around which are located two pelvises. From the lower grow two movable hip joints, and from them the legs. From the upper pelvis also grow two hip joints, and, higher, there is the head. At first glance, the work seems coherent. After taking a closer look, however, we can see that the upper curves of the doll are duplications of the pelvis and hip joints which should be located in the lower parts of the body.³⁴

In this presentation, the artist finds the simultaneity of what our body experiences and puts it as follows: ‘one should imagine a kind of axis of reversibility between the actual and the possible outbreak of excitement; an axis which could be run by metric human anatomy and which, given the opposite symmetry, such as the breasts and buttocks or mouth and sex, would pass horizontally, at the height of the navel’.³⁵

From the outside, the human body does not seem to require deeper reflection; it just exists, and it would be difficult not to notice it. It is much harder to see what is happening inside. Completely imperceptible is the quaint landscape, displayed through the body, in which, e.g. the whole digestive tract with its different organs turns into Józef Mehoffer’s *Strange Garden*. In *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or the Anatomy of the Image*, Bellmer put it as follows: ‘we would like to imagine a large screen, stretched between Me and the outside world, on which the unconsciousness projects the image of its dominant excitement. The consciousness will be able to see it, and objectively read only when “the other party” – the outside world – also projects the same picture on the screen simultaneously, and these two corresponding images overlap’.³⁶

The last issue that should be addressed is the fact that this inscription could serve as a punchline to Bellmer’s work. At this point it should be mentioned that Bellmer’s dedication to Fini was written in 1957. At that time the artist was already a mature man and his *Little Anatomy* had just been published. The wrongdoings he had experienced in his childhood may have influenced his later sexuality – he had been a toy in the hands of his father. He would spend his lifetime trying to free himself from this grip, in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. Bellmer’s dedication may have something to do with division,

³⁴ Jeleński, *Bellmer*, pp. 46–7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁶ H. Bellmer, *Mała Anatomia...*, transl. I. Kłoczowski, Lublin 1994, pp. 69–70.

a kind of reduction, something that we were deprived of and lost in adolescence, at the very instant that we began to be aware of our bodies. Then we ceased to be animal. If this wildness becomes a part of us again, then, as Bellmer emphasises, we might be ourselves again. It is possible that we will be ourselves, because we will just be our animal selves, uncontrolled by our mind. As Bataille says, a man returning to his nature will remain detached from it (thus constant detachment is a domain of returns).³⁷ Basically we are all hostages and slaves of our bodies and senses.³⁸ Meanwhile, the artist's phantasmagorias come to light, e.g. in the erotic drawings, in which everything is very phallic: a female torso and buttocks are arranged in the shape of a penis. In another case legs become phallic, or a penis is visible in the bowels.

As Hal Foster observes, the multiple phallic symbols which restlessly swarm in his works is an attempt to hide anxiety about this part of the body, thus the fear of castration.³⁹ *Rape* by René Magritte is an image depicting a faceless woman. Her elongated head and neck bear resemblance to a phallus. In contrast, the facial features, which should fill the image with personality, were converted into a woman's breasts and vagina.⁴⁰ Bellmer saw that the duality of the world's appearances shocks us, which forces us to reexamine the concept of identity. The head which we perceive, is, in this case, 'a third image', which hides in itself two others: anxiety (penis) and desire (female torso). The penis and the female torso are identical, and both elements simultaneously constitute the head. Bellmer attempts to isolate the unconscious parts in the image captured by our memory, to show their irrational identity.⁴¹ With his sadistic photos, another Surrealist, Jacques-André Boiffard, also provoked the search for something less obvious. Once a woman's finger turned into a male member, another time a woman's head into a tight leather mask. Similarly, when photographing the neck and jaw of Lee Miller, Man Ray tilted her in such a way that she resembled a penis.

It must be noted that Bellmer's works depict only female characters. In the case of dolls which have a common part – an abdomen from

³⁷ G. Bataille, *Historia erotyzmu*, transl. I. Kania, Cracow 1992, p. 76.

³⁸ Craig, *Tajemnice*, p. 170.

³⁹ H. Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, Cambridge 2004, p. 230.

⁴⁰ Bellmer, *Mala Anatomia*, pp. 61–3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 63–4.

which grow two pelvises, and from the pelvises legs – one can say that this is a clumsy, masturbatory combination, as if it wants to express that this is not what looking for oneself is about. The masculine-feminine fantasies in Bellmer's illustrations somehow say that only through contact with others can we experience who we really are, as if with his creations the artist wants to say that he could only be himself provided he had two elements, male and female, in him. This is similar to the Jungian concept of discovering the opposite sex in oneself, the identification of something else – something alien.⁴² One could say, like Rimbaud: 'I am someone else!'⁴³

Among synonyms of the word 'difference', one can find *specificity*, *strangeness*, *heterogeneity* or *contradiction*. It is not without reason that the dolls looking at us from the photographs are often decorated in a bleak *noir* style. A light body against a dark background evokes contrast, another word synonymous with the word 'difference'. This expression, in turn, is the basic concept of the philosophy of dialogue, in which a man always heads toward something or someone (a stranger). Who or what is this stranger? Perhaps a representation of someone or something physically absent. As pointed out by Michał Paweł Markowski, otherness is nothing but a model of identity, which can be decided upon and made our own.⁴⁴ Foster, in turn, observes that by manipulating his dolls sadistically, Bellmer somehow masochistically identifies himself with them.⁴⁵ So are the works of the artist deprived of certain items or doubly endowed? Are they not re-presentations of the absent?

Bellmer had a predilection for emphasising specific segments of the photographs by 'blushing' them, e.g. when portraying four legs, he arranged them in a way so that he could accentuate the cavity between the thighs. This space automatically brings to mind the female vagina and the question of what the organ is doing in this place. This gives the impression of something else, something out of place, yet completing the whole. There is an irresistible temptation here to link this

⁴² C.G. Jung, *Syzygia: anima i animus*, (in:) *Archetypy i symbole: pisma wybrane*, transl. J. Prokopiuk, Warsaw 1993, p. 76.

⁴³ J. Ziarkowska, *Ucieczka do głębi*, Wrocław 2010, p. 271.

⁴⁴ M.P. Markowski, Inność i tożsamość, (in:) *Pragnienie i bałwochwalstwo. Felietony metafizyczne*, Cracow 2004, p. 160.

⁴⁵ Foster, *Prosthetic*, p. 233.

with the prosthetic limbs. The artist's dolls were made of various heterogeneous materials. Initially, these were wood and metal, and the doll looked like a mechanical creature; not entirely happy with this, the artist commented: 'a number of broomsticks tied together makes it a half-ectoplasmic, half-mechanical puppet'.⁴⁶ Later dolls were enriched with a coating of plaster and papier-mache. Still, they remained combinations of different materials and even Bellmer did not attempt to hide the join marks on their bodies.

In addition, the artist had a peculiar liking: everything had a rounded shape. A common theme of his work was an abdominal joint treated as a mirror reflecting identical symmetrical body parts. The doll's breasts, however, which in fact turn out to be buttocks, or the moving spherical hip joints of the pelvis, are another gimmick, used every so often, of swapping the locations of different parts of the doll's body. These examples raise the question of whether such prostheses are only an addition or whether they supplement the missing parts of the doll. It seems that the artist deliberately resorts to such a reduction, and requires the same of the recipient, which is also the main motto of 'the mother of modern BJDs' from the Volks company: be creative. Each Dollfie is a BJD, but not every BJD is a Dollfie. If it were not for the material used by the artist to make his dolls, they would also be Dollfies. Because BJDs consist of fragmented segments, we are forced to interact with them. Our consciousness begins to move towards something different from itself. We can replace individual parts or combine elements from dolls (not necessarily from a single doll), thereby forming a hybrid.

Isn't the deformity of Bellmer's works derived from the scarcity of our consciousness? We tend to hold a false belief that our body is solid, with a distinctive shape, but can it be said that it ends or begins somewhere? All we can see is successive layers, a tangle of skin, muscles or veins. We also believe that dismantling is destruction, but it can also be the unveiling of this other which Bellmer sought. Moreover, as was noted by Hegel: to be able to start to look for one's self, first one needs to lose it. Yoshiki Tajiri claims that what Bellmer does to the female body is degeneration.⁴⁷ After all, thanks to ball joints and split body

⁴⁶ Jeleński, *Bellmer*, p. 105.

⁴⁷ Y. Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body*, New York 2007, p. 30.

parts, Bellmer's BJD can disconnect itself. However, as emphasised by Hegel, we are also torn apart internally. Thus, disconnection itself is not yet degeneration. The latter occurs when we begin to realise that, however we abuse our nature, we are not able to get rid of the limitations our own body places on us. Bellmer's doll can have two torsos and two pairs of legs, and this, in turn, begins to be another body, not congruent to reality.

Tajiri strongly emphasises that Bellmer, like no-one else, could make use of the distribution principle of the defragmented body. Various parts of the dolls can be moved, connected with each other, and possibly replaced.⁴⁸ Such an approach to the female body did not pose a problem for the surrealists, who had the overwhelming desire for 'convulsive beauty'. In some works of Max Ernst the heroines are deprived of heads, or their legs are locked in an exhibition showcase. Man Ray also deprived models of heads, hands or legs. In his photographs, Pierre Molinier often multiplied e.g. women's legs or turned the lower part of the body back to front.

Masculine-feminine fantasies are Bellmer's fantasies, the elements constantly intertwined in his works, being in a way a decomposition of the subject.⁴⁹ It also seems that through the use of such tricks the artist desired to present himself as somebody else. That is: through alienation, to seek himself. This brings to mind the Hegelian concept of getting to know oneself through the spirit: 'Spirit is at war with itself; it has to overcome itself as its most formidable obstacle. That development which in the sphere of Nature is a peaceful growth, is in that of spirit a severe, a mighty conflict with itself. What spirit really strives for is the realisation of its own vision, and is proud and well satisfied in this alienation from it'.⁵⁰ Therefore, I believe that the artist's dedication to Fini, created at a time when he was already a mature and fully developed artist, is the perfect punchline to his artistic achievements: so I am someone, but still not myself...

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 77–8.

⁴⁹ Ziarkowska, *Ucieczka*, p. 270.

⁵⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, transl. J. Sibree, Mineola 2004, p. 55.



Illustration 1 *I don't believe that you are not alive*, A.KOOT.

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