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COUNTER FORMS
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

For 'Counter Forms', curator Elena Filipovic brought together the work of Tetsumi Kudo, Alina Szapocznikow, Paul Thek and Hannah Wilke. This deeply researched selection rehabilitated the significance of a group of somewhat under-theorized artists, suggesting that the manner in which they engaged with the body has had profound implications for contemporary art practice. Each artist has attracted institutional re-examination in recent years, on the heels of which Filipovic accepted the invitation to bring together several works never before seen in the US. While Kudo, Szapocznikow, Thek and Wilke never worked together, and may only have had a passing familiarity with each other's practices, they share formal approaches and ideological relationships to the chaos and destruction of the mid-20th-century.

It is tempting to read these works through each artist's biography. Kudo's dismembered, haunted terrariums as post-Hiroshima provocations about radioactivity and impotence; Thek's morbid enclosures of flesh might be read (anachronistically) along with his diagnosis with AIDS; Wilke's latex and terracotta forms have a vocabulary of vulnerability (the artist succumbed to a well-documented battle with lymphoma in 1993). Szapocznikow's biography – life in Nazi-occupied Poland, tuberculosis and terminal breast cancer – has likewise heavily influenced much commentary on her work. Filipovic measured such interpretations carefully, opting for a revised reading that counters perceived wisdom about the period.

Kudo rose out of the young Japanese Neo-Dada Organizers whose milieu was the burned detritus of the war-torn city. His striking models and psychedelic colours were a key influence on Mike Kelley, who once described the work as resembling 'movie props from lurid science fiction scenes'. Likewise, in other writings, Kelley cited Thek as being among the first to show him the potential of large-scale environments constructed through recycled, heterogeneous materials.

The chilling presentation at Andrea Rosen connected Kudo's view of humanity with Thek's objectification of the carnal – both are obsessed with scientism gone awry. The former's themes of radioactive-induced-impotence, garish neons and impossible biologies interact with Thek's 'Technological Reliquaries' (1964–67), meat sculptures and laboratory-like sections of human forms. Kudo's *for nostalgic purposes, for your living-room, souvenir 'la mue'* (1965–66), takes direct aim at the US: a tall signpost, labelled 'For Your Living Room', supports cages containing dismembered human forms. The work represents Kudo's response to the overextension of American scientific and military advancements.

The most pronounced counters to minimalism are found in the objects from Wilke. Her painted terracotta sculptures make simple, near-accidental forms carry provocative messages. Wilke began working with gum, which she viewed as a metaphor for women's role in society – 'chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece'.

Szapocznikow's haunting *Foot [Fetish V]* (1971) was made in France after her diagnosis with cancer. Anchored by a cast of the artist's foot, a dried blue nylon stocking emerges, resembling the tibia and fibula with considerable anatomical veracity. Newspaper and polyester resin moulds join a flesh-coloured cast of the artist's breast. It provides the balancing support for a disfigured human leg lying desolate, abandoned from the body. In an adjacent room were several of Szapocznikow's *Petite Tumeurs*, polyester resin and gauze sculptures that she began making shortly after her diagnosis in 1969. Hanging nearby was Kudo's *You are metamorphosing* (1967), a green biomorphic form that mimicked the process of two organs duplicating.

What was most striking about 'Counter Forms' was the way in which these works' appeals to the abject seemed wholly contemporary, while the industrial sheen and conceptual gestures of their better-known peers remains pegged to its historical period. The abject is still a theme of great interest to so many of our strongest voices. One thinks of artists such as Robert Gober, Paul McCarthy, David Altmejd and the late Kelley, whose work deals in personal reflections on memory, fascinations with a latent human form, or nightmarish technological situations. The subtext in 'Counter Forms' might have been how these artists embraced Susan Sontag's famous call for an 'erotics of art'. Their work relies on a direct, sensuous connection with what is almost always a human subject, be it memory, fear, disease or inhuman manipulation. Historians searching for a clean post-conceptual lineage of what we mean when we speak of contemporary art will find this show troubling.

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