

## About Anna Fromchenko's Body of Work

Jonathan Hirschfeld



This essay sets out to examine Fromchenko's body of work since 2012, and to offer a thematization of her artistic practice and keys that could assist the reading and interpreting of her various projects. In the introduction, I will present thoughts about art that engages in abstraction by means of photography, video, and painting. These thoughts, some my own, others have already become the convention in the artworld, are based on a feminist interpretative approach, on interpretative structuralism, and on speculative realism. In the first part of my essay, I will attempt to examine these thoughts in relation to some of Fromchenko's exhibitions and projects. I will devote its second section to *245* - her latest solo show, which was held at Braverman Gallery Project Room.

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1. The teleological problem

Embarking on the task of writing an interpretive or thematic essay about art, we should keep in mind the pitfalls of any and all interpretive theories: Every method inevitably leads to conclusions that it was designed to find. For example, a Marxist analysis will

find that the work touches on class tensions and the ownership of the means of production, a structuralist analysis will reveal that the real content is found in the structure of the artwork and the underlying social structures, a feminist analysis will uncover the hidden chauvinistic content or the meaning of the work in relation to the patriarchy, and so on and so forth. This is a built-in catch. And so, in order to overcome the teleological problem, in this essay the interpretive work was carried out deliberately along several methodical avenues simultaneously.

#### 2. Feminism and realism, presence and absence

Some may wonder why, alongside Marxism and structuralism, feminism is an interpretive method. One possible answer to this question is that today, the material that presents itself to interpretation also requires "reading outwards," and so, we must be able to identify a history of injustice. In this context, feminist theory is related to queer theory and postcolonial theory, and at the same time, to an internal reading aimed at exposing the text's denied nature - a reading capable of seeing Ophelia as the protagonist of Hamlet and Artemisia Gentileschi as heralding a voice that in fact was heard only centuries after her death.

And because the West's mechanisms of representation have been masculine for thousands of years, and since "the gaze" as a rule has become synonymous with the masculine gaze, which is the objectifying, appropriating gaze, the gaze of reason, of realism - the one through which, according to Linda Nochlin and Edward Said, the West understood

the Orient and women as irrational and childish and therefore as requiring the patronage of the enlightened West – because of this, the question we must ask today about art is whether and how the world can be represented not from the Western/male/master perspective.

For this purpose, we have quite a few models at hand. I am thinking, for instance, about Olympe de Gouges's 1791 *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*. De Gouges wrote it in almost phonetic French (i.e., without the silent letters that are not pronounced). Some assumed that this was because she was a simple and uneducated woman, but today it is commonly believed that she could have afforded to pay for the text to be proofed, if she so wished, and that the reason for the phonetic writing is the master discourse – the correctness of language as a tool for class differentiation, and the accessibility of the phonetic text to women of the lower classes.

I wish to look at this choice and understand it as a philosophical strategy: The master formulates the correct language, which is the faithful and rational means of representation, whereas de Gouges, in her simple writing, uncovers the hidden links between language, revolutionaries, nationalism, and machismo.

Two other models I would like to present here are contradictory, and for me, represent two opposite poles of feminist thinking: One asserts that there is something we could call “feminine” writing, and the other that such a thing does not exist. The model that represents the first pole is identified with Hélène Cixous, who speaks of “*écriture féminine*,”

women's writing, writing of multiplicity, circular as opposed to an arrow – not a cypress but grass. The model that represents the opposite pole is identified with Judith Butler, who sees women and femininity as social constructs created by mechanisms of repression. An interpretation that sides with the first school of feminist thought will look for the bypass roads that the artwork paves around the masculine-Western-linear-hierarchical instrumental rationality, whereas the writing and interpretation of the opposite school will try to see how the text exposes the artificiality of the languages that present themselves as natural. Not only that, if Butler asks us to turn our attention precisely to the question of how and why we associate femininity with materiality (mother/matter), Cixous (and more Jungian versions, such as Clarissa Pinkola Estés's *Women Who Run with the Wolves*), asks us to identify resistance in the same exact discourse. Butler writes that for a woman to engage in mimesis means to try and take back the place of her exploitation by the discourse, without allowing herself to be reduced by it. If she is on the side of the “sensed,” the “material,” this means giving herself anew to ideas, particularly ideas about herself that were processed by the male logic. Butler also stresses that her interest here is not in the materiality of sex, but in the sex of the material – materiality as a site in which the drama of sexual difference is enacted, and reminds us that according to Plato, femininity is formless.

In this short essay, I will try to stay open to both perspectives. I will try to show how Fromchenko's works write like de Gouges, stand against logocentrism in the spirit of Cixous, while uncovering the socially silenced like Butler.

### **3. Structuralism**

In the context of Fromchenko's works, I wish to examine how the work process produces meaning. The work process is my structure here: Taking something from the world, and looking at it through photography, painting, video, until it becomes abstract.

### **4. Speculative realism**

In recent years, I find my thinking to be more and more influenced by Object-Oriented Ontology, from the school of Graham Harman. This is a school of thought that does not distinguish between things and processes (after all, a mountain is not a thing but the process of the earth rising as tectonic plates collide, albeit large and slow, and a lit match is not an event but a thing, albeit small and quick). With this in mind, the artwork is a temporal object created as an event of observation, and the artist who makes it is the viewer who engages in method acting. Meaning, when you read the line "the wine-dark sea," the sea is not there and the wine is not there; you are the one who plays the sea as if it were wine.

In light of these three interpretive theories, and in light of the teleological problem I have introduced in the opening, I wish to claim that there is a problem to represent the world from a woman's perspective. I suggest that one strategy is disrupting the master's discourse, the second strategy is to adopt a view of female essentialism and work from a spiral polyphony that defies the repressive aspect of instrumental rationality, a third strategy is to try and point to how our concepts of the world are not natural and transparent but rather the

outcome of knowledge-power relations and mechanisms of policing, controlling, socialization, and normalization, and that these structures can be identified as such through the artist's modes of operation and in the object oriented affinities that the work generates in the encounter with the viewer.

## PART I : ABOUT ANNA FROMCHENKO'S OEUVRE

### **A**

This is the thesis, then: There is a correct mechanism of representation. It belongs to the patriarchy and is called "realism." There is abstraction, which involves ideology and the sublime, and it also belongs to the male logic. In Fromchenko's works, I identify another abstraction, abstraction towards life, the quotidian, and experience. Abstraction that constitutes a disruption of the master's discourse – circular, Jungian, essentially feminine in the school of Hélène Cixous; abstraction of Mother Earth and not of Father Time, and at the same time, one that teaches us about the artificiality of social structures that seem natural; abstraction that is an effective means of creating the conditions for the viewer's method acting, which is necessary for turning the artwork and viewer into a temporal object.

**B**

Let us begin our journey with works from the 2017 show *What's Up Bro?*<sup>(fig.5)</sup>. The show centered on the observation of an ejector seat. Fromchenko painted and drew it until it disintegrated into a series of acrylic paintings from which it is impossible to recreate its original form. Observing it from “too close,” meaning, from a



Fig. 5: *Exit*, 2017, wood sculpture coated with beach sand, 70×90×190 cm

distance that cancels out rational coldness and allows a direct gaze of its viscera, the paintings turn into all-over patterns – threads, laces, tubes, belts and buckles, evocative of the innards of an animal. In a series of ceramic 3D prints, the chair has been removed from the airplane, from the sky, from anything that defines its essence, and becomes a purely aesthetic object. In other words, from instrumental rationality, from an instrument, a device, it has turned into a piece of jewelry. The

ejection seat is a universal metaphor for life as sitting in a crashing airplane. An expression of the dream to be ejected from life into a leisurely glide through the air. A defiance of the master's discourse, the myth of the heroic and masculine pilot. Everything is converted here. Under the impotence of the one who was ejected emerges the impotence of the one who remained aboard the airplane.

The central sculpture in the show is made out of wood and covered with sand paint. Smadar Sheffi noted that the lifesaving seat resembles the life-taking electric chair: Technology will serve any master. I wish to add that here technology has reverted into the natural: wood, sand. Rationality reverted into emotion. The functional has mature into the futile.



Fig. 6: *From the Mist 1*, 2019, color print on archival paper, 30×40 cm

**C**

Let us continue by looking at photos from the exhibition *From Fog to Doom* (of 2019)<sup>(fig.6)</sup>, at A Place for Art. Fromchenko starts here from Brenner's quote that can shed light on how nationality is formulated, how the narrative from exile to the State of Israel is represented. Perhaps due to his ambivalence towards everything, from his own work to the Zionist project, in recent years Brenner has become (or perhaps we should say regained

his status as) a cultural icon, precisely because this characteristic ambivalence resonates with contemporary psyche and thought. To a contemporary reader, Brenner presents a Jewish Nietzsche, life affirming and passionate on the one hand, and skeptical of the mechanisms of religious and national identification on the other hand. A man who is always on the brink of the abyss, which is

precisely the source of his power. And here Fromchenko does not paint Brenner or his protagonists or his ideas or his landscapes. Instead, she photographs peeling walls in Portugal.

She writes: “This is a country that has frozen in time under the dictatorship that governed it. Only in recent years, it has awakened



Fig. 7: *The Vanishing General*, 2015, mixed media on paper, 90×140 cm

from the imperialist reveries to which it has fallen... The peeling walls I photographed there reminded me of my paintings.” Once again, we learn that Fromchenko’s gaze refuses to be linear, theoretical, academic, and insists on being decentralized, stratified, associative, and ambiguous. In her work, the peeling walls and the awakening of Portugal from its imperial dreams are linked to the Zionist dream and its decline in Brenner's tormented world and to the existential crisis that Brenner represents. In his insistence on not

drawing his essence from the outside, from ideas, from nationalism, or from religion, Brenner serves as a model.

#### D

A similar move can be traced in the painting *The Vanishing General*<sup>(fig.7)</sup>, exhibited at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art in

2018. Fromchenko painted the first woman major general in IDF, Orna Barbivai. In my reading, she steps over the simple, obvious, transparent feminist text, which celebrates the accomplishment, and does that only to show how the celebration itself is an affirmation of the anomaly, as though it were an extraordinary and marvelous event, like a circus bear riding a unicycle, while the anomalous, strange, extraordinary thing is that only now and only one.

*The Vanishing General* painting once again opens up the discussion of how the master represents the woman; how the correct discourse of reason represents the world in its realism that makes the represented appear natural. In *The Vanishing General*, Fromchenko disrupts the formal photograph. She writes it, if you will, without the silent letters.

#### PART II : ABOUT THE EXHIBITION 245

#### A

All the projects I have discussed reach their culmination in this exhibition. Even its starting point is the material and not the concept, the world and not intention. There was not a moment when Fromchenko sat, like Rodin's *Thinker*, and then a light bulb appeared above her head “Ah! I will film beehives!” On the contrary, as Yair Barak

writes in the exhibition text, “In the beginning, there were the beehives that found their way to the artist’s backyard, like a call for action.”

The modus operandi was carried over from the previous projects: Abstraction that is not an ideological abstraction (Mondrian, Malevich), which is not a machoist sublime (Pollock); abstraction whose trajectory is not from the world out but from the world in. The abstraction of observing the object from such extreme proximity that it disintegrates, loses boundaries and contexts, and becomes pure aesthetics.

The exhibition comprised three bodies of work: video installation, photographs, and sculptures. The video *Moat*, projected simultaneously on three walls, is a world. This world that envelops the viewer is made up of screens on which the image climbs up, so that the viewer feels as though he is falling. What is filmed on the ascending screens is a close-up of unbelievable power and quality of the beehives’ interior walls. You are basically a little bee that has lost its ability to fly and is now falling slowly, like a feather, from the roof of the hive to its floor.

Once again, the supposed abstract, which is in fact the realism of the unseeable. And this abstract is discovered as a strategy against conventional representation mechanisms. A mode of seeing that at the same time has a sense of tactility, cyclicity, avoidance of taking pleasure in the meaning of the objectifying gaze, as well as a comment on how our gaze is controlled and based on our habit to look for shapes, meanings, significances.

## **B**

Alongside the video installation, the exhibition also featured photos. The large-scale photographs are not of the actual beehives but of the sculptural objects, like organic modernist totems that Fromchenko constructed with the beehives. The photos are quite blown-up, creating another facet of distancing from the original. These are not the hives but the sculptures; these are not the sculptures but their photograph; and the photograph is not the right size – it is enlarged. What you are seeing is the refusal to give account. The refusal of the shape of art as an indicative statement. A refusal of the ego. A refusal of art as an expression of emotions. Against a white a neutral background, the beehive totems stand tall like the pillars of a Greek temple. Like models in a catalog. Like a solitary ejector seat, without an airplane or sky. Like a major general without IDF, like peeling walls without Brenner.

Indeed, others before me have already noted that bees are noticeably absent from this exhibition. But that is not because the exhibition waves an ecological banner, warning of the colony collapse disorder. As mentioned above, the bees are the once who have made their way to Fromchenko and set the process in motion, and not the other way round. These empty beehive towers are tombstones. And tombstones mark something that is gone. But for me, and in the spirit of everything that was said above, what is gone is not the bees but the scientific, logical, organizing, naming, and defining gaze. This is a hymn to everything that evades naming.



## C

Another body of work in the exhibition comprised semitransparent epoxy castings of the beehives' interior. These works correspond with a long tradition of contemporary art that turns to the negative space between, under, inside things, from Bruce Nauman to Rachel Whiteread.

The beehives' epoxy castings give shape and presence to the empty space that was once, one can assume, humming and buzzing with bees. In its honey-like translucent nature, the epoxy feels more like a beehive than the actual hives. As was already mentioned, it gives a picture that is independent of the gaze of reason. It depicts the beehives not from the outside, like an eye, but from the inside. In that sense, these works complement the video by giving the viewer a sense of being a bee, of being inside, being one with the object – in total contrast to the disengaged, external gaze that holds the subject/object logic, the one against which Fromchenko's entire artistic project stands in defiance.

Fromchenko's artistic project, and this is the main claim of this text, is to point at how we point. To show the manner in which we see. To offer a different type of gaze, and with that, a different type of image of the world. Fromchenko looks at the world and disassembles it. She carries out an abstraction that we could call feminine, in the spirit of the things said earlier, but we can also call it Deleuzian, rhizomatic; abstraction born from a too close, disintegrating, associative, cyclical gaze, which gives precedence to sensibilities and intuitions over rationality.

The move that Fromchenko performs in *245* is not about bees more than *The Vanishing General* is about Major General Barbivai, or the ejector seat has to do with ejector seats. All these are a medium through which she examines our gaze. The obvious gaze, the gaze of the subject that sees nothing but objects, the gaze of Raphael who assembles the world into a vanishing point and establishes it from his position at the center and opposite it. The master's gaze.

Fromchenko is preoccupied with signs. She endeavors to free them from their signified. To give them autonomy. Create a territory that is free from the tyranny of meaning.

Bees famously dance. The dance of the bees is a type of primitive language through which they communicate about the place, distance, and quality of nectar they found. Fromchenko's work turns their dance into modern dance. Movements without a message or meaning. The imprint that the life of the bees has left on the walls was captured on video and enlarged, photographed from the outside and arranged as a tower, and cast from the inside and duplicated. With that, the dance was stripped off of all the flowers, nectar, and bees. Of the honey and the sting.

## SOME WORDS IN CONCLUSION

The use of photography to reach the abstract is one key: Photography is the mechanical, all-knowing gaze of reason. The use of video for the abstract is a second key: Video carries credibility. We think of video footage as reportage. There is something almost news-like about it. And even when video art is not a documentation of the world, even when it is staged, we believe that this staged thing that took place somewhere, in a reality of some kind, is faithfully captured by the video. Sculpting absence is a third key: Not looking at what is there but looking at what is not there. Not marking, not indicating, not formulating a message about the world, but giving presence to what escapes representation by its very nature.

Fromchenko's work process is based on removing the object from context, on observing it not from the correct distance, on rewriting it in an "incorrect" language, on unraveling its uniformity, on weaving it as an abstract in the viewer's gaze. This is a view of how we do not see. This is making the invisible visible. Fromchenko's abstract is the testament of things.

**Totem 2 (Towers and Abyss)**, 2019,  
manipulated photo on archival paper, 190×80 cm  
טוטם 2 (מגדלים ומצולות), 2019,  
צילום מטופל על נייר ארכיוני, 190×80 ס"מ

