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A study in porcelain: Valentina Savić

*Sometimes the work of art produces
seeds of theory from which, upon
elaboration, art slips away.*

Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger²

Seeking a woman's discourse

Starting from post-structuralist feminist theories, the exhibition by Valentina Savić, *Home Economics Class: I'll show you mine if you show me yours*, deals with the topic of female script in ceramics and from that starting point, considers the issues of prejudice, freedom, institutional canons, consumer society, tradition and the role of gender. For more than two decades, Valentina has cultivated a unique approach to ceramics, balancing between sculpture and design, developing her research and reflections in porcelain. Problematizing themes and contemporary social phenomena, she has created her own mise-en-scène using deeply intimate motifs, philosophical thought and the language of gender art.

The author predominantly finds ideological support in the *matrix theory* of Bracha Ettinger, artist, theoretician and psychoanalyst, which has been upgraded and has constantly evolved from 1990 until today. Etymologically, the name of the theory comes from the Latin word *matrix* and means the womb, uterus, base, point of origin, but also a mathematical complex suitable for displaying transformation operations. This theory relies on Jacques Lacan, French psychiatrist, theoretician of psychoanalysis and one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century, who considered the notion of a *matrix*, which is a symbolic representation of the prenatal zone, the meeting between the *self* and the *non-self*, which are created simultaneously.³ The theory emphasizes change, divisibility in the foreground, but actually sees a common development through emerging encounters as the only approach.⁴ It uses the metaphor of the womb as the dimensions of the boundary space in which the child and the mother intertwine, as well as the metaphor of birth, the original traumatic event, where the mother and the child mutually witness the trauma of the other.⁵ Art, according to Ettinger, offers the possibility of recreating matrix connections, with the help of which we can bond with others and create a space for an aesthetic encounter that stimulates our capacities for compassion. Moreover, she

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²Anna Louise Johnson, *Bracha Ettinger's Theory of the Matrix Contexts and Commentary*, The University of Leeds, Department of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, September 2006, 15.

³Ibid.

⁴Milica Miražić, *Lacan's notion of the gaze in feminist film theory*, Genero 19, 2005, 109-133.

⁵Ibid.

introduces a new model of trans-subjectivity and a politics of partnership in difference, counter to the phallic model of subjectivity

Searching for a woman's discourse in ceramics, Valentina analyzes specific social positions through the prism of the *matrix theory* and the poststructuralist ideas about the creation of differences. An important stronghold of her philosophical thought is the essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* from 1975, authored by Hélène Cixous, which is a passionate call from one woman to others to resist the dominant phallogocentric discourse that disengages them.⁶ The essay apostrophizes women's writing (L'écriture féminine)⁷ as that which stands against the male approach, representing a potent weapon that is to take a position against the Logos founded by men.⁸ The path to the deconstruction of logocentrism by means of the language of porcelain in Valentina's works also opens up other questions. Seeking a woman's discourse in patriarchal society and the modern world, she critically scrutinizes global positions through intimate and personal narratives. In her works, the reinterpretation of cult achievements unites art, film and music with porcelain. In this case, a woman's discourse is not only retained for the female gender, but represents a space for experiencing differences and creating changes.⁹ In this rumination, the theorization of artistic discourses and the connection between practice and the theory that interprets them is necessary. Griselda Pollock also spoke about the paradigm shift that should rewrite cultural history: "...importantly, (feminist interventions) are discovering ways to address women as subjects not masquerading as the feminine objects of masculine desire and fantasy and hatred."¹⁰

Home economics class: I'll show you mine if you show me yours

The Valentina Savić exhibition at the Museum of Applied Art presents a series, split into two, of interconnected ceramic installations created in the period from 2005 to the present. An important part of the exhibition's concept has emerged from reflecting about space and galleries. The physically divided space of the gallery of the Museum of Applied Art contributes to the contextualization of the idea that finds its articulation in the division into the male and female segments of the exhibition. The space emphasizes the plurality and juxtapositions of these two conceptual units that together create a home paradigm. Male and female spaces, separated only nominally into two units, do not necessarily refer to gender differentiation. Ideas are intertwined and connected, and boundaries are blurred, thus forming a unity.

⁶Marija Bulatović, *Writing with milk as l'écriture de soi in Hélène Cixous' Dreams of a Wild Woman*, Književstvo, journal for studies of literature, gender and culture no. 5, 2015.

⁷Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, ARS no. 5, 6 (2010), <http://www.scribd.com/doc/122338258/Helene-Cixous-Smijeh-meduze-Elen-Siksu-Smeh-meduze#scribd> (retrieved on 3 April).

⁸Marija Bulatović, *ibid*.

⁹Hélène Cixous, *ibid*.

¹⁰Griselda Pollock, *Feminist Interventions in Art History, Introduction to Feminist Painting Theories*, collection of texts, Center for Contemporary Arts, Belgrade, 2002.

The title of the exhibition refers to and underlines some of the starting points for the interpretation of these ideas. The first part of the title, *The Home Economics Class*, refers to handiwork and work related to the home. It primarily associates with the feminine principle and lays emphasis on the role of women in the household. It also points to the traditional role of ceramics and useful clay objects that were part of the household and everyday life. In fact, the making of ceramic objects was traditionally associated with women. This is why in contemporary artistic ceramics, the women's script is often associated with interpretations of women's experiences and emotions through works that reflect emotionality and physicality, motifs of female fertility, intimacy and vulnerability.

The setting was also conceived as a porcelain setting of a household, an exemplary example of a home in which porcelain works are placed so that they figuratively define the spaces of the kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, etc. Also, these two terms, 'home' and 'class' directly refer to certain stereotypes and imposed norms that every individual encounters.

The second part of the title, *I'll show you mine if you show me yours*, is a phrase that carries a metaphor and is related to disclosure, alluding to the first meeting with the intimate, but also to opening and connecting. Also, the expression is associated with social movements that helped to raise awareness, creating a space for the development of art created by women.¹¹ During the seventies of the 20th century, social movements were initiated that encouraged association, cooperation and provided support to women on a personal level in order to condition and initiate greater changes. The projects encouraged an undertaking called the exchange of works of art. The works were placed in the center of dialogue and exchange, and thus intimate experiences became public, which in itself carried a certain risk. Some of the issues raised by the exhibition are related to the themes of revealing sexuality, as well as accepting and sharing the intimate area.

Using different forms of communication, women exchanged ideas, views and works. These collaborative projects enabled women to exchange ideas, opinions and accept themselves in a more self-conscious way.¹² One of these projects was the *Postal Art Event* (1975-1977)¹³ that connected women in different cities, towns and villages in England through the exchange of works of art through the post. The event birthed numerous exhibitions in different cities. This change in focus caused different reactions and consequences and had a double effect on the further empowerment of women. The narrative of high and low art was rekindled. Empowering women to engage in art at home fit perfectly with the goal of raising awareness, but it also ran counter to the institutional recognition of this form of female expression. The home as a place for creating art, exchanging ideas, provides women with a different identity. This opened the possibility for women to analyze and realize their own identity. Observing this discourse

¹¹Tobin, Amy, *I'll Show You Mine, If You Show Me Yours: Collaboration, Consciousness raising and Feminist-influenced Art*, Tate Papers, no. 25, 2016. Retrieved: 15 August 2023. [I'll Show You Mine, If You Show Me Yours: Collaboration, Consciousness-Raising and Feminist-Influenced Art in the 1970s – Tate Papers | Tate](https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/25/i-will-show-you-mine-if-you-show-me-yours-collaboration-consciousness-raising-and-feminist-influenced-art-in-the-1970s)

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

through the understanding of Valentina Savić's works, we can connect all this with the material in which she works, i.e. ceramics, which for years were precisely at the epicenter of polemics related to high and low art.

I'll show you mine

The part of the Museum gallery on the left side of the entrance is designed as a woman's space. The works of art in this section bear the symbolism of female intimacy and female discourse, and are arranged in units that form and metaphorically represent the space of the kitchen and bedroom, encouraging a rethinking of the role and perception of women.

The Bombonier wall installation consists of six tin panels with peony flower prints. Valentina begins the process of creating the work of art by making digital transformations of photographs taken in her mother's garden. Digital transformations of real images were used to obtain images of an ideal flower, which Valentina then transferred onto sheets using the printing technique. The striving for an ideal representation is actually man's striving to idealize the past. The symbolism of peonies is deeply intimate and familial. Born in Prizren, Valentina associates peonies with her childhood and the memory of her grandmother. That is where the name of the work comes from, *Bombonier*, as a symbol of a carefree childhood and joy in childhood. The metal images of peonies clasp porcelain bonbons. The porcelain parts are actually curled up sanitary napkins wrapped in cellophane, like bonbons. Each bonbon has a magnet that allows the porcelain sanitary napkins to be attached to the metal base. Like street souvenirs, the magnets can be moved. The observer can alter the image, and by changing the array of the images, s/he can create a new visual experience. By moving the magnets across the metal plate, the picture of the peonies that tended towards the ideal becomes scratched. In this way, the primary image is erased and new narratives are created in the interaction of the artist with the viewers, all connected to the idea of the passing of time and the changes that time brings. In fact, an ideally conceived idea as a starting point for work undergoes changes and transforms itself.

Elaborations and different articulations of the concept of transience and memory permeate other works at different levels. There is a meeting of three generations of women connected by an idealized flower that disappears through time. Also, the motif of porcelain sanitary napkins, which is part of a great number of other works in the exhibition, emphasizes fertility and the feminine principles in the sense of a matrix, as well as all the prejudices that that entails. The six metal plates with digital representations of peonies are arranged in groups called *Albedo* (white stage), *Rubedo* (fire stage) and *Nigredo* (tranquil stage). The names link the installation to alchemical transformation. These names, as well as the changes due to displacements caused by the actions of the observer, emphasize transience and perishability.

The two things I know about her is the work that was inspired by the 1967 film (*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*) by French director Jean-Luc Godard. The work consists of two ceramic hemispheres composed of casts of female breasts. These two hemispheres, which in the composition are associated with the female brassiere, are often referred to as a symbol of

restraint or if discarded, a symbol of freedom. The ideological discourse considers the position of the woman as an object, turning her into an object of desire. Through various forms of visual culture, women were often perceived through the prism of the male gaze and were primarily reduced to an object of desire and visual pleasure.

In the women's section of the exhibition is the work *Medusa at the crossroads*, which consists of three parts. There is an oversized apron made of ceramic black inlays and a woven, traditional sash. A female belt, handmade by women, is part of the traditional costume. Under the ceramic apron is a cloth female shirt that is part of the author's personal collection. The shirt is stitched as a part of the woman's outfit, but it is unfinished. There is no opening for the head, and it is kept as such. The work conveys deep personal memories. Intimate items are rendered new meaning and placed in a new context.

The second part of the structure is a wall composition with porcelain imprints of a woman's hands displayed on a tray. The third part of the composition is a footprint made of two layers of clay, black and white. This is a floor composition, and used high-heel shoes are arranged around the porcelain legs. The work examines the possible directions and paths of a female being within the socially defined frameworks. The title of the work, *Medusa at the Crossroads*, comes from the mentioned essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* from 1975, authored by Hélène Cixous, as well as the use of the Medusa myth in feminist theories and the deconstruction of the male perception of this myth. Used as a powerful symbol in the struggle against patriarchal society, Valentina branches this composition into three sequences, like the tentacles of a jellyfish: an apron with a headless dress, prints of a woman's hands and legs with high-heel shoes.

Beware of the bed is a ceramic installation made by Valentina for a Museum of Applied Art exhibition (2023). The work consists of three plates that make up the composition of the bed and upon which ceramic works are arranged in three layers. The plates are transparent so that all three layers are visible, consisting of porcelain portraits, organic fruit forms and sanitary napkins. The phrase in the title of the work is related to traditional understandings and patriarchal control of women. This work is also inspired by the theory and different perceptions of the symbolism of the bed in the works of Hélène Cixous.¹⁴ While her early works associate the bed with sleep, silence, passivity and death, her later art focuses on the bed as a scene of rebirth. This item becomes closely associated with dreaming, which for her is an act of liberation, exploration and discovery. As a symbol of the world of dreams, the bed is thus transformed into a place where the wishes, voices and creative forces of the unconscious can be expressed. How does this transition from death to rebirth, from repression to liberation, from silence to discovery take place? By demystifying the *Sleeping Beauty* fairy tale, Hélène Cixous deconstructs the position of women, concluding that it is necessary to get up from a bed that must be prevailed over.¹⁵

¹⁴ Cecily Davey, *Jouissance: Journeys Beyond the Bed with Hélène Cixous, Sleep(less) Beds: Awakening, Journey, Movement, Stasis*, Department of English and Creative Writing, Issue 3, Lancaster University.

¹⁵Ibid.

The idea of two worlds, the world of feelings and the world of ideas, is the basis of the work *Finding doors in a wall that has none*. The composition consists of numerous porcelain items made by slip casting, representing copies of everyday items and signifying the world of genesis and decay and the realm of constant change. This decay is focused on the conceptual plan of each item as its original idea and the decay of that idea through the replica created by slip casting. However, the items acquire a new context and new meanings by creating a new composition of different replicas. In the center of the composition is a porcelain doll with a plastic head. A discarded and found item, the plastic head of a doll is the motif that connects the work of *Medusa at the crossroads*, as well as other works. Red ribbons connect objects to each other, creating interaction.

If you show me yours

The masculine space is in the right part of the gallery space, which is a metaphor for the male segment. Here, through symbols of masculinity and stereotypically chosen motifs, the roles are reexamined. A feast is shown as a symbol of power through archetypal constructs, where the motifs are redefined, twisted and thereby changing their meaning. The observer is guided through the public, masculine area of the living room of *Dinner at Buñuel's* (MAA 24333), the bathroom of *Personal Issue* and the exterior of *Junkspace - the debris space*.

The work *Dinner at Buñuel's* consists of 12 semi-porcelain cast children's potties, which are glazed with black glaze and placed on a table and three TV sets, lit but with no picture being broadcast. The work was awarded the Redemption Award of the Museum of Applied Art at the 14th Triennial of Ceramics 2012-2013. It was inspired by the works of Luis Buñuel, the films *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, *The Phantom of Liberty* and *Viridiana*. The dinner theme in Buñuel's films is a motif that runs through as a metaphor for social constraints and the false formality that holds people back. Valentina Savić's work *Dinner at Buñuel's* deals with similar themes, questioning the theme of freedom, social values and cultural patterns. The film *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974) is one of Buñuel's most complex works and deals with the idea of freedom and its correlation with social norms. Valentina finds direct inspiration for this work in a scene where a group of people is sitting around a table on toilet bowls while eating their dinner. This scene, like her entire work, represents a criticism of society and meaningless conventions. In the ceramic installation *Dinner at Buñuel's*, Valentina uses potties, which are placed on a table. These twelve bowls also refer to sets of porcelain dining services, which are usually six or twelve.

Wings of Desire (MAA 23851) belong to the group of works from the series *Consumption*. These works explore the correlation with spending and the values of modern society. The title of the work is taken from the title of a Wim Wenders' film, translated as *The Sky over Berlin*. The work consists of two circularly cut PVC sheets on which the motif of white porcelain, traditionally Japanese plates is printed. The first plate contains 28 porcelain chicken wings. The wings were made using the mold technique, while the molds are made by real items and cannot be replicated. The wings are coated with black engobe, varying shades from black to white. On

the plate, the wings are arranged in the form of a cone, the darkest at the bottom and the white at the top. Porcelain breasts are laid out on another plate, glazed with a transparent finish.

On 11 June 1981, the world was shaken by the news of a crime committed in France by a Japanese murderer, Issei Sagawa, a cannibal and necrophile known for the murder of Renée Hartevelt. He was arrested while making an attempt to get rid of the body parts. Disturbing crime scene photos showed body parts on white plates. It is absurd that after his extradition to Japan, he was acquitted after five years due to legal errors. Also, the subtitle of the above work, *Angelopathie*, indicates a religious theme and the querying of the topics of the sacred, spiritual purity and sins. The observer can encounter a commonplace act but in altered circumstances. Thus, by changing the context, things and situations are given new meanings.

Junkspace is a work conceptually conceived as an appliance of desire created by the process of filtering and retaining waste. It consists of three porcelain installations instigated by the form of an amphora and created from discarded, consumable everyday items. What is left of them creates only an impression on the surface, the structure of the amphora decor. The assemblage was used here with the aim of connecting the historical layers and a modern civilization imprint. Valentina uses the technological possibilities of porcelain, which is suitable for mixing with other materials, and thus creates new ones that metaphorically follow the concept of work. For these reasons, Valentina chooses three contemporary items discarded after usage, while it is possible to turn them into a kind of new inorganic fossil by the process of “porcelainization.” The selected items are sanitary napkins, toilet paper and disposable masks. Due to their properties of keeping the porcelain mass in their structure, they allow the obtaining of nearly an identical shape to the organic one after the firing. The vessels are placed in three metal frames that symbolically limit each work individually. Containers of the universal amphora shape, combined with everyday items, symbolically shape a concept connected to contemporary global social contexts. The vessel thus becomes a weapon, a boundary, a target or waste and thus refers to all previous, present and future vessels.

The work *Personal Issue*, which belongs to a larger series of works called *Consumption*, was exhibited at the *Homobalcanicus* 2005 exhibition, and at the 12th Triennial of Contemporary Ceramic Art (MGLSS and MAA). It consists of a urinal that was produced in the Mladenovac-based *Keramika* factory. It belonged to their sanitary program, the production of which has been stopped for decades. The urinal bears the text “Mom, look what I’ve done,” above of which are ceramic tiles with the depictions of Brigitte Bardot and Greta Garbo. The work directly refers to and debates on Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* sculpture from 1917. This ‘readymade,’ as one of the most influential works created in the 20th century, is also ceramic art. Did the work that influenced the course of art history simultaneously negate ceramics as a material because it had long been understood as a material for making exclusively utilitarian objects? Through the discourse of such an observation, the exposed object carries double meanings. On the other hand, the urinal was displayed by a man and it is also a symbol of masculinity, which again speaks of gender dominance in the world of art, while the woman is present as a picture hanging on the wall.

In the works of Valentina Savić at the exhibition in the Museum of Applied Arts, the search for a woman's script and discourse is primarily laid emphasis on, leaving opportunities for individual interpretations and the anticipations of one's own experience. These works examine the conceptual possibilities of ceramics as a material, operating in the expanded field of visual arts. The exhibition sets off with personal narratives and intimate poetics, but also studies global phenomena by means of the language of gender art.

REFERENCES