

*Counter Forms* brings together an extraordinary group of rarely seen works, predominantly from the 1960s and '70s, by four artists whose oeuvres remains as fresh and visceral today as they must have first appeared in their time. The exhibition gathers an unprecedented constellation of artists and exceptional historical material, provoking us to look at the innovation and continuing relevance of each artist anew while also highlighting the unexpected resonance of their oeuvres. Involving many loans from institutional and private collections, archives and artists' estates, *Counter Forms* continues the gallery's commitment to featuring influential historical artists whose full significance is growing both in the United States and internationally.

During their lives, each cut too short, Tetsumi Kudo (1935-1990), Alina Szapocznikow (1926-1973), Paul Thek (1933-1988) and Hannah Wilke (1940-1993) likely never met or learned of the others' practices. Yet in the 1960s and '70s they were almost simultaneously developing an art that was at once raw and sexualized, acerbic and resolutely human. Their immediate contexts were different, but whether grappling with the implications of post-war America, post-Holocaust Poland, or post- Hiroshima Japan, their works seem haunted—materially and actually—by their makers' willing exploration of disaster and disintegration in a way that was quite at odds with the clean, optimistic and perfected forms that more widely circulated in their epoch.

Theirs was an art of bodily traces: repeatedly, obstinately, Kudo, Szapocznikow, Thek and Wilke made forms that were by turns gangly and awkward or strangely elegant, and often involving body casting or references to the body through material agglutinations of new and experimental materials of their day, including latex, resin, and poured polyurethane. The results were resolutely handmade with a charged immediacy and an aesthetic and conceptual volatility to them that far outweighed their often diminutive, human scale. Penises float in resin or sprout from buckets, delicate folds of terracotta conjure orifices both inviting and dangerous, while latex lips, butts, noses, and chins offer themselves as curious indexical traces of real bodies, figuratively dismembered. As biting as they are unexpectedly humorous, they were provocations to much sculpture being made at the time.

Intractable, unsettling, one could call them “counter forms”: decidedly not formalist exercises and yet not totally amorphous either—forms they are. In their embodied intimacy and sexual candor and in their anti-heroic stance, they offered their own uncanny riposte to the commercial imagery of Pop art, the pure geometry or industrial facture of so much Minimalism and the dry, immaterial practices of Conceptual art. Kudo, Szapocznikow, Thek and Wilke's works spoke of the flipside of their contemporary moment's lust for idealized commodity objects and, with it, any naively optimistic view of reality or its sexual politics. They dared to make an art so questioning that it would allow its maker “to doubt everything completely” as Kudo once wrote; an art that was imperfect, built from

“awkward objects,” as Szapocznikow called hers; or, in Wilke’s words “an art close to laughter, making love, [or] shaking hands,” and which brought, as Thek explained, “the raw human fleshy characteristics back to the art” against the period’s “enormous tendency toward the minimal, the non-emotional, the anti- emotional even.”

Built around some of the shared vocabulary of these four artists, the exhibition purposefully includes rarely seen examples of Kudo’s signature cubes, buckets, gardens and cages lined with readymade objects and body cast elements that sit and protrude on stems like planted chrysanthemums; a selection of Szapocznikow’s seemingly volcanic, molten polyurethane forms, some of which were first and last shown in the late 1960s, as well as a number of examples of her penchant for body casting; a spectacular ensemble of Thek’s “Technological Reliquaries” or, “meat pieces,” wax made to resemble glistening pieces of raw flesh housed in Plexiglas cases, as well as other rarely seen of his cast works; and an extraordinary ensemble of Hannah Wilke’s early gaping, orificial forms, wrought from terracotta, ceramic, latex, bronze, or chewing gum, some never exhibited before. Their primarily sculptural practices are accented here by select examples of paintings or works on paper.

*Counter Forms* pays homage to a group of artists who were pushing the boundaries of what was happening in their time— formally, materially, technically, conceptually—while also sitting at the center of the critical discourse of their era. Representing their countries at the Venice Biennale; the first Whitney Biennial; staging critically acclaimed exhibitions; receiving prestigious grants; and garnering respect from amongst their artist-colleagues, their visceral work struck a chord at the moment it was first being made and shown and then, inexplicably, slipped from many of the official narratives of the epoch. Recent reassessments have begun to importantly shift their place. Alongside such large-scale exhibitions as the 2008 Tetsumi Kudo retrospective at the Walker Art Center and forthcoming Osaka retrospective; the 2011 Alina Szapocznikow retrospective at WIELS Contemporary Art Center in Brussels, the Museum of Modern Art, the Wexner Center for the Arts, and the Hammer Museum, the large-scale drawing show at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and forthcoming monographic show at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art; the massive Thek Artist’s Artist monographic show at the 2008 ZKM, Karlsruhe and Reina Sofia, Madrid and the 2010 retrospective - and the important place given to Hannah Wilke in the exhibitions Wack!, elles@ Centre Pompidou, and in the Museum of Modern Art’s most recent permanent collection display, *Counter Forms* contributes to a burgeoning counter narrative that makes room for a wider, messier, and perhaps more compelling history of artistic practice in the 1960s and ‘70s.

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