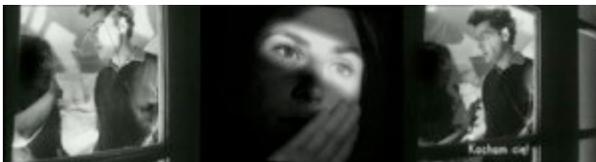


**Bill Kouwenhoven ,*The Uncanny and the Hypothetical in the Work of Anna Baumgart***

In a career that has embraced sculpture, video and performance art, the Polish artist Anna Baumgart (Wroclaw, 1966) has demonstrated an extraordinary versatility in terms of artistic expression. She graduated from department of sculpture of the Academy of Fine Arts, Gdansk, in 1994 (Prize for the best diploma) and became active in Polish avant-garde circles and established a series of performance spaces and “artistic cafes” in Gdansk including the “Delicatessen Avant-garde Gallery,” and the Forum of Contemporary Art at the “Gazownia Gallery,” and various multimedia and improvisational music workshops. The most important, Cafe Baumgart at the CCA “Zamek Ujazdowski,” became a meeting place for diverse artists in Warsaw to intersect and interact across a variety of disciplines.

With her earliest works such as *Let Unrestrained Anger Be Eliminated* (1996), she incorporated electrical and optic devices and various liquids that merged representations of the body with the implements of technology in a staged battle between “the female” and “the male.” Later videos, *Who Speaks?* (1998), *Mother* (1999), *Condoms, Money, Lady - No problem!* (1999), and *True?* (2001), continue her strategies of feminist representation and the questioning of societal roles and emotional relationships. In the latter video series, Baumgart inserted herself into contemporary Polish films such as (*Leca Zurawie / The Crains Are Flying* by Michail Kalatozow and *Mis / Bear* by Stanislaw Bareja) in order to critique media images of women in society.



Baumgart’s concern with the status of women in society and the (self-)representation of women is a major feature of *Ecstatics, Hysterics and Other Sainly Ladies*, (2004), a video that was presented as part of a body of work, *A Collection of Shameful Gestures*, in collaboration with Birgit Brenner at the Zacheta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw She examines issues of female auto-aggression and hysteria, and notes in an interview that she was “tempted by the possibility of redefining the notion of ‘hysteria’: of transforming it from a verbal insult into a verbal compliment. The hysteric seems interesting to me, suggesting a creative approach by women to the world, a defiant and even revolutionary attitude. What feminism has already uncovered and investigated on the basis of 19th century hysteria – that it is a kind of auto-art – has never found acceptance in our collective thinking”. (*Kolekcja wstydliwych gestów...*, in: *Czas Kultury*, no. 1, 2004, [www.culture.pl](http://www.culture.pl)).



This inquiry has led directly into some of her most vibrant works, notably *Weronika A.P.* (2006) and *Natascha* (2006). Baumgart uses media images of women as the basis for these sculptures. *Weronika* takes as its subject an image of a woman, her face bandaged and in shock after the terrorist attacks in the London transportation system. The photograph became one of the main images that were fixed in the public mind as the true face of the horror of the attacks. The title of this sculpture, *Weronika*, takes its name from Saint Veronica who is said to have offered Jesus a cloth to wipe the sweat and tears off his face en route to his crucifixion. The cloth was miraculously imprinted with his image and thus became „the true image,” or „Vera Eikon.” Baumgart’s sculpture features an exaggerated bandage on her face, clothed, and painted to resemble the newspaper photo. However, Baumgart has painted only the frontal side of the woman and left white the sides of the woman not captured in the two-dimensional image seen by millions of viewers. Through this act of subversion, Baumgart alerts us to the fact that there is more going on „behind the scene” and that there is a backstory that must remain unknown to us. Thus, there is no „Vera Eikon” and we can never know what really happened.



*Natascha*, similarly, uses the media image of Natascha Kampusch, an Austrian girl imprisoned for more than eight years by a man, Wolfgang Priklopil, who committed suicide after learning of her escape. The half-painted *Natascha* is seen with a blanket over her head being led away by two police officers who shield her face from curious onlookers and the paparazzi. Kampusch’s story fascinated the media for months as she attempted to describe the nature of her relationship with her kidnapper. The emotional bond she described has been likened to that of the situation between hostages siezed by

terrorists at a bank in Sweden during the late 1970s that gave name to the „Stockholm Syndrome.” However, Kampusch’s true thoughts can never be known, nor can that of her kidnapper. Ironically, Kampusch has become a television talk show host and is living in a new flood of images as well as (re-)creating her own.

Baumgart’s latest work takes her critique of media imagery further. *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* (2008) takes as its point of departure a famous image of East Berliners escaping from houses not yet sealed off by the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. Using her now established technique, Baumgart extracts the figures, seen climbing through windows or walking away towards the photographer carrying their belongings, re-creates them as sculptures and half paints-them. This effect produced by this group is somewhat uncanny because some figures are seen only from the waist up as they hang out windows. Baumgart herself suspends those sculptures from the ceiling. The back leg of a woman is further stencilled „Reuters/Forum” representing the photo agency credit in the original photograph from 18 August 1961 reproduced in a contemporary Polish newspaper.



With her title, *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*, Baumgart adds further dimensions and uncertainties to the original story. The title originates as the title of a movie based on ideas of art criticism by novelist Pierre Klossowski. Filmed by Raoul Ruiz in 1979, it was a highbrow cult film of French cinema and involves a story about a series of paintings owned by a collector. The collector shows off his paintings to another collector, yet, as he does so, the characters depicted in the paintings come to life as Tableaux Vivants and begin to mock the ideas and pretensions of the collector. One painting is missing from the collection without which the series of seven is incomplete. An unexplained scandal lurks behind its disappearance, and even the name of the artist is revealed to be false. As the characters in the tableaux vivants come to life, the fixed narrative of the painted image as well as the understanding of the collector become uncertain. Baumgart extends this metaphorically in her work, noting that “[a] character caught in

one picture steps out of the photograph like from a movie screen and ‘takes a walk’ in another image. This ‘visit’ of one visual and mental tale within another is also a duel between two gazes, two lenses.” She adds, “What could hypothetically happen if two stolen looks met and started its own new life without control of the authors of the original pictures, creating a new hybrid narrative between reality and fiction. This new narrative does not yet have its picture and thus becomes a hypothesis of a [nonexistent] image.” This is the root of Baumgart’s manipulations and the reasons for the games she has already initiated with *Weronika* and *Natascha*.



By extracting the human figures from various images, the familiar is mystified and made uncanny. The viewer, even when cued by the artist’s texts, is still free to form her own narratives about what might or might not be going on: who are these people, are they real? What happened to them, what will happen to them? We write these “hypothetical” stories in our heads out of the whole cloth of the appropriated images that were once seemingly clear in their meaning. Indeed, just as Baumgart re-incorporates her subjects into new contexts, the viewer automatically re-inscribes Baumgart’s figures into their own imagination based on her own personal contexts. Interpretation becomes autobiography.



The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting marks a radical point of departure for Anna Baumgart. It marks and multiplies the uncertainties implied in her earlier works and further frees the viewer to become more involved in searching for meanings in the work that may even have nothing to do with Baumgart's original intent in creating the works in the first place. To re-iterate what she says, "This new narrative does not yet have its picture and thus becomes a hypothesis of a [nonexistent] image." Meanings are suspended, here literally, and the viewer is always left guessing. That is the power of Anna Baumgart's uncanny new work.

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[artist](#)