

WALL TEXTS

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## **Maria Pinińska-Bereś** Under the Pink Flag

Maria Pinińska-Bereś (1931–1999) is one of the most exceptional personalities in 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish art. Her work includes sculptures, installations and performances. The focal point of her poetic-political art is her engagement with womanhood and the related social challenges. She trained as a sculptor and experimented with the conventions of that discipline by incorporating performances and actions in the public domain into her artistic practice.

Maria Pinińska-Bereś's art is subtle, humorous, conceptual and erotic. It speaks about diversity in an authoritarian system in which this artist pursued a path of her own. The colour pink conveys her criticism of society. It stands for the feminine, the domestic, the body, and is clearly distinguishable from the red omnipresent at the time in communist Poland.

This retrospective exhibition highlights the most important stages in Pinińska-Bereś's artistic and emancipatory development. The exhibition intervenes twofold in art history: in the art history focussed on the works by male artists, and in the art history that is written from a western perspective and therefore overlooks the multifaceted art of Eastern Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

Maria Pinińska-Bereś was born in Poznań and grew up there until the outbreak of the Second World War. When her father was mobilised and captured by Soviet troops, she and the rest of her family fled to Kraków. Under the influence of her grandfather, Catholicism took on a great importance for the family after her father's disappearance. When the war ended, she lived with her family in Katowice and completed studies at the Secondary School of Fine Arts there. In 1950 she started studying in the sculpture class of Xawery Dunikowski at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. In 1956 she was awarded her diploma. That same year she married the artist Jerzy Bereś. The couple's daughter Bettina was born in 1958. She too became an artist. The flat Maria Pinińska-Bereś lived in with her family functioned both as a studio and as a meeting place for artists and intellectuals. Maria Pinińska-Bereś took part in numerous art events and was actively involved in creative circles. In 1962, together with her husband, she initiated the annual exhibition *Rzeźba Roku* (Sculpture of the Year), where she also exhibited her own works. In 1979 she was received into the artists' association Grupa Krakowska (Kraków Group). At the same time she exhibited in the important group exhibition *Feministische Kunst Internationaal* (International feminist art) in The Hague. Despite the difficulties she encountered as an artist in Communist Poland, where censorship and restrictions on freedom of expression were the order of the day, Maria Pinińska-Bereś pursued her path consistently. She died in Kraków in 1999.

## ROTUNDY AND GORSETY: A RADICAL BREAKTHROUGH

Having complete her training as a sculptor at the art academy in Kraków, in the late 1950s Maria Pinińska-Bereś initially made figurative works, such as a female bust with a dove. Soon, however, she found the conventions of classical sculpture too restrictive: “In my beginnings, I felt the urge to redefine sculpture. By abandoning the traditional sculpting skills I had mastered and imposing an unconventional mode on myself, I made a radical breakthrough.”

This development is evident in the series *Rotundy* (Rotundas, 1961–1963). The massive cement figures allude to bodies and exhibit religious accessories. The artist positioned them on quilted fabrics instead of on traditional plinths. The works refer to a society that glorifies women, on the one hand—by putting them on a pedestal—and on the other hand, devalues them by forcing them into rigid roles.

In the series entitled *Gorsety* (Corsets, 1965–1967) Pinińska Bereś uses papier-maché for the first time: “I got rid of weight in my works. For I had always dreamed of being able to carry my sculptures without anyone’s (any man’s) help.” The light, fragile material contrasts with the restrictive form that comes about when it hardens. The sculptures become rigid items of clothing that symbolise the physical and intellectual suppression of women.

## THE POLITICAL IN THE DOMESTIC

As of the late 1960s, Maria Pinińska-Bereś made a series of objects she called *Psychomebelki* (Psycho-Tiny-Furniture). These are items of furniture to which she added naked female body parts made of painted papier-maché or foam. Through these works the artist criticises a society dominated by men, which confines women to the domestic sphere and makes them objects of their desires. At the same time, however, Pinińska-Bereś confidently affirms female sexuality.

From the early 1970s onwards, she introduced soft materials into her art. Cloth covers that she made herself she stuffed with cotton wool and foam, as in *Parawan* (Screen, 1973), which stands for restrained or exploding desire. The installation *Mój uroczy pokój* (My Enchanting Little Room, 1975) might represent a doll’s house, a bedroom or also a room in a psychiatric clinic. The traces of colour on the quilts can be read as evidence of a sexual act or of domestic violence.

From now on, the colour pink that Pinińska-Bereś previously used sometimes, becomes the determining hallmark of her works and an expression of female self-determination.

## FEMINISM

As an artist in a male dominated art world, Maria Pinińska-Bereś experienced exclusion and ignorance. Although she always worked from a clearly female perspective, she was sceptical about the term “feminism”. She became part of a female avant-garde that emerged in Poland in an environment marked by Catholicism and Communism, and she took part in the *Feministische Kunst Internationaal* exhibition in The Hague in 1979. Pinińska-Bereś remembered that, “[i]n the second half of the 1970s, hence over ten years from embarking on this road, I heard my work termed feminist art [...]. It was a shock. It carried the hope of sisterly souls.”

Her performance *Pranie I* (Laundry I, 1980) drew attention to the invisible work carried out by women. The artist washed white cloths by hand and then hung them up to dry. The pieces of cloth had pink lettering on them, forming the word “feminism”. At the end of the action, the artist turned her pink apron into a flag and placed it in the middle of the installation. With that pink flag Pinińska-Bereś fought confidently for visibility and recognition for women in the art world and beyond. At the same time, the flag also symbolised a celebration of her own art.

## MARTIAL LAW IN POLAND 1981-1983

At the end of 1981, the Polish government imposed martial law so as to crush the protests by *Solidarność* (Solidarity), the trade union and democracy movement. The economy and the media were militarised and citizens' rights repealed. People's everyday life was marked by arrests and repression. In protest against violence and censorship, the art scene boycotted state galleries, exhibiting instead in cellars, studios and on church premises. Pinińska-Bereś's provocative works, however, were not welcome in the latter.

"I felt that [martial law] was also a tragedy for art", she later wrote. "During martial law I dramatically disproved my own oeuvre, my own signature (disposing of pink). I painstakingly built up possibilities and tested the acceptable limits of contemporary art in light of the new circumstances."

In *Okno II - odejście rózu* (Window II. The Pink's Departure, 1982) the colour literally runs off the picture in the form of a large drop made of fabric, leaving behind an empty canvas. In the performance *Tylko miotła* (Just a Broom, 1984) Pinińska Bereś wears a black dress while symbolically sweeping the exhibition space. Her conflict with state repression and political violence is also evident in *Goraże łzy* (Hot Tears, 1982): a teapot hanging from a rod like a flagpole appears to be heated by flames due to its red color. The painted red stones on the pyramid-shaped plinth look like drops of blood or tears.

## NATURE AS AN ANTI-INSTITUTIONAL SPACE

As of 1976, Maria Pinińska-Bereś's performances and actions took place outdoors, in nature. In her text *Dlaczego performance?* (Why performance?), she writes: "In my youth, I considered nature and art as the only beautiful worlds and good in their naturalness. I saw art as a refuge from the trappings of the world around me (communism)." Nature enabled the artist to liberate herself from social constraints. Her work *Przenośny pomnik pt. "Miejsce"* (The Place: A Portable Monument, 1979) is a portable construction with the poetic inscription: "There is such a place on earth." The work pays homage to nature and is only temporarily part of the landscape, so that the latter remains unharmed.

During gatherings held outdoors, artists and theorists from all over Poland tried out and discussed art forms not included in the prevailing cultural-political ideas. Pinińska-Bereś regularly appeared at those gatherings with a pink flag, as in the performance *Aneksja krajobrazu* (Annexation of the Landscape, 1980). Her tree-house *Punkt obserwacyjny zmian w sztuce* (Observation Point of Changes in Art, 1978) is situated very high up and only accessible by means of a rope ladder. It represents a humorous and critical commentary on the institutional art world.

## EROTICISM AND FAMOUS PAINTERS

Eroticism plays an important role in the work of Pinińska Bereś and she often presents it in humorous settings. The artist also formulates her criticism of male dominance in art history humorously. She adapts works by famous painters, making her very own version, including *Mme Recamier* by Jacques-Louis David. In doing so she translates the rendering of the female form into her own formal idiom using her typical soft and pink coloured materials.

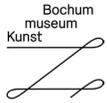
In her last creative period, Pinińska-Bereś availed herself of yet another material: wire, which she used to make cagelike sculptures referencing the captivity of the body. Among these is *Infantka z dzwoneczkiem - Klatka* (Infanta with the Bell: The Cage, 1997), which cites the famous work by Diego Velázquez *Las Meninas*. For this she created a metal structure similar to the 19<sup>th</sup> century hooped crinoline. This work ties in again with the artist's early *Rotundy*

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(Rotundas). Instead of a closed opaque concrete block, this sculpture is now made of a material characterised by lightness. The cagelike structure, however, makes it seem oppressive.

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