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## From Print to Digital: Reappropriation of the Ready-Made Image in the Works of Margit Sielska and Weronika Gęsicka

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This article traces the connections between print and digital photomontage practices through the works of two women artists, Margit Sielska (1900–1980) and Weronika Gęsicka (1984–), addressing the way these lesser-known, non-Anglophone artists reveal a continuity of interests across time. Changes in technology have allowed the cut and paste technique of photomontage to evolve from the use of scissors and glue to the use of computer software. By reappropriating and manipulating the ready-made images of women and of stereotypical family life from printed and photographic materials, both artists challenge assumptions about a woman's role in society while constructing new settings and realities for their subjects to occupy. In both instances, the combinatory process of montage serves to question and disrupt traditional and normative representations of women and domesticity. By drawing on the parallels between artworks that are made with different techniques but are derived from the shared creative process of appropriating and manipulating the ready-made image to create new, unexpected situations, the article reveals continuity between certain modernist practices and contemporary digital culture.

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Through their relationship to technology, mechanical reproduction and image manipulation, early 20th century experiments with photomontage can be considered a precursor to the contemporary creative use of digital technologies and software to create or alter images. An analysis of the early modernist montage and collage practices of Margit Sielska (1900–1980) and Weronika Gęsicka's (1984–) more recent series of photoshopped images, *Traces*, reveals the connections between the technique's first iterations and its later adaptations by contemporary artists. Created by two women artists working in Poland almost a century apart, their works are analyzed in the context of changing perceptions about the family and a woman's place in society, from the tumult of the 1930s felt in Sielska's work to Poland's post-communist transition, toward a market economy and the American-style consumerism that informs Gęsicka's images. Defined by the strategy of appropriating ready-made images, the works in question attempt to dismantle the dominant visual language that, in instances of political and social crisis and instability, is implemented as a means of applying a measure of control. The act of appropriation signifies the borrowing of another, already existing visual language, while the ready-made suggests an archetype, an epitome, a cookie-cutter character or normative notion or behaviour. The opportunity that photomontage (the act of cutting and pasting) provides to create new contexts and realities from pre-existing images is evident in works of both artists. Sielska's and Gęsicka's works also serve as examples of two different tactics and visual effects produced by photomontage techniques. In Sielska's works, the act of cutting is marked in the discreteness of each visual element, such as words in a sentence: there are visible spaces and breaks between the cut-out pieces of photographic and non-photographic material. In Gęsicka's works, conversely, the photographic content is at the forefront, with unity and seamlessness between the elements playing an important role. These differences produce different visual effects yet, in the works of both women artists, appropriation and the ready-made are integral to the construction of both the print and digital photomontages.

In a 2019 special issue of *History of Photography*, the editors of the journal asked, 'Is photomontage over?' (Kriebel and Zervigón, 2019). The title assumes that the technique, historically associated with radical political activity in the first half of the 20th century, has somehow lost its relevance and potency in the digital age at a time when the proliferation and consumption of images and a collage-like, fragmented experience of reality has ostensibly become the norm. The publication 'confronts such questions by exploring the possibility that photomontage has indeed run its course; that it may no longer serve as a point of critical inquiry, a potent object of historical research, or a forceful contemporary practice' (Kriebel and Zervigón, 2019: 119). The contributors to the issue, in analysing photomontage's different moments in time,

its application, significance, and relationship to other practices such as painting and photography, argue that the technique not only holds renewed potential and artistic inspiration in the digital age but that it also ‘vastly expand[s] the apparent project of political avant-garde montage between the wars’ (Biro, 2019: 170).

Despite the evident enduring popularity of the technique in the 21st century, in a 2009 *Artforum* article (reprinted in the aforementioned *History of Photography* issue) contemporary artist Charlie White argues that photomontage today has been stripped of its political power and radical potential by the ‘late-capitalist teenager’ and the already-irrelevant and outmoded websites, such as Polyvore (2009). Either unconsciously, or worse, intentionally, White makes the distinction between ‘low’ and ‘high’ forms of photomontage. He associates ‘high’ practices with such artworks as Martha Rosler’s deeply political photomontages about war and ‘low’ versions of photomontage with an adolescent’s impulse to cut out and paste photos of celebrities onto their bedroom’s walls. In his analysis, White fails on the one hand to recognize the at times playful nature of photomontage, and on the other the commercial and consumer history of the technique. Even as the Berlin Dada artists were creating works of political satire using photographs and newspaper cutouts, their colleagues produced collage for commercial advertising in new, colourful magazines and newspapers.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, artists and designers in Central and Eastern Europe used surrealist photomontage strategies to create covers for pulpy popular science-fiction magazines and novels.<sup>2</sup> The so-called ‘radical’ character that White attributes to serious photomontage is not a fixed point but rather a moving target, whose meaning is contingent on context and circumstances.

Peter Bürger observes that ‘without the avant-gardist notion of montage numerous realms of contemporary aesthetic experience would be inaccessible’ (1984: 22). One of the goals of modernism was to question and disrupt traditional modes of representation, such as painting, and to bring art and life closer together. Photomontage is a practice of art-making that emerges from the impulse to challenge the viewers’ understanding of art and reality. The montage technique, the desire to take things apart and put them back together, fragmentation and recombination, whether through film, photography, or mixed media, remains a powerful form of expression for artists today because of this ability.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of commercial and avant-garde photomontage that were exhibited together in 1931 can be seen in César Domela-Nieuwenhuis’ *Fotomontage* exhibition in Berlin. At this time, commercial photomontage was being produced, for example, by the Ring neuer Werbegestalter (Circle of New Advertising Designers). Moreover, many artists such as László Moholy-Nagy produced political, artistic, and commercial photomontages and used the latter as means of income.

<sup>2</sup> In Poland, Janusz Maria Brzeski created surrealist photomontages for the weekly illustrated popular fiction magazine *Tajny Detektyw* [The Secret Detective] (1931). Margit Sielska’s colleagues, Jerzy Janisch and Aleksander Krzywobłocki, produced photomontage as illustrations to a children’s novel, *Kometa Halleya* [Hailey’s Comet], by Alina Lan (1934).

## From Print to Digital

It was Victorian photographers such as Oscar G. Rejlander who first utilized the technique of combining multiple photographic elements, but it was in the decades of interwar social and political crisis that photomontage became the technique of choice for many artists and served as the epitome of resistance and modernity. In order to understand how the digital photomontage of today relates to and expands the photomontage of the 1920s and 30s, it is important to trace the development of the technique in those pivotal years, and how the understanding of its political character changed throughout the decades. The term photomontage was first developed by artists associated with the Berlin Dada group, such as John Heartfield, Raoul Hausmann, George Grosz, and Hannah Höch. For them, photomontage specifically takes on a political, even militant character, before circulating in exchanges between these artists and Soviet constructivists in the spring of 1923.<sup>3</sup> For the Berlin Dadaists, the montage process referred to assembly, construction, and the notion of the artist as an engineer. As Dawn Ades explains, '[p]hotomontage belonged to the technological world, the world of mass communication and photo-mechanical reproduction' (Ades, 1986: 13). For the artists, the mechanical process was represented in the raw materials used in the creation of photomontage, such as photographic reproductions, newspaper clips, and commercial advertisements, as well as in the content of the works that were symbolic of the modern, industrial world. The photograph is used as the ready-made material that is tethered to reality, ripe for manipulation in such a way as to provoke and agitate. The montage aspect of the technique alludes to cinematic effects, modern and mechanistic, where a string of scenes with various degrees of relevance are pieced together. This is particularly evident in Hannah Höch's *Cut with a Kitchen Knife* (1919–1920), where the artist appropriates cut-outs of political figures, newspaper lettering, and machine imagery to create a chaotic scene in which space and scale collapse and every element overlaps.

Photomontage in the Soviet Union, like its counterpart in the Weimar Republic, is deployed in the service of an overtly political message with an emphasis on technology. Unlike the Dada works that rely on humour and satire, photomontage in the hands of Soviet constructivists is a tool of mass communication, with the purpose of representing the utopian, industrial future built by the Soviet state. Leaders such as Lenin are celebrated rather than mocked, and the technique of photomontage is used to spread the message of the Revolution.

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<sup>3</sup> Dawn Ades points out that visual evidence suggests that the practices of photomontage in Berlin and the Soviet Union might have developed independently of one another before 1923. See Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (1974).

Complicating this Berlin–Moscow axis were the Warsaw–based Polish artists, who capitalized on their international contacts to bring photomontage into local avant-garde circles.<sup>4</sup> The leading practitioners of photomontage in 1920s Poland were part of a Constructivist group, *Blok*, and included Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro, Henryk Berlewi, Mieczysław Szczuka, and Teresa Żarnower. Like the Soviet constructivists, Szczuka and Żarnower (who introduced photomontage in Poland) used the technique for political and educational purposes.<sup>5</sup> Żarnower, for instance, combined photomontage techniques with bold, modern typography to produce pamphlets for the Polish Communist Party. For Szczuka, regardless of how overtly political or even utilitarian it is, a work of photomontage is still ‘the most condensed form of poetry ... PLASTIC-POETRY’ (Benson and Forgács, 2002: 503) that rests on the organization of discrete forms into a unified composition. This is unlike Höch’s works, in which the composition appears hectic and the placement of elements appears random. Conversely, the message in Szczuka’s and Żarnower’s works is clear, direct, and in the service of the social, political, and technological revolution.

Following the initial Dada and Constructivist approaches, the photomontage technique was adopted by artists associated with the surrealist movement. In *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe*, Matthew Witkovsky notes an important difference between the vehemently political, utopian, and utilitarian photomontage of the 1920s, and the emerging surrealist strategies in the 1930s. The ‘personal, or private, nature of surrealist creations sets it radically apart from other responses to modernity in central Europe’ whose photographic practices, including photomontage, are ‘emphatically public, entailing presupposition of mass communicability ... and a pedagogical desire’ (2007: 119). Although the surrealist movement received heavy criticism in Poland, from avant-garde and conservative artists alike, its political and radical character was rightly acknowledged by such writers as Debora Vogel. A philosopher and art critic in interwar L’viv, and a colleague of Margit Sielska, Vogel traces the developments of photomontage in a 1934 article, ‘Genealogy of Photomontage and its Potential’, where she argues that surrealism is ‘a movement that can be reconciled with the revolutionary in its social dimension’ because it offers one the possibility of ‘concreteness of matter’ and ‘active concreteness of social life’ (Vogel, 1934: 313). In other words, surrealist expressions towards ‘a subjective, “internal” reality’ reveal a particular way that the

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<sup>4</sup> Mieczysław Szczuka and Teresa Żarnower exhibited their works at Sturm Galleries in Berlin in 1923. Other Blok artists had close connections with Kazimir Malevich and a shared interest in Suprematism and Russian Productivism.

<sup>5</sup> Most of Szczuka’s and Żarnower’s works were destroyed, the magazine *Blok* which they published together between 1924 and 1926 is the main source for their art.

world arranges itself into associations that are not inherently apolitical, even if the photomontage itself does not contain an overtly political message.

In her scholarly analysis of surrealist collage, Elza Adamowicz echoes this argument when she states that ‘collage effectively anchors surrealist activities in the real, thanks to the “reality effect” of its process, which unmask, critiques, and renews perception of utilitarian reality and modes of representation and expression’ (Adamowicz, 1998: 11). Adamowicz further characterizes surrealist forms of collage, including photomontage, as a combinatory practice of cutting and pasting pre-existing messages that rests on the

discrete dissemination of prior discourses, since all texts intersect with other texts, the specificity of surrealist collage is to have drawn attention to the intertextual process itself, by its deliberate *mise-en-scène* of diverse and often divergent verbal and pictorial texts (2005: 15).

By combining disparate and unexpected elements, surrealist photomontage strategies were meant to shock the viewers and to lead them to question established norms, whether they be political, social, or aesthetic. It is within this surrealist realm of photomontage technique that both Sielska and Gęsicka’s works are situated, as they cut up and appropriate the ready-made discourse on the representation of women into a new, defamiliarizing reality.

It is important to recognize that the impulses towards the private and personal, or ‘internal’ and subjective, in surrealist photomontages created by women is also political. Feminist scholars and artists, especially since the 1970s, have long acknowledged and understood that the private sphere, which women’s lives have been historically and traditionally associated with, is political. Women artists and writers, particularly in the postwar era, have increasingly criticized this chasm between private as domestic and public as political.<sup>6</sup> Martha Rosler’s photomontage series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (c. 1967–1972) is a powerful example of a confrontation between the modern home life and the Vietnam war. In these works, Rosler takes cutouts of horrific images of war and destruction and incorporates them into the pristine and idyllic space of the American living room. Rosler’s works are blunt, confrontational, and unambiguously radical in their opposition to the war.

The feminist and postmodern strategies of opposition and fragmentation, associated with photomontage practices in the second half of the 20th century, are a transitional

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Griselda Pollock’s *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (1988).

point between the earlier print practices and contemporary digital photomontage. In *Pink Glass Swan*, Lucy Lippard claims that ‘the collage aesthetic—also the core image of postmodernity—is particularly feminist’ in its power to deconstruct established notions and to create new possibilities (1995: 25). Gwen Raaberg, echoing Lippard, argues that the oppositional nature of feminist collage and its potential to overcome patriarchal structures and build anew comes from women’s ‘minority marginal position ... which offers particular possibilities for a double-visioned cultural critique’ (1998: 157). The works of Sielska and Gęsicka reside in the legacy of women artists using photomontage to create oppositional art that functions as a cultural critique on the often-marginalized position of women in society.

Today, the legacy of modernist and avant-garde practices can be seen in the proliferation of contemporary collage and photomontage, catalogued in such publications as the multi-volume series *The Age of Collage: Contemporary Collage in Modern Art*. The cover of the third volume, published in 2020, bears a photomontage from Gęsicka’s series *Traces*. The editors of the volumes attribute the popularity of collage and montage practices to how they are able to respond to contemporary phenomena: ‘excess ... as exemplified by insatiable consumerism and unimaginable amounts of waste, so collage’s recycling and repurposing of imagery in a world that is also visually saturated is particularly meaningful’ (Gestalten, 2016:3). Digital platforms allow for greater access and availability to an almost infinite repository of images. Digital archives, such as the one Gęsicka used to create her works, have replaced the printed magazine and newspaper culture of the last century. Software, such as Adobe Photoshop, has replaced scissors, glue, or darkroom procedures of combining multiple photographs. Despite the changes in technologies utilized in the making of photomontage (from print to digital material, from scissors to software), the process still begins with the searching and collecting of ready-made materials that inspire the artist to create a new message from the visual language left behind by others.

### **A Woman’s Place: Anti-Domesticity in Margit Sielska’s Photomontage**

Margit Sielska was born in 1900 to a Jewish-Ukrainian family in Kolomyia, a small-town that, at the time, was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. She spent most of her life living and working in L’viv, although she began her artistic career studying and traveling (mostly through France).<sup>7</sup> Upon returning to L’viv in 1929, she joined the avant-garde group ‘artes’ and exhibited with them until 1934. Surviving the Second

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<sup>7</sup> Lviv is located in Western Ukraine. During the Interwar period, it was part of the Second Polish Republic. During the Polish partitions (1775–1918), it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

World War, she remained in L'viv with her husband (also an artist) and continued to exhibit frequently. Sielska was predominantly a painter and only produced five works in photomontages, all in 1934. If there were other works, they were likely destroyed during the Second World War, as were many of her other artworks. Her engagement with the technique attests to photomontage's popularity among avant-garde artists of the interwar period.

Much of Sielska's work created during this time can be understood in terms of its intertextual quality: a pastiche of different painterly styles, an appropriation of forms and techniques transformed into new contexts, and direct quotations of motifs from other artists. According to Bakhtin, this dialogic discourse is made using 'another's speech', a painterly discourse dominated by masculine inventions, or what Bakhtin would call 'centripetal' or 'official' artistic discourse (1981 [1934–1935]: 271). Yet in their appropriation of forms and styles, the artworks also reflect and refract another reality, one in which Sielska's marginal voice and context become visible. Nowhere in Sielska's oeuvre is this intervention into the material handed down to her more apparent than in her three works of photomontage, in which a woman is the subject matter. The photomontages also represent an instance where the relationship between the past and the present is most evident, as they address the codes and conventions of female representation and, by extension, their place in society throughout history. Each image can be analysed through that lens individually but grouping them together allows for a deeper understanding of the discourse from which they originate and which the images themselves produce. The following analysis considers three collages, *Eve*, *By a Window*, and *Composition with a Nude* (1934) as a series even though it is unclear whether Sielska would have considered her own works in such a way. There is no indication that the works were originally exhibited together but they were created in the same year. It is important to discuss the three works of collage in dialogue with one another, as each highlights a different aspect of a woman's social and political experience in interwar Poland and speaks to multiple rather than singular experiences. Since Sielska's collages can be considered an active interpretation of the material handed down to her, it is necessary to analyse how these fragments are transformed, what potential meanings they create in their new context, and the interlaced subjective voice present in these works. Conflating past and present representations of women, Sielska's collages suggest a sense of unbelonging to address the constructions of femininity, anti-domesticity, and the power of the state over the female body.

The montage technique is itself an example of a dialogic discourse, an intertextuality that takes place in time and space (surface). It is a combinatory technique that isolates pre-existing messages from their original context and meaning and transports them to



new interactions and permutations, allowing them to reflect and refract a reality that is not limited by physical constraints. A work of montage is a site at which a multiplicity of utterances exists alongside the voice of the author or the artist. In each of the three cases cited above, the artwork incorporates a cut-out of a woman, highlighting the ready-made, semantic quality of Woman as a cultural sign or stereotype, whose meaning is defined by the masculine, monologic discourse of a woman as a male fantasy. In addition to offering a reading in which the different female stereotypes are presented as male fantasies, the collages address tensions between the experience of interior and exterior spaces when occupied by women and, in turn, allude to the problem of the private and public sphere that is integral in understanding the official standing and marginalization of women in Polish interwar society.

The title of the collage *Eve* references the biblical figure of Eve who, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, occupies the contradictory and polarizing guise of the first mother, 'the mother of all' and the temptress, a symbol of human corruption and sin (Solnit, 2001:155). At the same time, the name Ewa was often used in Polish writing to address women in general, about and to women (as a separate social group). *Ewa* was also the title of the most popular Jewish women's magazine at the time. The Polish art historian Stanisław Czekalski identifies the cut-out of Eve as one from a painting by Pierre-August Renoir (2000: 317). The connection with and usage of a Renoir reproduction is also relevant in the context of Margit and Roman's visit to Cagnes-sur-Mer, the final home of the French artist. In quoting an image from one of Renoir's paintings, likely obtained during Sielska's travels, and combining it with modern materials and techniques, the artwork negotiates between tradition in painting and modern materials and visual culture.

Here, the figure of Eve is not only the symbolic Eve belonging to the Judeo-Christian mythology and the subsequent discourse on perception and place of women in society that is derived from this mythology, but she is also an utterance belonging to an artistic discourse on the representation of the nude in Western Art. Traditionally, Eve is depicted as the 'idealized form of beauty or desirability or else personified the guilt and shame associated with expression of sexual desire' (Birnbaum, 2011: 170). Citing Suzanne Valadon and Tamara de Lempicka (another Polish woman artist working in Paris at the time), Paula J. Birnbaum argues that for many women artists working at that time, 'Adam and Eve offered a powerful iconography of heterosexual desire, fertility, and the creation of the world, and [that] was available to them for revision' (2011: 169).

Sielska's intertextual revision of Renoir's painting does not explicitly reject conventional iconography of Eve, as she is depicted with the use of the cut-out of nude women bathers (a common subject in 19th-century painting). In altering the traditional iconography, however, Eve appears neither weak nor guilty, nor overly sexualized.

Instead, she is relaxed and unashamed. Another significant aspect of Sielska's revision is the absence of Adam. With Adam quite literally 'out of the picture', the traditional allegory of their transgression against God and subsequent banishment is subverted. Eve's presence on her own could, therefore, suggest a celebration of womanhood and signal an increasing social and political emancipation of women during the post-First World War era.

The 'domestic' materials and cut-outs used in the collage further contribute to the revision of the Judeo-Christian creation myth. The tree canopy in the background, evocative of Eden, is composed of a cut-out of a lace curtain, while what could be considered the roof of a house in the top left-hand corner resembles a lampshade.<sup>8</sup> In combining the image of Eve with the materials and objects of private, domestic spaces, the work brings the myth into the context of the everyday. Still, the photomontage does not explicitly deconstruct or challenge the figure of Eve and her culturally inscribed meaning as a symbol of weakness and the ultimate reason for Adam's (and Man's) downfall, or as the perpetrator of the original sin. More accurately, the work could be read as highlighting the lack of change for women. Instead of the *Neue Frau* [New Woman] so thoroughly debated in the previous decade of the 1920s in neighbouring Germany, or the emancipated women of the Soviet Union, the viewer is met with a stereotype that is not at all outmoded to much of its contemporary audience.

Sielska's three photocollages reflect an aspect of backwardness, even retrogression regarding civil rights, and a social position that most women, especially those of a working-class background, experienced in the increasingly conservative, nationalist, and authoritarian environment of the 1930s.<sup>9</sup> Eve, and the symbolism and meaning associated with her, remains the same, and the superficial changes appear only through her modern surroundings, in the form of objects and materials. In turn, *Eve* can be read as emphasizing a level of inertia where everything around the woman changes except how she is perceived or treated: she is still surrounded by domesticity and defined by her nudity.

The lack of social emancipation for women in Poland (despite structural changes, such as the right to vote) is further emphasized in *Photomontage (by a window)*, where oppression and confinement are physically represented using materials such as chicken wire, and where references to domestic spaces again play a significant role. Here, in an interior, the windowpanes have been replaced by overlaid wire mesh, evoking a cage-like state for the woman, as the home becomes a prison. The

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<sup>8</sup> The tree trunk is a direct quote from a reproduction of Josef Šima's *Double Paysage* (1927): another example of intertextuality present in Sielska's works.

<sup>9</sup> Katharina von Ankum outlines the shift in opinions and perceptions of the New Woman in the Weimar Republic following the 1929 economic crash, and the return to the ideal woman that embodied the qualities of the nurturing mother figure. See *Women in the Metropolis. Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (1997).

remaining background is produced using marbled bookbinding paper whose patterns evoke fluid, ephemeral forms. In combining a multiplicity of sources and elements (photographic representations, crafting materials, and wire netting), Sielska's works explore the avant-garde interest in modern, everyday materials. With these ready-made elements, Sielska's works critique the modern invention of the domestic space, a space separate from work, a space of privacy and comfort, and the experience and expectation of domesticity dictated by the rigid gender roles of the time. A specifically modern phenomenon, domesticity is 'a product of the confluence of capitalist economics, breakthroughs in technology, and the Enlightenment notion of individuality' that attracted harsh criticism in the early 20th century (Heynen, 2005: 236).

In *By a Window*, a young girl sits behind a table, staring longingly out of the window. The composition alludes to the physical confinement of women to and within domestic spaces, and the accompanying normative role for a woman in the household as a wife and/or mother. A photographic representation of a woman in Victorian-era dress and with a Victorian-era hairstyle is a possible gesture to the past, specifically highlighting the way in which this enforced domesticity and gendered division between private and public spaces was codified at the time. The presence of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century woman, confined to her domestic space can, in 1930s Poland, be understood in the context of the ubiquitous figure in Polish culture and the dominant ideology of *matka polka*, 'the Polish mother'.

Any degree of freedom and equality that women in Poland achieved during the interwar years might have appeared superficial. Earning the right to vote, albeit an important step, only served as a legal formality that did not translate into a change in social norms, especially in the largely conservative, Catholic Polish society. For the most part, women were (and still largely are) expected to strive for the model of 'the Polish mother': a woman who, even if in modern times might be allowed to work outside the home, is also expected to perform unassailable motherly and house duties. *Matka polka* can be considered almost a mythical figure in Polish culture, whose lore can be traced to an 1830 poem 'Do matki polki' ('To the Polish Mother') by the celebrated Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz. *Matka polka* is an archetypal character in Mickiewicz's poem, a stand-in for a secularized version of the Virgin Mary. She is an irreproachable woman, whose role in the poem is to ready a young generation of Polish men to fight for independence.<sup>10</sup> It is a reminder that the definitions of womanhood in Poland are often used and dictated by the needs of the state.

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<sup>10</sup> For an English-language source, see Anna Reading's *Polish Women, Solidarity and Feminism* (1992) and Anna Kuroczycka Schultes' 'The Image of *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother) in Contemporary Poland', *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* 5 (2014): 263-274.

In 19th century partitioned Poland, where language and cultural rituals were banned in the public sphere, the family unit became a marker of and upholder of the national identity, and while men were, in some instances, exiled or imprisoned, it fell to the women and especially to mothers to sustain the national identity. The dominant ideology of *matka polka* 'places woman on a pedestal whilst simultaneously chaining her to the family and the hearth' (Reading, 1992: 21). In the interwar period, after regaining independence, the patriotic duties of *matka polka* shifted from liberation to nation-building. Meanwhile, 'nationalism resulted in the dominant image of Matka-Polka which militated against women representing themselves ideologically or in practice as anything other than patriotic Catholic mother' (Reading, 1992: 21). Consequently, the lack of images of motherhood in Sielska's works marks a departure from the dominant cultural ideology of *matka polka* and the woman's place in the private and the public sphere.

The emergence and popularity of *matka polka* in the 19th century aligns with wider shifts and the construction of domesticity in Europe at the time.<sup>11</sup> While these studies reveal a connection between the domestic ideal and the rise of industrial capitalism and imperialism, the figure of *matka polka* exposes the links between domesticity and nationalism.<sup>12</sup> The Victorian-era woman in Sielska's montage can be seen as a powerful, apt reference to the 19th-century bourgeois home, whose dynamics and division of spaces ultimately came to define a woman's role in society. Building on the critique of bourgeois interiors of the time developed by Karl Teige, Walter Benjamin, and Soviet avant-garde artists, Hilde Heynen explains that 'these interiors were deeply ingrained with capitalist commodity culture and corresponded to an oppressive, patriarchal, individualist, and unjust social system' (2005: 18). In underscoring the cage-like quality of the home for many women, Sielska's collage echoes this entrenchment of the home's oppressive conditions that were critiqued at the time by other leftist artists and writers. This capitalist commodity culture, heightened after the Second World War, is also reflected in the choice of Gęsicka's ready-made materials which are rooted in the imagery of the American dream, represented by happy, suburban, white American families of the 1950s.

Societal pressure for women to be the strong yet subservient *matka polka*, to bear and raise children while taking care of the household and her husband's needs, are critiqued in the third collage *Composition with a Nude*. The composition is centred on a photograph of a nude woman reclining across a bed. Her arms are raised above her

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<sup>11</sup> See Donna Birdwell-Pheasant and Denise Lawrence Züniga (eds.), *House Life. Space, Place and Family in Europe* (1999).

<sup>12</sup> Also see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather. Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995).

head and her head is slumped slightly to the side, as if she were asleep. Her naked body appears vulnerable, as it is exposed to the viewing pleasure of the audience and, more strikingly, to the two large hands reaching out towards her, one above and one below, along with a large, sharp object that hovers over her. As with the previous collage, a sense of confinement and a prison-like state is introduced with the inclusion of a cut-out photograph of a wired fence. The composition could be read as a metaphor for the societal pressure women faced at that time, as the small hand (perhaps that of child) could represent motherhood while the large hands of a man could represent marital duties.

Through this tension-filled tableau, a visual commentary and critique on the changing role of women in society aligns with the wider debates on parenthood and marriage in Poland. Planned parenthood, both in form of contraception and abortion, was an intensely polemic topic in interwar Europe. In Poland, notions of birth control were at times tied to women's rights, but also to population control amongst the poorest classes, and to eugenics (Gawin, 2000: 227). Women's magazines such as *Kobieta Współczesna*, *Bluszcz*, and *Ewa* devoted their pages to advocating for decriminalizing abortions, offering women more contraceptive choices, and discussing men's and women's responsibilities in the domestic sphere. In 1929, a stricter abortion bill came into effect, leading to more illegal and dangerous underground abortions. In 1930, in protest of the law, Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński published the infamous *Piekło Kobiet* [Women's Hell], a collection of essays describing the current situation of women who sought abortions on their own and the legal and societal punishment they faced.<sup>13</sup>

The appropriation of the female body for political purposes extended further than what was, in the 1930s, referred to as forced motherhood. As Anna Reading points out, in early 20th-century Polish literature, 'the representation of women has become sexualized and Polish nationalism became linked with sexuality ... [t]he woman's body is a field/nature/battlefield to be dominated and violated. Women in early 20-century Polish literature are "taken," "undressed," fired at and used' (1992: 53). For example, Cyprian Norwid's (1821–1883) 'Undressed Ballad' combines nationalism and voyeurism with women's passivity and Greek mythology. The Polish word for 'undressed', *rozebrana*, shares its root and etymology with *rozbiory*, the term used for the partitioning of Poland. Therefore, in Norwid's poem, the undressed woman embodies partitioned Poland. She is silent and unseen because she is sleeping. Decades later, Sielska's contemporary, the self-proclaimed prodigal son of L'viv Józef

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<sup>13</sup> The essays were first published as a series of articles in 1929 in *Kurier Poranny* [The Morning Courier]. In his articles, Boy-Żeleński often included letters sent to him anonymously by women seeking abortions.

Wittlin (1896–1976), wrote in his novel *Salt of the Earth* (2018 [1935]): ‘Magda’s body was the only field on which he felt victor. It is difficult for masculine self-love to do without this’ (1935). Again, the woman’s naked, sexualized body is understood as a passive object used for a man’s fulfilment and psychological satisfaction. Suggestive of violence, it is a metaphor for the only battlefield a man can conquer.

Sielska’s *Composition with a Nude* highlights several aspects of women’s representation in Polish culture at the time. The scene is filled with the anticipation of violence and horror, as mysterious objects and phantom hands could at any moment snatch or tear apart the body of the woman as she lays there unaware. The woman’s passivity and obliviousness as to what is happening heighten the viewer’s own awareness of the potential of violence and harm that could be inflicted upon her, which produces a warning response. The image could, therefore, be read in the context of a woman’s inability to escape her social situation, from the dominant nationalistic ideology of *matka polka* to forced motherhood and ‘women’s hell’. The passivity of the female figure also represents a lack of power, weakness, and an overt sexual availability. As Linda Nochlin convincingly argues, in the history of Western painting, the ‘patriarchal discourse of power over women masks itself in the veil of the natural’ while representing women ‘within the implicit context of passivity, sexual availability, and helplessness’ (1988: 15). Sielska’s collage reverses the traditional notions of ‘natural’ depictions of the female body by representing the patriarchal discourse and dominant ideology as unnatural, disembodied, ghoulish hands, while making the traditional conditions of the representation of women extremely explicit. The image exposes male power and dominance over women, not as inherent and natural, but as a type of horror.

The deeply political private, personal, and domestic spheres are at the forefront of Sielska’s three photomontages. For Poles during the partitioning the degree of freedom in private home life was a substitute for its lack in the public, political realm. Behind closed doors, Poles were able to express themselves more fully and freely, speak their native language, and teach their children Polish history and culture. Publicly, women were expected to be passive and political unengaged, while privately performing the duties of *matka polka* and self-sacrifice. The violence, voyeurism, and women’s passivity represented in Sielska’s work question whether women’s bodies were ever allowed to be private, unobjectified or not exploited as a sexual and political battleground for different ideologies.

*Eve, By the Window*, and *Composition with a Nude* are artworks that prompt important political discussion as they explore the myth, universality and binarism of the figure of Eve, a woman’s confinement in her domestic role, and a sense of violence and of the exploitation women experience daily in order to address the private and political

sphere of interwar Polish women. As a Jewish-Ukrainian woman living in Poland, Sielska was in a unique position to critique these patriarchal, nationalistic notions. The photomontages, if not struggling directly against the dominant ideology, together make this ideology and its oppression more visible. These tensions arise between heterogeneous elements within each collage because of the dialogic between centripetal and centrifugal forces of the visual language incorporated. Through this combinatory effect, the collages allow the viewer to see parts of themselves and the process of their own social construction through the visual language of the dominant male voice.

### **The Grotesque American Dream in Weronika Gęsicka's Digital Photomontages**

Unlike the heterogeneous visual language of disparate elements in Sielska's works, where the cutting and pasting process is clearly visible, in Weronika Gęsicka's *Traces* this process is intentionally blurred, hidden, and ostensibly seamless. Thanks to digital software, the differences between the original, ready-made images and the manipulated elements of the photomontage are nearly eliminated, resulting in scenes that oscillate between humorous and grotesque. At the same time, Gęsicka's works, like those of Sielska, appropriate and manipulate a ready-made image of an intimate, personal, and familial quality in a way that makes the audience question their validity and value.

Gęsicka's process of montage-making begins with the photographs, which she refers to as traces, or evidence of existence. *Traces* was created using digitized vintage photographs made available through an image bank. After purchasing the photographs, Gęsicka looks for an element of inspiration in each image: '[g]estures, poses, elements of surroundings. Details which people sometimes ignore. I try to erase, as much as I can, the difference between an original image and my own modification' (Hernandez, 2016). Using Adobe Photoshop, the chosen element is then transposed to other parts of the image (Reiter, 2016). For instance, in *Untitled 15*, a woman and two children are engaged in the activity of colouring, but instead of colouring the book, the subjects are colouring themselves or each other. The mother is applying a crayon to the boy's hair while the two children draw on their faces. Black lines, like those in the colouring book that delineate borders, are applied to the faces, hair, and clothes of the subjects. Covering their faces, the lines form a chequered pattern like a thin veil or a cage. In another example, *Untitled 19*, a woman, a little boy, and a man carrying a little girl in his arms are standing around in a kitchen holding glasses of milk. In a grotesque manipulation of the hand gestures, the milk, like melted gold, is pouring over the woman and the girls' heads. Here, from the original photograph, the detail of pouring milk from a cup is duplicated, expanded, and layered over the vintage photograph.

In erasing difference to create a seamless surface, Gęsicka echoes what Rosalind Krauss observes in surrealist photography of the 1930s:

The photograph carries on one continuous surface the trace or imprint of all that vision captures in one glance. The photographic image is not only a trophy of this reality, but a document of its unity as that which-was-present-at-one-time ... By preserving the body of the print intact, they could make it read photographically, that is to say, in direct contact with reality' (Krauss, 1986: 107).

Krauss argues that through the 'strategy of doubling', Man Ray's process of solarization creates a 'kind of cleavage in reality' that produces 'special meaning' (Krauss, 1986). Photographs have a special connection to reality and manipulating the appropriated ready-made images allows the artist to create a new reality: 'these images, modified in various ways, are wrapped in new context: our recollections of these people and situations are transformed and gradually blur into a new reality' (Gęsicka, 2016). Gęsicka's works disturb the viewer's perception—or, to use the discourse of the digital, create a glitch, a lapse in perception—so that the viewer must look not once but multiple times in order to take in what is actually happening. Through the technique of digital montage, of copying and pasting, of grafting one element onto another, the reality within the photograph is disturbed, at times producing a grotesque expression. Simultaneously, the rest of the photograph remains unaltered, giving the viewer a false sense of cohesion in the image. As a result, the viewer's perception of reality is also disturbed, in disbelief of what they have seen, they must do a double take to confirm what is transpiring in the work. In looking at the photomontage, the viewer is left with a glitched sense of perception and that perhaps the image might return to looking 'normal'. However, it does not: instead, it lingers, forcing one to rethink, reconfigure, and adjust.

Similar to Krauss, Gęsicka acknowledges that the photographs function as traces, 'evidence of a presence', a documentation of people and experience. Gęsicka, operating like a detective, is interested in the real or fictitious relationships of the subjects in the photograph: 'it is hard to figure out whether they are spontaneous or entirely staged ... Who are, or were, these people in the photographs? Are they actors playing happy families, or real people whose photographs were put up for sale by the image bank?' (Gęsicka, 2016). The domestic and familial scenes in the photographs appear ordinary, as if taken out of a family album, but for the viewer, the people in the photographs are strangers and therefore can never exist as recollections of familiar and cherished experiences. Instead, the characters in the photographs have no choice but to become a *type* of family, a symbol, and a signifier: a representation of Americana and the perennial American dream propagated by media and politicians following the Second World War.



Unmistakably, the photographs depict a mid-century American life that is evident in the clothes, hairstyles, furnishing, and architecture captured by the camera. For the most part, the photographs chosen by Gęsicka are of smiling, white (except for one of the artworks), apparently heterosexual, middle-class nuclear families: mother, father, children; home life and activities such as playtime or gardening. In few instances the events take place outside the home: a happy photo of teenagers on the beach, a dance, or a school gym class. The ready-made reality of these photographs presents the viewer with what (at the time of their creation) might have been idyllic, homey experiences, but these photographs of American domesticity are inextricably tied to post-war recovery, the selling of the American dream to the public, and the entanglement of Cold War politics.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States experienced a domestic revival brought on by Cold War anxieties, demographic shifts, and domestic policies promoted by the government. Following the end of the Second World War, American society vehemently worked towards reaffirmed traditional gender roles. Women who supported the war effort by working in factories or who found employment elsewhere were expected to give up those jobs for the GIs returning from the front, and to accept unpaid domestic duties as mothers and housewives. In turn, the obsession with domestic fulfilment and family life was directly related to Cold War politics. In *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Elaine Tyler May extends the foreign strategy of containment by the United States against the spread of communism around the world to a domestic life that also had to be contained, to conform to predefined parameters of an idealized familial hierarchy. In analysing the connections between domesticity and Cold War politics in America, May argues that the family-centred culture reflected fears of communism, nuclear war, and aspirations for stability and prosperity:

To alleviate these fears, Americans turned to the family as a bastion of safety in an insecure world, while experts, leaders, and politicians promoted codes of conduct and enacted public policies that would bolster the American home. Like their leaders, most Americans agreed that family stability appeared to be the best bulwark against the dangers of the cold war (May, 2017: 9).

May explains that leaders and politicians had a vested interest in presenting to the outside world a harmonious American society based on traditional values, where class and racial struggles have been resolved. Although far from the truth, painting such a picture of a happy, prosperous, heterosexual, white, middle-class family became a political and a foreign policy agenda.

A cogent example of how the private spaces of a home became political tools in the service of domestic and foreign policy was the so-called ‘Kitchen Debate’

between the then Vice President Richard Nixon and the Soviet prime minister Nikita Khrushchev (CSPAN, 2021). In 1959, as part of the easing of relations, the Soviet Union hosted an American Show in Moscow and in return the Soviets would display their achievements in science and technology at the New York Coliseum. Nixon travelled to Moscow to meet Khrushchev and the two wandered around the American exhibit. The conversations between the two politicians, recorded on colour videotape for the first time and broadcast in both countries, shows them squabbling over communist and capitalist ideologies, technological advancement, and the latest kitchen gadgets available in their respective countries. The competition between the superpowers extended beyond a geopolitical battleground and the space race, and into the kitchens of the American household. Standing among dishwashers, ovens, and refrigerators, Nixon and Khrushchev argued over the superiority of the American kitchen design, with Khrushchev insisting that the same technologies are available to the average Soviet citizen. The ideological debates, on the merits of communism and capitalism, play out in the cultural sphere of the home where the American superiority rested with the suburban, domestic life, and consumer goods.

The photographs that Gęsicka chooses for her photomontages are snapshots that capture the idealized version of America, of an outward image that the political leaders wanted to project. In many ways they were successful. The image of the domestic, suburban American life became ubiquitous and enduring, and evidence for US cultural hegemony can be seen in an interview with the Polish magazine *Wysokie Obcasy*, where Gęsicka explains the significance of this American tableau:

The most important goal was the breaking down of certain stereotypes. When we look at the pastel photos of 1950s America, immediately a film reel is projected—the image of an ideal family. The man is returning from work with a briefcase, dinner is ready, the kids are well behaved, and the housewife looks perfect. I thought that I wanted to spoil this ideal image a little (Gęsicka, 2016).

In many of the photomontages, Gęsicka aims to disturb traditional hierarchies. In *Untitled 1*, for instance, one can imagine the original photograph as three young women in bathing suits sitting on the shoulders of three men. Gęsicka ‘spoils’ the image, as she ‘removes’ the heads of the men by layering the bodies of the women over them. In the resulting photomontage, the bodies of the headless men function as plinths that the women sit on top of. For Gęsicka, the men appear to be melting’ into the women, making the women the more dominant figures in the photo (Gęsicka, 2016) while the presence of the men is diminished.

In each photomontage from *Traces*, Gęsicka destroys, or 'spoils' the ideal image of the American suburban family. The language appropriated from the ready-made images of the photographs is that of the American cultural hegemony that was established in the 1950s, and that was reaffirmed after the fall of communism. With the transition from socialism to capitalism in the 1990s in the former Eastern Bloc, for some, it appeared that the American dream might just become a reality at home as American products and companies became available in the Polish market. As Poland was to adopt the US model of market economy through shock-therapy and replace the one-party government with new democratic institutions, it became increasingly likely that Poland might also adopt some of its culture. As Gęsicka admits, the image of a perfect 1950s family was ubiquitous, and there was considerable fascination with American life and pop culture in communist Poland. Today, however, these images do not hold the same meaning: certainly not for Gęsicka, nor for a generation of viewers for whom that idealized version of family and the American dream never really existed.

Gęsicka's photomontages manipulate the cultural hegemonic language of the United States into, at times, humorous and grotesque imagery that disturbs its authority and power. In Bakhtinian terms, the image of the American family and the capitalist, consumerist, and patriarchal ideology that it holds is the centralizing, authoritative, and normalizing language of the dominant discourse (Bakhtin, 1981 [1934–1935]: 271). In altering the totalizing visual language of the photograph by reproducing its details, gestures, or changing the scale of objects, Gęsicka inserts her own language into the discourse, producing a dialogism marked by different 'accents' or 'intonations' that are accomplished through not-so-subtle changes to the composition. The photomontage produces a new reality, and in acting like a perceptual glitch, constitutes a de-centralizing, subjective visual language.

The language of the ready-made appropriated by both Sielska and Gęsicka is the language of what Bakhtin would call 'centripetal forces', the dominant language that, through the technique of the photomontage, the artists inject with subjectivity. Both artists rely on the same strategies of photomontage: cutting, pasting, and the combinatory process of appropriating ready-made photographic elements, but differ in their tactics, or the execution of those strategies. For instance, the two artists use the 'photo' element and 'montage' process of photomontage differently and to different effects, and in doing so, they attest to the diversity and enduring interest in critically engaging with the technique. Where Sielska's works use intertextuality through dialogic discourse by appropriating multiple cultural signs and works by other artists, Gęsicka's photomontages operate within a closed system of a singular sign

(the perfect, suburban American life) whose visual language is altered to create a new, strange reality. In Sielska's work, although still present, the photographic element is one of many other materials used to create a photomontage. In Gęsicka's works, on the other hand, photography, with its special connection to reality and unified surface, plays an integral role in the creation of the new reality. The montage process, or the cut and paste effect, are also different in the works of these artists. The combinatory process in Sielska's works is meant to be visible so that the multiplicity of utterances and meanings produce a dialogue between the ready-made elements. In the digital age, Adobe Photoshop allows Gęsicka's works to have a seamless effect: the photography and the 'pasted' elements are combined in such a way as to create a complete image, where the boundaries between original and altered can disappear.

Yet, in analysing the context of the works in question and the impulse to dismantle the dominant visual language, it is possible to discern the lasting connections between print and digital photomontage practices in the works of Sielska and Gęsicka. Sielska's works are informed by the instability of the 1930s, born out of economic depression and the rise of fascism and, more locally, by the Polish project of nation-building and the need for citizens to participate and conform to a specific vision of society. In practice, this vision is often tied to the idea that the traditional family unit can provide national stability and prosperity. This is evident in the United States, where promoting the happy, suburban family became part of domestic and foreign policy during the Cold War. Although alluding to the uncertainty and containment associated with the 1950s, Gęsicka's works emerge from a post-Cold War milieu defined by the political, economic, and social anxieties associated with the transition from communism to capitalism in Poland. Furthermore, it is impossible to ignore the immediate political context of Gęsicka's 2016 photomontages, which were created a year after Poland's rapid turn towards conservative values and politics in the form of the right-wing Law and Justice party's 2015 landslide election victory, which ushered in a raft of 'pro-family' policies, including harsh anti-abortion laws.

In each of these times of instability and uncertainty, political forces in power employ an existing visual language representative of conservative and traditional family values to meet a political goal. Meanwhile, in both sets of artworks, the technique of photomontage allows the artists to, quite literally, cut up this existing visual language. As a result, the works not only challenge the specific content of the images (the representation of women or the idealized family life) but, more importantly, they criticize how the images are used by the repressive forces in power. In dismantling the traditional representations of women and family life, the photomontages attempt to prevent the dominant, centrifugal forces from continuing to abuse these representations.

As Sielska's photomontages prove, the ostensibly private realm of the home, the historically and traditionally designated 'woman's sphere', served to perpetuate national myths and furthered specific political and ideological goals in interwar Poland, while the ready-made images of happy, suburban American families that Gęsicka manipulates reference Cold War politics of containment and feelings of anxiety. Sielska's and Gęsicka's photomontages do not only address the outmoded, patriarchal, and gendered representations of women, domesticity, and family. More importantly, in their appropriation of ready-made imagery, the works in question 'cut-up' and dismantle the visual language adopted by hegemonic forces attempting to homogenise, promote, and control social and cultural values. To destroy this dominant language, photomontage can serve as a weapon against oppressive ideologies that would exploit the imagery for their own political purposes. The relevance of photomontage is evident in how it has adapted and evolved over the last century. Digital technologies and the proliferation of media expanded the creative process of montage-making, but the modernist and avant-garde impulses to challenge traditional modes of representation and the experience of reality remain as important as ever.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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