

Ballsy

My recent engagement with Agata Madejska's new body of work for the exhibition *Technocomplex* made me realize that I lived three years of my life in an area guarded by dragons. Usually, one imagines that what is protected by dragons must be some sort of treasure, and that kind of makes sense when I tell you that I lived in the City of London, or how it is often referred to as The Square Mile. It is a zone in the centre of London which governs much of what shapes our daily existence through its control over the financial sector. It is where the heart of the UK's wealth and banking industry is based, protected by a special legal status and guarded by century old privileges.

The political economist Ann Pettifor tells us that what makes money and the finance market so successful in today's age of global exchange is the ability of money to move quickly and invisibly across borders, very much like digital images and information, with (to date) very little hindrance. This means that global financing is not in need of vessels or visas and therefore has a unique advantage over other economies such as trade and labour.¹ We will see whether this may change, now that Theresa May has officially triggered Article 50, however it made me curious about what these dragons might actually be guarding if money can circulate this freely. Maybe their presence is not about safeguarding what could be removed, but about protecting the very status of the reserve itself. The theorist Joana Rafael describes a reserve as an architecturally demarcated space that protects spatial and temporal integrity 'in order to prevent any contamination that threatens it.'² According to Rafael, through architectural means, a 'temenos', an isolated universe is created that is set apart from the rest of the world and held in a forced stasis.³ Could this be what the dragons are guarding?

The dragons captured in Agata Madejska's new work series *Tender Offer*, 2017 were created as boundary marks, cast iron statues of dragons on metal or stone plinths that mark the limits of the City of London. As with many public sculptures, their visual language is shaped by the objective to be recognizable from afar, however only an up-close encounter reveals a curious yet important detail. The perspective of the flaneur on foot in looking up at the creatures from below will find the dragons oversized testicles exposed. A surprising attention to fictional detail paid by the creators one might think, yet if one considers that 'the networks that dominate the financial sector are overwhelmingly male and often shockingly sexist'⁴ as Pettifor states, this veneration of male power as an emblem and gate keeper begins to make sense.

In her new series, Madejska focuses on these curious insignias of power through photographing the dragons from below using a close crop of the testicles in question. The perspective of the wandering observer is one that she has occupied herself on her many walks of the perimeters of the city, walks that she has been undertaking with increased frequency in the wake of the EU referendum, pondering the City's stake and role in the pending divorce. In *Tender Offer* she uses an alienating crop that obscures her subjects and eludes their context, a typical device used in her practice. Similar to older series such as *The Order of Solids* (2010–13), Madejska's perspective, choice of lighting and framing results in a highly abstracted space that only hesitantly reveals itself to be the bottom view of the boundary mark dragons. These techniques are reminiscent of Robert Mapplethorpe's

1 Pettifor, Ann, and Mae O'Hagan, Ellie, (2017), *Money is a Feminist Issue*, [online] Available from <http://www.londonreviewbookshop.co.uk/events/past/2017/2/the-production-of-money-ann-pettifor-and-ellie-mae-ohagan> (Accessed 8 April 2017).

2 Rafael, Joana, (2017), *'Mutually Assured Survival' and the reserves of future catastrophe*, [online] Available from <http://thisisthebarbershop.blogspot.de/> (Accessed 8 April 2017).

3 Ibid.

4 Pettifor, Ann, and Mae O'Hagan, Ellie, (2017), *Money is a Feminist Issue*, [online] Available from <http://www.londonreviewbookshop.co.uk/events/past/2017/2/the-production-of-money-ann-pettifor-and-ellie-mae-ohagan> (Accessed 8 April 2017).

photographic gaze that solidifies its subjects, that makes them appear universal and oblivious to time. Madejska chooses to portray these archetypes of masculinity through an extreme perspective from below which supports the glorification of their virile power whilst introducing an ironic take, questioning what this exaggerated display of masculinity is supposed to achieve and whom it is meant to impress?

It is a sad fact that the power of men in the financial sector is paramount. A visit to the City proves the domineering mixture of suits, ties and testosterone. This impression is supported by an exclusive study undertaken by the Financial Times, which proves that, despite a near 50–50 gender balance in overall staff numbers in the City of London, a mere 19.5 per cent of senior roles across the top City employers are held by women.⁵ How are women supposed to claim space and visibility in such a prejudiced environment? The thrust of women into the periphery condemned to indifference is reminiscent of Barbara Loden's landmark film 'Wanda', (1970). Despite having been made almost half a century ago, the film continues to be a poignant take on women's struggle to claim space. The film chronicles the drifting existence of the young woman Wanda, portrayed by Loden in rural Pennsylvania. Wanda is a woman who is unable to adapt to her environment, to function in the way society demands her to. Her limited grasp on the space that shapes her surrounding becomes a physical challenge that leaves her consistently threatened to escape the margins of the screen and the camera makes a show of the struggle to keep her in view. The film is a portrait of a woman that does not have any space of her own and unable to make any space her own.⁶ Consequently Wanda becomes raw material, blending in with the background, her figure hides in plain sight almost indistinguishable from her environment. The theme of women not fitting in, not belonging or not having the authority to claim their own space is still a subject even after over a century of the women's liberation movements and it appears to be especially obstinate in male dominated reserves such as the City of London.

The expansionist theme of the city's architecture follows a capitalist interpretation of progress, demanding ever-growing architectures to represent its ideology of perpetual advance through growth. Their representational manifestation's total absorption is told in Madejska's series of fossil works. For these, the artist took minute photographs of the surface of facades using Portland limestone. Here in particular the facades of the London Stock Exchange and of the headquarters of the diamond empire De Beers Group. The selected limestone is characteristic for the millions upon millions of petrified fossils of protozoa that have been enclosed in its material and clearly visible in the buildings. For each final collage work, Madejska takes more than 30 images of various parts of a limestone facade and then stitches the multiple elements together in a meticulous and time-consuming practice creating one unique fictional continuous surface. Each finished piece consists of photographs, which will be reshuffled and reused without any quality loss every time when stitching a new image from the raw photographic material. As such, the final outcome is no longer a reference to the original captured with the camera. Here the phenomenon that the optical pattern creates can be identified as 'pareidolia', the perception of a recognizable image or a meaningful pattern where none exists or is intended. Not

⁵ Jenkins, Patrick and Agnew, Harriet, (2015), *London: Sexism and the City*, [online] Available from <https://www.ft.com/content/7c182ab8-9c33-11e4-b9f8-00144feabdco> (Accessed 7 April 2017).

⁶ Alvarez Lopez, Cristina and Martin, Adrian, (2016), *Woman in a Landscape: Barbara Loden's Wanda*, [online] Available from <https://vimeo.com/161556412> (Accessed 4 April 2017).

unlike in Alfred Stieglitz' famous 'Equivalents' (1925–1934), we are able to project imagination and drift away in abstracted fictional pattern. Madejska sees these fossil formations as witnesses of a process telling the stories of an evolution that has winners and losers, presenting us with the remnants of beings that quite literally, and not unlike Wanda, have become trophy material employed for the self-aggrandizement of others.

The third body of work in the show *Technokomplex*, 2017, which lends its title to the exhibition, is also informed by Madejska's research into the City of London. On her exploration Madejska witnessed the Square Mile's corporate occupants celebrating themselves through ever larger, sleeker and increasingly opulent representative architectural endeavours; capital ventures that devour anything that may stand in their way and that have little or no concerns for the needs and concerns of the citizens affected by them.

One of these representative architectures, 20 Fenchurch Street, or as nicknamed by the people of London the 'Walkie Talkie', had a particularly severe impact on its surroundings. The building is characterized by its unique concave curvature, a feature that had the calamitous side effect of reflecting intense sunlight, sending a heat-ray onto the pavement of the street below and melting parts of a parked car. This physical relationship between the architecture, the sunlight and the surrounding environment prompted Madejska to synthesize her photographic explorations into sculptural form. The complex has, akin to the fossil stitchings, an untimely quality that is both prehistoric and of the now. Through the unique combination of photographic paper and poured pewter, Madejska transfers the light-sensitive resin coating of the photographic paper onto a sculptural object. The two elements unite in the hardening process, leaving the light-sensitive resin removed from the paper and melted into the poured pewter surface. The chemical reaction between the pewter and the photographic paper results in a surface structure that resembles enamel or metal work and yet the photo sensitivity of the resin proceeds in a gradual darkening of the object's surface until the exposure is completed. Not unlike an alchemist, Madejska's marriage of elements is a search for purification. Her use of metal in the photographic process reaches back to the early days of photography when metal plates were still customary. *Technokomplex* is resultantly revisiting the origins of photography in an age where its physical properties are about to become extinct. Madejska allows the resulting piece a life of its own, noble, immortal, fossilized. Removed from the image or the notion of a source her process is a form of deconstruction that separates the image from its carrier leaving us with an object instead of an image. The material eats itself. A process of emancipation has begun.

Ouroboros, the self-consuming dragon may very well be the underlying symbol of this constellation of works. The Square Mile with its boundary mark dragons, who in its greed and struggle for self protection and exclusion consumes itself, is united with photography, a field based on the transformation of light into the representation of an image, here liberated from that task through the re-imagining of the original process devoid of its duty to depict. As symbol for alchemy, Ourobouros represents both this strive for gold and the perfection of a process through self-referentiality—making itself the *prima materia*.