

Materiality and virtuality, touch and distance from the (femi) graphic perspective.

Irena Keckes & Katarzyna Zimna

INTRODUCTION

The time of the pandemic has acted as a magnifying glass, directing one's attention to some features of printmaking practice that correspond with the contemporary condition of humans and their needs in terms of communication, contact and relations, with oneself and with others. As two female printmakers practising relief printing techniques and constantly trying to push and expand the range of tools and recipes in our graphic 'kitchen', we exchange and discuss our narratives, experiences, and experiments. This process of exchange resulted in our DO NOT TOUCH exhibition presented as part of the Impact 12 conference (Figure 1). The keywords that kept reappearing during these last two years and which define our project are materiality, touch, and presence, which are constantly followed and supplemented by virtuality, distance and representation.

MATERIALITY

The above notions resonate well with Jennifer L. Roberts' series of Mellon Lectures (2021) entitled "Contact: Art and the Pull of Print", with their conceptual brackets that can be identified with two opposite or complementary concepts: contact and alienation. In this paper, we focus not only on the process of making the matrices, and the meaning that is carried by their material qualities but also on the process of hand-printing the matrix and the post-print activities, such as sewing. These all stages rely on touch, the direct, intimate contact of the artist with the materiality of the matrix and the printing substrate. Sensory perception is vital in the creative process; it interweaves it with the processes of life and material reality that shape and inspire artistic vision. According to Jennifer L. Roberts: "Every print is the record of a contact event: pressure followed by release. This makes print an especially subtle medium for exploring alternative models of the sensory image and for working through the social continuum of touch, from intimacy to violence." In our practices, we experiment with the

sensual aspect of printmaking and the idea of "new materiality", exploring how different materials of a matrix, of paper or fabric "give life to different realities and actualise aspects of subjectivity, embodiment and human-world relations that are particular to their material qualities".

Printmaking is an indirect medium. The first and most significant point of contact between the artist and her work is the matrix (Figure 2). The relationship between the artist, her work and the viewer relies on the materiality of the matrix and the time invested in its making. All printmaking



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 1: Irena Keckes and Katarzyna Zimna, DO NOT TOUCH, view of the exhibition

Figure 2: Irena Keckes, carving woodblock matrix

techniques evoke different connotations; the workshop can vary from strong physical contact as with woodcut or metal engraving, chemical treatment as with intaglio techniques or it can be experimental, more amateurish in a way, using everyday materials and items to preserve their traces or trace their meanings.

For many years now, Katarzyna, in her practice, has been trying to use characteristic features of printmaking as meaningful elements supporting the message of her works. In her recent projects, partially presented at the Impact 12 exhibition, she has been exploring different materials, obtained from her close surroundings, that can be used to make a matrix. These experiments have been dictated by the pandemic situation and the growing importance of the domestic environment, as well as by her ongoing interest in expressing feminine or feminist positions in artmaking (Figure 3).

The work "Reverse", being her contribution to the DO NOT TOUCH exhibition, comes from the open cycle "Love is Patient", in which she makes matrices from small elements of her surroundings, including, above all, ironing beads that her daughters use for their creative play. The slow process of making matrices and their hand-printing has been a cure for permanent stress and fear and can be interpreted as an expression of love, an attempt at humility, patience, and non-thinking. The Reverse is a double self-portrait: two matrices made of beads and grass, and two prints that mirror the images of each other. The matrices are indispensable elements of this work so they are being presented together with the prints, referring to the interwoven aspects of human experience, while, at the same time, being intellectual, spiritual, and deeply immersed in the material and bodily processes of life (Figure 4).

The matrix on display provokes the impulse to touch. This is instinctive, although, as trained viewers, we know that we should NOT touch the work. However, is the matrix the WORK, the complete being that gains special rights? The connotation of a pregnant woman comes to mind. Most people feel they can touch her belly as this is neither a part of her body nor a new human being that must be protected. The matrix similarly shows her feminine or maternal nature; it is fundamental for the work's existence, but treated as a minor element, being part of the process, not the outcome. By using meaningful materials and exposing the matrices, Katarzyna places them in the spotlight, bringing to attention the materiality of the printmaking medium. As Basia Sliwiska and Astrid Korporaal write: "Her attention to the matrix, the primary element of the printmaking process, raises questions around visibility of labour and care involved in the production of an image. Symbolically, she also pays tribute to the unacknowledged affective and care labour performed daily in domestic spaces and beyond."

Over the past two years, and at times during lockdowns and the restriction of physical movement and in-person social contacts, Irena's practice has increasingly moved towards experimenting with printing on various types of natural and synthetic fabrics, including cotton, linen, polyester, chiffon, and more (Figure 5). She has also introduced a sewing



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3: Katarzyna Zimna, matrix made with ironing beads and the process of hand-printing

Figure 4: Katarzyna Zimna, Reverse, 2021, the matrix made of grass (detail)

Figure 5: Irena Keckes, combining printmaking and sewing

component to her practice, combining it with her exploratory prints on thin, transparent fabric and papers. A sewing machine has become her 'drawing tool', implementing a variety of patterns and lines sewn over her prints. She treats a sewing thread as an extension of a print, being its integral, united part. The sewing thread flows through printed areas and streams out of them to an empty part of the fabric or paper. Lines and patterns intersect and touch, adding to the dynamic of the prints so that they become innately one with the sewn threads. Irena often leaves long threads sewn throughout the printed work but also allows them to hang freely from the end of each print, exiting its design. Imperfection, spontaneity, and the absence of any intention to create the illusion of reality characterise these works (Figure 6).



Figure 6

The symbolism of thread dates back in history: there are legends and myths related to spinning or weaving threads. The Greek myth of the Minotaur and the labyrinth and Ariadne's thread may serve to illustrate the creative passage of using threads and sewing as an integral part of Irena's print works. Thread in the myth "not only was the link between the outside world and the centre of the labyrinth but also the link allowing one to go from the realm of darkness to the realm of light. (...) Taoists often associate thread with the backward and forward motion of the shuttle across the loom: life and death, evolution and involution of manifestation. The Rig Veda sees weaving as a symbol of the rhythm of life and its endless alternation. Thread is one of the meanings of the word sūtra, denoting the Buddhist scriptures. (...) Throughout the Mediterranean Basin, spinning and weaving are associated with the participation of the woman in the work of creation."

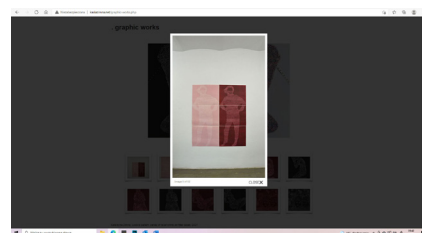


Figure 7

Just as Ariadne's thread helps Theseus to find his way back out of the labyrinth, the threads Irena uses meticulously in her prints may be seen as a method of persistence to overcome the uncertainties and anxieties experienced during the ongoing pandemic, and to battle times of loneliness. Sewing, unlike printing, is a direct intervention in the work's tissue. It somehow materialises the artist's presence, even though, in this case, the work of the hand is being enhanced by the machine. Sewing also makes the work more tactile: it provokes the desire to touch.



Figure 8

VIRTUALITY

Recently, the haptic quality of the process as a part of the artist's experience, and the message that it carries, remains hidden and it is difficult to transfer and share it with the audience in the virtual distribution of the image (Figure 7). The question that arises is: How can the experience, the knowledge "situated" in the process be re-presented? How can we interpret and make the most of the notion of touch to translate it into "tuché" (Lacanian "encounter with the real"), despite the mediation of the screen? What are the benefits and dangers of the newly gained virtual identity of hand-carved or hand-printed imperfect material entities? Can we provocatively argue that virtual presentation can be seen as a "porno-graphic" element of the printmaking practice, with the images being inevitably digitally edited, manipulated, and presented in such a way that they look flawless, alienated from the real world?

Figure 6: Irena Keckes, sewing process
 Figure 7: Katarzyna Zimna, virtual gallery
 Figure 8: Irena Keckes and Katarzyna Zimna, DO NOT TOUCH, view of the exhibition

These questions can be asked also in the context of our exhibition proposed for IMPACT 12. We decided to present the exhibition online because of logistical issues. However, this situation provoked reflection: How can an exhibition directly referring to the sense of touch be presented in the virtual environment? For us, it was a challenge but it also offered a new dimension to the project that we could play with. The title of the exhibition—DO NOT TOUCH—in this new context has become the constatation of a fact rather than a provocation. At the same time, it has made us try to make the experience of viewing as tactile as possible; it has evoked mindfulness and intensified our perceptions of the notions of repetition and spontaneity, and how we use it throughout our work. Further, it has, again, summoned up Lacan’s “tuché”, the encounter with the real (Figure 8).

Exhibiting online has its advantages and disadvantages; as with almost every aspect of life, there are more grey areas than solely black or white. It can be seen as a ‘yin-yang’ association, where we constantly try to create balance in our lives and art. While we lose the experience of directly encountering art in front of our eyes, we lose that touch, on the other hand, we have learnt a lot about how to successfully exhibit online. We have, in a way, become ‘tech nerds’, learning new skills we would not have otherwise. Viewing art online and exhibiting online brings a different set of experiences. Are the works presented online the same works that we encounter in reality? This, in a way, is a process of double representation. Virtual exhibitions provide experiences that are much more controlled by the artist than traditional ones, like images on dating portals. However, exhibiting online has opened doors for many artists because of its accessibility and affordability. It can connect people in unparalleled ways. Losing something, gaining something: yin and yang. When events take place both in-person and online, we see in them inclusiveness, interdependence, interactions, connections, and the synergy of systems that supplement one another.

TOUCH AND DISTANCE

Through our abovementioned works, we also explore the narrative strands entangled with the ambiguous experience of touch: intimacy, contact and violence. The COVID-19 pandemic and the recommendations of “the new normal” in terms of social distancing and social contacts have brought yet another dimension to our perception of the notion of touch.

The pandemic has been present for over two years now, and it has become intrinsically interwoven into our fibre of being and living in this world that encircles us. It affects us all, while we continually learn to navigate through it and reinvent ourselves through everyday living and functioning. Irena’s response and contribution to the DO NOT TOUCH exhibition are repurposed and printed medical robes, a testimony to our realities and contemporary times we live in and witness (Figure 9).

She experimented with printing medical robes that were received as part of COVID prevention equipment while teaching face-to-face classes at university. She printed medical gloves in fusion with her carved wood



Figure 9

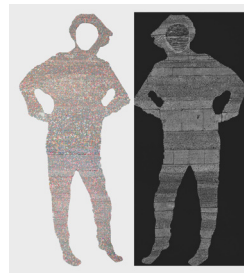


Figure 10

and linoleum blocks on the robes, making overlapping configurations and designs, and reshaping, recycling, and re-processing the robes by sewing in black thread and different patterns. In so doing, she experimented with materiality and the notion of touch, passing each robe numerous times through her hands: first while printing, then when sewing threads through it, repetitively. Through this process of repetition that involves contemplation, the robes gained a new form and purpose; life and art became one. For the artist, these processes inspire thought and action and symbolise rebirth, regeneration, the re-establishment of balance, and the triumph of creativity and life over a shattering time of solitude, angst, void, and desolation. To sew, to stitch, to attach, to mend, and to create became a way of finding a resonance or of restoring or repairing broken aspects of life affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Irena created five robes printed in black ink, sewn with patterns of black thread that are superimposed over prints and in unprinted areas. The sewing thread, a drawing interwoven with print-media work, is an essential part of this cycle of Irena's work, suggesting the connection between life and death, light and dark, despair and resilience. The sixth robe in the DO NOT TOUCH exhibition is the latest she created and is the only one printed in red ink, containing carved patterns and patterns sewn in red thread. As the COVID restrictions have recently been lowered, and life is very slowly returning to what still is a "new normal", this last, red robe signifies a ray of hope, a desire to transcend the distance, in an emotional, spiritual, and physical sense.

Katarzyna, in her work, reflects upon the positive and negative connotations of touch from the female perspective and women's constant fight for their rights and their general sense of safety (Figure 10). Her double self-portrait in the "Reverse" project can be also seen as a reference to the resistance body posture of "women on strike". In recent years, in Poland, there have been numerous women's demonstrations in the fight for their reproductive rights, saying out loud, screaming: "Don't touch us! Don't decide about our bodies and beliefs!" Unfortunately, the ruling right-wing party has so far gained the upper hand in this battle. The tiny circular shapes of beads forming one of the matrices refer to these multiple female voices and generally "allude to the circular structures characterising many women's practices. With no beginning and end, the circle is both a temporal and spatial marking of the affective and tactile qualities of processes." To touch, in this context, refers to someone crossing the boundaries of one's established zone of safety and subjectivity, violating one's rights. It is a reversal of the usual connotations of touch and distance.

SUMMARY

This illustrated talk, part of a reflective panel, has discussed printmaking practices in the time of the pandemic, lockdowns, isolation, and how we might re-learn to function as before, in our lives as female artists. The Femigraphic collective's work has shifted, even though, in a way, before the pandemic, we communicated virtually and created collaborative print installations using mail and email communication. This part of the

challenge has not changed for us. However, over the past two years, we have experienced the benefits of exhibiting online, while still questioning what our work has gained from appearing in the virtual mode, and what it has lost in terms of direct communication, socialising, and being able to meet in-person more often than every two, three or more years. Irena's works, printed/repurposed medical robes, incorporate sewing and thread as an integral part. The thread in her sewing of prints signifies connectivity, continuation, and resilience, and, as the thread breaks, it represents the imperfections and fragilities of life. These works were created in the solitude of her studio and with little social interaction. They were created through processes of introspection and self-reflection about loss, solitude, and personal and human scale tragedies, but as a manifestation of spirit and the healing process. The materiality of the creative process was an important aspect of keeping in touch with the real world.

Katarzyna's experiments with simple materials drawn from her closest surroundings used to make matrices have opened new paths for further explorations and brought together aspects of materiality and meaning (representation) as two sides of the same experience. The presence or, as in the case of the online show, the presentation of a matrix encourages the activation of the sense of touch and exposes its ambiguous connotations.

For the occasion of the DO NOT TOUCH exhibition and the present paper, both artists pursued their projects but, in the end, the works created during the time of introspection and isolation turned out to enter a dialogue. These were also the works that met physically in Poland and became one show, a synergy of complementing threads, surprisingly in tune with one another.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carrillo de Albornoz, M.A. and Fernández M.A., *The Symbolism of the Thread* <https://library.acropolis.org/the-symbolism-of-the-thread>, 2014, accessed June 6, 2022
- Coleman, Rebecca; Page, Tara and Palmer, Helen, eds. 2019, *Feminist New Materialist Practice: The Mattering of Methods*. Special Issue of *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*
- Haraway, Donna; *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988)
- Lacan, Jacques, seminar on 'Tuché and Automaton', featured in: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques-Alain Miller (Ed.), London: Penguin Books, 1979
- Jacques Lacan, from *Seminars XI & XX* <https://circleuncoiled.wordpress.com/2013/05/07/jacques-lacan-from-seminars-xi-xx/>. Accessed June 13, 2022.
- Roberts, Jennifer L., series of Mellon Lectures (2021), *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print*, <https://www.nga.gov/research/casva/meetings/mellon-lectures-in-the-fine-arts/roberts-2021.html>
- Sliwinska, Basia and Korporaal, Astrid, *Love letters - Katarzyna Zimna*, 10
-

June—02 July 2021, <http://almanacprojects.com/public-programme/love-letters>

AUTHORS

Irena Keckes, Ph.D

Associate Professor of Art
College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences
University of Guam
Email: keckesi@triton.uog.edu
<https://irenakeckes.wixsite.com/irenaart>

Irena Keckes received a PhD in Fine Arts from the University of Auckland, New Zealand (2015), MFA in printmaking from Tokyo University of the Arts, Japan (2005), and BA in art education, Academy of Fine Arts, University of Zagreb, Croatia (2000). Her practice involves large-scale woodcuts, print installations, and experimental artist books and printed objects. She presented her research at 2021 IMPACT 11 in Hong Kong, 2018 IMPACT 10 in Santander, Spain, 2018, 2017, 2016 SGCI conferences in Las Vegas, Atlanta, and Portland, 2015 IMPACT 9 in China 2013 IMPACT 8 in Scotland, and 4th, 3rd, and 2nd IMC in Nara, Hawaii and Tokyo, Japan (2021, 2017, 2014). Dr. Keckes exhibited her artwork in numerous solo and group exhibitions, nationally and internationally. Since 2015, Irena has been an Associate Professor of Art at College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at University of Guam.

Katarzyna Zimna, Ph.D

Associate Professor
Institute of Architecture of Textiles, Faculty of Material Technologies and Textile Design
Lodz University of Technology, Poland
katarzyna.zimna@p.lodz.pl
www.kasiazimna.net

Katarzyna is an artist and researcher, born in Lodz, Poland. Graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Lodz, Faculty of Graphic Art and Painting (2002), and Faculty of Visual Education (2004). She obtained her PhD from the School of Art and Design, Loughborough University, UK in 2010. Habilitation in Fine Arts in 2019. Author of *Time to Play. Action and Interaction in Contemporary Art* (I.B. Tauris, 2014/ Bloomsbury 2020). Participant in numerous group and juried shows in Poland and abroad, printmaking biennials and triennials. Author of 16 solo shows. She presented her works and research at IMPACT International Multidisciplinary Printmaking Conferences in Bristol 2009, Hangzhou 2015, Santander 2018 and Hongkong 2021 and the Paradox European Biennial Art Forum in Riga (Latvia) in 2019. Her practice, using a main vehicle as the printmaking medium, is fuelled by the 'anatomy' of a print. The matrix, the print substrate, the process of printing, the final printout and lastly the 'post-print' area, including the relationship with the viewer, become starting points for formal and conceptual journeys.

IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1: Irena Keckes and Katarzyna Zimna, DO NOT TOUCH, view of the exhibition
Figure 2: Irena Keckes, carving woodblock matrix



Figure 3: Katarzyna Zimna, matrix made with ironing beads and the process of hand-printing
Figure 4: Katarzyna Zimna, Reverse, 2021, the matrix made of grass (detail)



Figure 5: Irena Keckes, combining printmaking and sewing

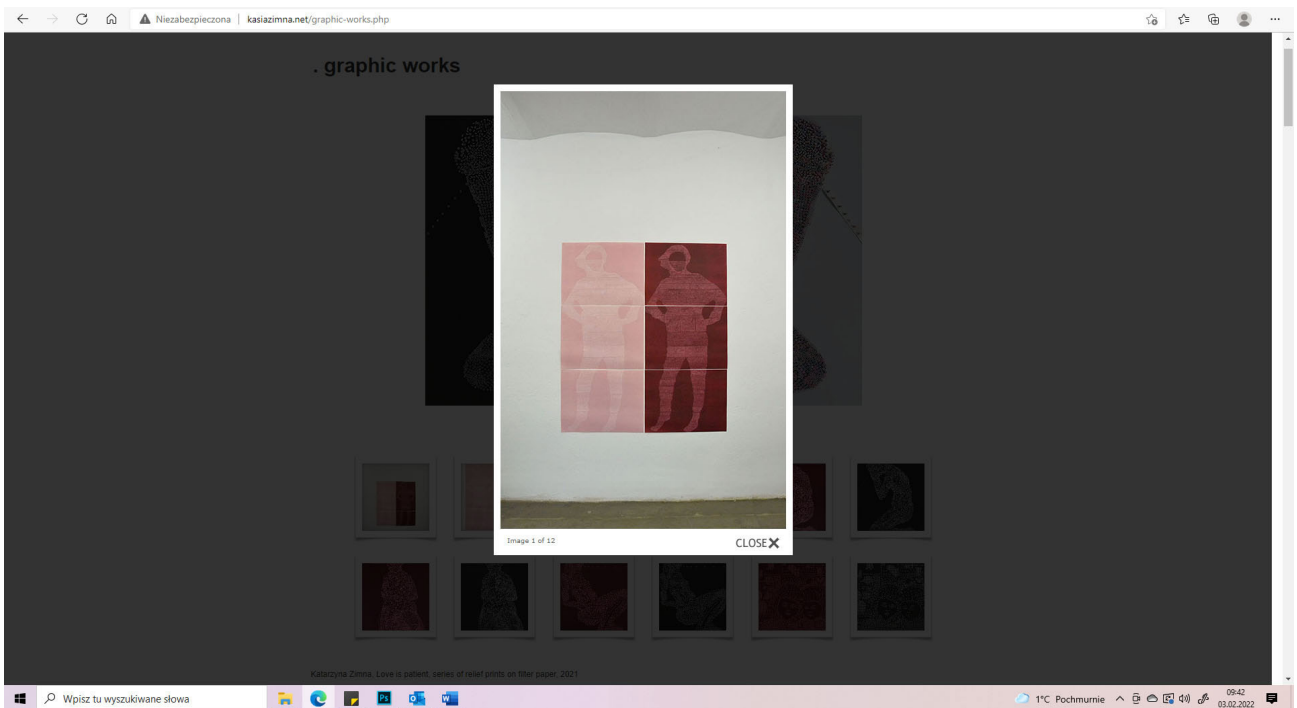


Figure 6: Irena Keckes, sewing process
Figure 7: Katarzyna Zimna, virtual gallery

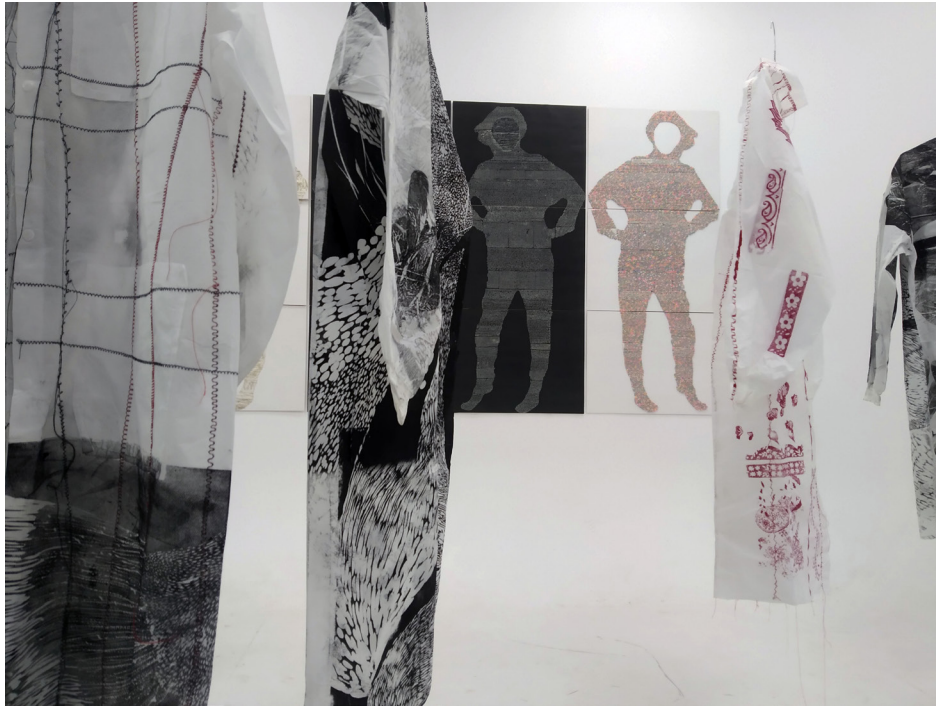


Figure 8: Irena Keckes and Katarzyna Zimna, DO NOT TOUCH, view of the exhibition
Figure 9: Irena Keckes, Medical Robes, 2021

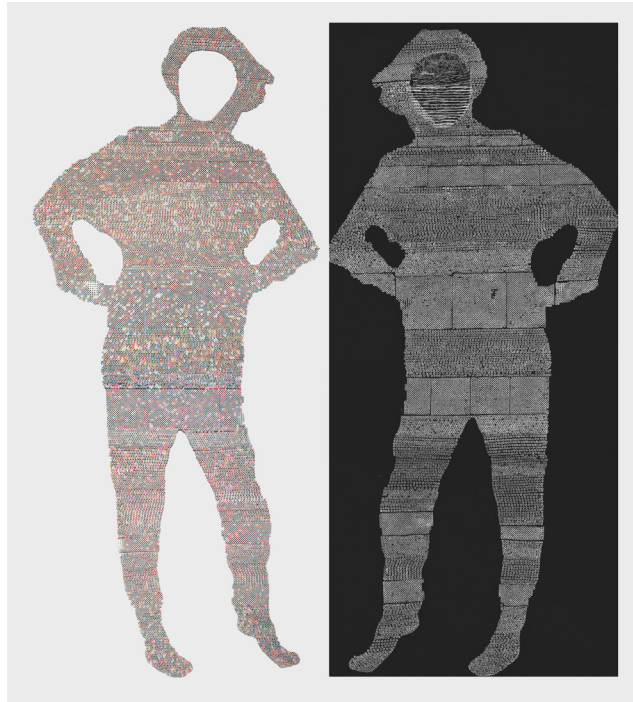


Figure 10: Katarzyna Zimna, Reverse, 2021 (fragment)