

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to introduce the figure of Ernesta Thot. She is the protagonist of a research and curatorial project that has been ongoing since 2020. It involves the successive construction and reconstruction of Ernesta Thot's life, but also, through her character, an exploration of the relationship of modern and contemporary art to romantic, alchemical, esoteric and magical traditions. The project, whose protagonist is Ernesta Thot, is structured around ideas of art-based research. It is also an attempt to answer the question of how to build and use fiction, imagination and confabulation, but one that draws on the reality around us, in the construction and telling of art history? To date, three projects have been published on the life of Ernesta Thot: a residual biography, a fable and a visual-textual collage about the tarot. The article presented here, together with the accompanying film by artist Yana Maroz, is the next stage of this project. This time its aim is to encourage readers to establish a letter-writing relationship with Ernesta Thot and to participate in the construction of a story about her.

keywords

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ERNESTA THOT
ALCHEMIST
CONTEMPORARY ART
ART RESEARCH BASIC
ESOTERICISM ART
OCCULT ART
SPIRITUALIST ART
HERSTORY
CURATORIAL PROJECTS

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<https://doi.org/10.34619/utuj-4i3w>

Letter from Ernesta Thot

curatorial correspondence on esotericism, magic and alchemy in art

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Ernesta Thot came into my life by chance as a result of a sense of meaninglessness, fatigue, disappointment, but also by my own impotence. It was the year 2020 and I was trying to write an article where the alchemical process would be a metaphor to explain the different stages of the curator's creation of an exhibition. I remember getting tangled up in my own thoughts like a spider web and not being able to sort out the associations and threads in my head. The traditional method of academic writing, with its inherent stages: an introduction with the state of the research, an outline of the most important threads in the paper, detailed argumentation, and a clear conclusion, seemed to me at the time something at odds with my intuitive and expressive understanding of my chosen topic. However, the biggest problem I had was that outward appearance of objectivity created by the impersonal narrative often desired in academic texts, which limited my imagination. I found this rigid, scholarly form to be something that was completely incompatible with what I wanted to write. For a while I kept trying. I started writing new sentences, looked for quotations, thought about a gradually developing argument. However, at some point I decided that I was done. I realised I couldn't write it like that. Somehow, this rigid form overwhelmed me; this form was not my form. It didn't correspond to what I wanted to tell. It was unable to reflect me or my thoughts and feelings.

I thought about whether I could tap into what had been gathering inside me over such a long time, and with each passing day I felt this strange, unnamed force was increasingly looking for a way out. It began in conversations with my artist friend Jakub Woynarowski and our discussions about alchemy, magic, conspiracy theories,

and works of art that did not fit into the canon of academic teaching. That is, all the things that have fascinated me since I was a child. Added to this was my girlish interest in the women of the past, which sparked my imagination and spurred me on to find the traces they had left behind. Then it occurred to me that the sources of this text on alchemy and curating are, after all, right there in all these memories and that I need a guide to help me find my way through it all. This is how she was born: Ernesta Thot. A mad curator, a lunatic, a romantic who believed that she was able to show through her work another, more magical, and irrational side of our reality.

Ernesta came to me like the characters in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, 'from afar: out of time, out of the wilderness' (Cixous 1993, 149), becoming a guide who would help me sort out and connect seemingly incompatible elements. Ernesta was to become a link between my fascinations, intuition, and scientific research. So I searched for a name for her and it, like herself, appeared suddenly and very intuitively. Thot is the ancient Egyptian god of the moon and wisdom, and was also the patron of the arts. He was the one who invented magical formulas and spells and was responsible for being the link between the worlds of the living and the dead. His Greek counterpart was Hermes, who also knew magic, and who had knowledge of all the mysteries of the world. For the alchemists, Thot and Hermes merged into one: Hermes Trismegistos.

Ernesta thus became not only a guide for me, but also a *parler-femme* as described by Lucy Irigaray in her book *This sex which is not one* (Irigaray 1985), which allowed me to approach the subject I was interested in in a completely different way. A text that was originally intended to be about the alchemical metaphors of curating became the story of a curator who traced the relationship between modern art and alchemy, magic and esotericism. So when I sat down to write this text with the assumption that Ernesta would, in a sense, be the character whose conviction about the relationship between curating and alchemy I was trying to describe and explore, everything began to fall into place. The energy between my head and my hands on the keyboard began to circulate faster. It turned out that all I needed to do was to change my form of writing, to move away from the learned and automatic. This is how the first text about Ernesta was written, which also became the beginning of a larger project about her. This text, published under the title 'The Alchemical Life of Ernesta Thot — A Romantic Heroine of Art' (Kudelska 2020, 73-93), appeared in print in 2020. It was structured in a dozen or so paragraphs in the form of small stories about Ernesta Thot's concepts, into which were woven the contributions of various scholars of art and alchemy. These overlapped with what was close to me and my protagonist. The same year also saw the publication of a grotesque fairy tale dedicated to Ernesta's childhood, inspired by illustrations by the Polish artist Alex Urban (Kudelska 2020b, 53-59). A year later, Ernesta Thot's next adventure was published 'Droga Ernesty

Thot — kuratorska podróż przez Arkana Wielkie tarota’ (Kudelska 2021, 148-163). Her story was inspired by the symbols found in the individual tarot cards that make up the Major Arcana. Each card was created by Jakub Woynarowski and referred to a selected work of modern art. The text that accompanied it referred to its meaning and wove further elements of Ernesta Thot’s story into it.

So who is Ernesta Thot, and what is she actually talking about? The answer to this question emerges between two elements: imagination and history, fiction and truth. Ernesta combines existing narratives and research on alchemical, magical, and esoteric themes in art with literary fiction. It is an activity that could be patronised by Monica Prendergast’s thought that ‘art is magic because it is born of a lie, being the truth’ (Prendergast 2006, 376). Ernesta refers to what exists, but also exploits any cracks in the official scientific discourse, any fissures, insinuations, uncertainties. It is these that she fills with her stories by connecting them on the basis of free and intuitive associations. In doing so, she draws attention to that which is marginalised in art history for being considered too irrational, strange, uncanny. She thus creates a magical, uncanny tale of alchemical, magical, and esoteric themes in art history, based on insinuations that have their origins in research and history. Ernesta is thus a bit of a spectre, outside of time, outside of history, who ‘defies both life and death. [She] joins the world of the living, breaks time out of its framework to prevent it from flowing peacefully’ (Idziak 2011, 294).

Such an attempt to engage with the world is the latest activity dedicated to another part of Ernesta Thot’s story, which involves writing her a letter. Why a letter? It could be said that today, in the age of text messages and emails, the letter is a literary form that is dying. Writing letters requires time, concentration, thinking about the individual words. However, letters are, as the Polish poet Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska wrote, ‘made of fire’ (Pawlikowska — Jasnorzewska 1927, 89). They contain emotions that are easier to articulate in words and allow us to express ourselves more clearly, to establish a closer relationship between sender and recipient. Letters allow us to be more fervent with our words and writing a letter requires commitment. This affective formula, then, is one that affords us more than a quick superficial contact. The letter, too, is that symbolic fire that makes it easier to describe and share our fascinations and discoveries. The moment of writing a letter stops us in the world, but also enables us to understand our existence more fully.

But what to write to Ernesta about? In the short film published here, thanks to the work of visual artist Yana Maroz, we can hear Ernesta and get to know a fragment of her story. In it, Ernesta tells her story, shares her doubts, her powerlessness, but also her dreams and her unquenchable thirst to discover new worlds. However,

by her own admission, today she remains a female spectre, albeit one who continues to claim her 'entrance into the world and history' (Cixous 1993, 168). When writing a letter to Ernesta, one can ask her anything: about alchemy, about magic, about herself. One can also offer her advice, tell her a story, or point out a path she could take between the worlds of the living and the dead.

So I encourage you to support this project and write a letter that will certainly not go unanswered and will certainly contribute to the next instalment of Ernesta Thot's activities. When will this happen? This is probably only known by Ernesta, who is making her way through the forgotten realms of our reality.

Address:

'Dla Ernesty Thot'

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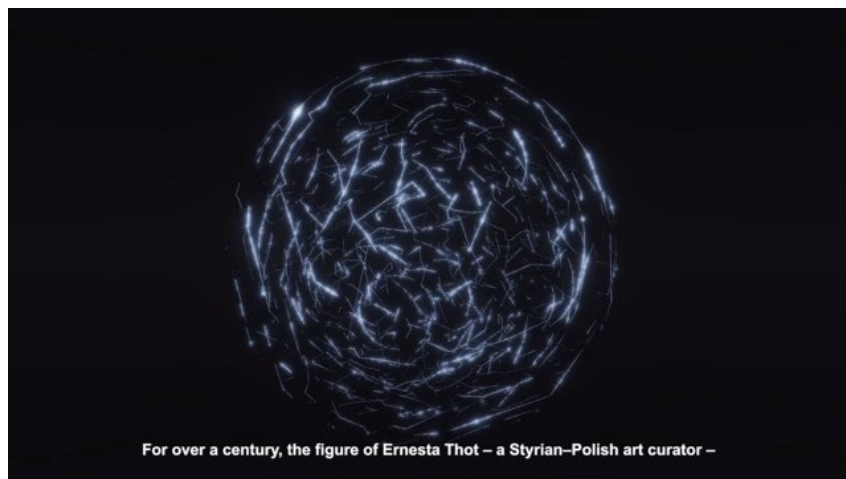
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Special thanks to Dr Marcin Laberschek, without whom neither this film nor Ernesta's subsequent adventures would have been made.

Special thanks also to Yana Maroz, who let Ernesta speak and prepared the film presented here.



If the video is not playing properly, please access it through the following link:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLvI3YuwXVg

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