

# Up Close And Personal

## Getting on all fours with four naked women and four cameras

by Johanna Lenander/photography Aneta Bartos, Martynka Wawrzyniak, Elle Muliarchyk and Yana Toyber

**On the way to my interview with Aneta Bartos, Martynka Wawrzyniak, Elle Muliarchyk and Yana Toyber, I'm thinking about female beauty and sexuality and all the complicated feelings they stir up. I'm meeting them to discuss their communal art project, a nameless series of nude portraits that they have taken of each other. The work is an interesting exercise in exploring the roles of exhibitionist and voyeur. As the roles switch between subject and photographer, there's a continuous exchange of control and exposure. Each woman works from a very personal point of view that she expresses through the other girls' bodies. The pictures give the viewer a glimpse into each photographer's soul—via four sets of amazing tits and asses.**

It's hard to get past the fact these four women are stunning. I'm not even sure that we are supposed to get past it. They are well aware of their beauty, and both Martynka and Elle used to model. As a woman, I'm definitely threatened and slightly peeved by their narcissism. And that's exactly why I find their work so intriguing. Their pictures raise all kinds of very emotional issues; they probe deeply into my animal brain where desire, fear and jealousy reside. Which in turn provokes more questions. Why should the concept of four beautiful naked women be so provocative? Why shouldn't they be free to express themselves, however they like, without judgment? What do my reactions say about me? What does it say about the world we live in?

Aneta, Martynka, Elle and Yana are four gifted female artists who have banded together to form a kind of creative union. They are also four Eastern European immigrants who share a certain cultural heritage as well as a sense of liberation from it. Aneta grew up in Poland and moved with her family to the US in her mid-teens. Elle was born in Belarus, grew up in Vietnam and the Czech Republic before going to America on her own accord when she was 15. Martynka left her native Poland for New Zealand when she was eight, and more or less escaped to New York at the age of 18. Yana is the most 'American' of the four: she arrived from the Ukraine when she was only two.

They have each carved out an accomplished career. Elle is a former model who made her name as an artist when she started taking guerrilla fashion pictures of herself in upscale boutique dressing rooms. In 2006, *The New York Times* got hold of the project and published six pages of it in its style magazine. She now focuses on photography and video and exhibits and shoots for prestigious editorial and commercial clients. Martynka is an artist who exhibits provocative video and photography works. She also edited the art and culture magazine *Issue* for several years. Aneta is a fashion photographer who recently started removing herself from the commercial world in order to focus on personal projects. Her beautiful and sensual photos have been published in top magazines worldwide, including *Zoo*. Yana is an up and coming artist who also shoots fashion. One of her most interesting projects is a riveting portrait series of sex workers.

When their communal project started, some of the girls knew each other well (Yana and Aneta) and others hardly at all (Elle and Martynka). But through their intimate work process, the four have become closely connected. Together, they have pushed and inspired one another. They have discovered new things about themselves and helped one another evolve, as artists and as women. And I have to tell you that I was immediately seduced by this enchanting little group. The girls are candid, funny, warm and brave, and also irrepressibly girly and flirty. Together they create the kind of effervescent energy that can only happen between females. It was intimate, sweet and fun to be around them, kind of like whispering with your girlfriends late at night at high school sleepovers. Part of this interview was conducted on top of Aneta's king sized, four-poster bed. And the rest you can see for yourselves.

### **Johanna Lenander: How did you all meet?**

Aneta Bartos: Yana and I met in college, at SVA. We just sort of fell in love at first sight, but it was actually a year until we really met. Yana Toyber: I think you first saw me when I was complaining at the financial office and I made a big raucous.

AB: And I was like: 'Wow, I love this girl, she's such a bitch!' And then she told me that she

saw me too, around that time.

YT: You said something really sarcastic and I was like, 'huh?' Because usually the conversations were pretty bland at SVA... I think it was this guy you had dated who asked you if you were still drinking and you said, 'Oh no, I only do drugs now.' I wasn't sure if you were serious or not, but then we finally met in this fashion photography class and we kind of hit it off right away.

AB: Yes, right after class we went drinking.

Elle Muliarchyk: That's such a good love story.

AB: I met Elle when I had first fallen in love with fashion and was doing tests. I chose her from a card and we scheduled a shoot and she [points to Yana] was my makeup artist.

YT: And then Martynka...

Martynka Wawrzyniak: I used to do an art magazine, called *Issue*.

AB: I first heard about you through the PDN 30 [a prestigious photo competition].

MW: You saw a Polish name...

AB: Yeah, and then the year after I won. And we have Polish friends in common.

MW: And I remember Elle when she was a model. She used to come to castings. I was a model too, for a good many years until I just stopped. I never took it seriously. I just did it because while I was editing the magazines, someone told me that I should get an agency so they can sponsor my visa. So for six years, I was sponsored by different agencies, but I never took it seriously and I was a terrible model.

### **JL: How long have you been close, the four of you, as a unit?**

AB: Only through the project, really. We've all known each other for a while and we'd see each other at openings.

MW: It was Yana who came up with the idea to form this... union. I think we started last November. My shoot was the first shoot that everyone got naked on. Everyone was so scared to shoot with me, because their pictures are so dreamy and beautiful and mine are the total opposite. I use very stark light and everything shows. Aneta makes everything look glamorous and dark, and Elle also shoots in darkness and Yana shoots under water, but with me it was like, 'OK girls, I want everyone in the studio stark naked.' I had been naked in pictures for years and years, and that is the kind of modeling that

Untitled, Aneta Bartos





Untitled, Aneta Bartos

I like to do. I find that exciting. I mean, I'm married to Richard Kern, OK? I used to be one of his models for years, and she [Elle] has done it too with Terry Richardson, but these two [Yana and Aneta] wanted to keep their panties on...

AB and YT [in unison]: We hadn't even thought of that as a concept, to shoot naked...

**JL: Can we go back to the original concept, what was the original idea behind the collaboration?**

AB: To create this kind of union of femininity and start shooting each other. We're four female Eastern European photographers and we wanted to emulsify each other as photographers and models in a beautiful way. I didn't know it would evolve into this direction and that we would start to exploit and explore each other and get more and more free and open and become so intimately and emotionally connected. From the original idea to what it is now, it has grown immensely.

MW: And it was a new direction for all of us, because I had never photographed anyone nude before, and I didn't want to do it because I didn't want to be too close to what Richard does.

AB and YT: But Martynka was the one who suggested it! [Total cacophony of everyone interrupting each other].

MW: I said to everybody I just wanted all of them naked, just against the white wall in the studio holding their camera as their only prop. And everybody was so freaked out because it was super bright lights and we hadn't even seen each other naked yet!

EM: Except me.

MW: You were used to it. But these two were terrified!

AB: I was like, 'Oh my God!' It's really silly, but I grew my pubic hair so at least it would cover something.

MW: They were so freaked out!

YT: Originally, when I thought of the idea I thought of it as another way for a woman to do a self portrait, where you're being exposed at the same time as you're exposing another woman who's a photographer as well. It's almost like channeling thoughts and ideas between the subject and the photographer.

EM: It's almost like the other photographer is like your other consciousness.

MW: We've become organically connected through this project; as we shoot each other we've become one person in a way.

YT: It's almost like spiritually tapping into other brains and bodies.

MW: Male photographers love to shoot girls naked, and this is a totally different take on it. And when we shot the lipstick video [a split screen video with the girls simultaneously smearing lipstick over their faces] I realized that we had to have a female cinematographer; we couldn't get a man to shoot the project.

Then we would all be different.

AB: And when we met with a bunch of curators, the one curator that we really liked was a woman because I felt like she could understand us, instead of seeing us as four bimbos shooting each other naked.

**JL: But inevitably your art is going to be seen by men...**

Everybody: Yes of course.

MW: It's obvious that naked photographs of girls appeal sexually to men.

AB: But we don't want some guy to create some sort of exhibition from his point of view; we want to be presented from our point of view and we need someone who is on that same level.

YT: Who understands us and the concept.

[Martynka and Aneta and Yana start to argue about whether a man could or could not understand the project].

**JL: But there may be a lot of women who wouldn't understand it either. And another thing about that is that you are four women who shoot each other naked and all four of you are very beautiful. And I was curious about how you relate to that about yourselves. Would you be naked in the photos if you didn't look the way you do?**

YT: We would be different people... So who knows? I don't know what I would be doing. I don't know what life would be like if I wasn't, if I didn't have this body.

EM: Well, I also think that. Beauty is how you think of yourself. Yes, me and Martynka are used to being naked all the time, so it's not even like you think, 'Oh I'm beautiful, so I can be naked in a picture.' It's just as easy to do. It's as easy for me as being dressed in front of the camera. Yana is very confident about her body—she loves her body. But when I started shooting Aneta, even though she has a killer body, she didn't feel as confident as us. You act as if you look like any girl who walks down the street. But we all have things we don't like about ourselves. I think for each of us, it's just our body, and it's not like we think that we're so beautiful. And it's not always easy to do; it can be hard.

MW: But we're all exhibitionists here.

YT: I used to be a dancer so I've always been very comfortable.

AB: I feel like I'm more exhibitionistic through the other girls. I put a wig on, but I'm still exposing myself.

YT: Even though we're exposing our bodies in this project we're also exposing our hearts and our minds; everything, you know?

MW: You know how like male photographers who shoot naked women get criticized a lot for objectifying women? My husband gets this all the time. And having been one of his models, my argument always goes, 'it takes two. You have to be an exhibitionist to want

to be photographed by a voyeur.' So we all are both exhibitionists and voyeurs in this project, and we switch roles all the time.

YT: We're exploring the connection between being voyeur and exhibitionist.

MW: And because we're all female, there's no male gaze behind it.

YT: And I think what is happening here is that we all can appreciate beauty: men do, women do, there's nothing wrong with it. The female form is beautiful, so why not idolize it and make art from it and hang it on your wall?

MW: Then again, the reason I did the lipstick video was to challenge the whole idea of the beauty shot. I wanted to show the emotional beauty of a woman. And I just wanted everybody to feel and let out their emotions. And everybody's emotion came out so differently; their personalities really were revealed in this, I think. It's so interesting to see someone destroy their face with something that is normally used to make you more beautiful. Here it's used as a weapon of destruction. But it's also about being bare. We just let go of all insecurities that all of us had and let loose, and I think we look so beautiful because it's the true person coming out.

**JL: I also find it interesting because female beauty and sexuality is very powerful and threatening. And I think women are perceived as very threatening when they don't fit into the norm and do things that are a little crazy. Painting the lipstick around the mouth is a very vaginal image, it's almost like this big, crazy vagina that has completely lost control, and that is very scary.**

MW: I have to show you the other video that we did because it is about all those things that you just said. [She shows a video of naked and lipstick smeared Elle and Martynka engaged in a primal, contorted, yet strangely sexual wrestling match to the sound of heavy metal].

**JL: I have to say I really love it.**

MW: I'm so happy you say that because most women don't. And men just get erections when they watch it; they always have this weird look on their face [imitates stupid grin].

**JL: I find it very provocative, of course, and very uncomfortable. Just the fact that it goes on for so long... I just felt like, 'Oh my God, STOP!' And you're also thinking, 'What is it? Are they making love? Are they fighting? Is it both?' I feel like it really captures the complexity of female relationships—the attraction, the competition, the aggressiveness...**

MW: Totally!



**JL: And also the raw animal instinct that we never let out.**

EM: Yes that is true.

MW: I think the hardest thing for me has always been to have relationships with women. I grew up with a sister and a mother and I was always the outsider. I've always found it easier to deal with men.

**JL: Why?**

MW: I find the female competitive, petty nature very challenging. I feel more like a man. Me and Elle always say that we are from Mars.

EM: This is the first time in my whole life that I have had any kind of relationship with women.

MW: Yeah, me too!

EM: I didn't have a mother really. I didn't have sisters; I kind of raised myself and I never had girlfriends—never ever—and now is the first time that I'm learning how to talk to women. Often, I just sit there and listen to them and I think, 'hmmm...' especially when they start fighting.

YT: It's just discussions; we're discussing!

MW: I'm like Elle. I'm more like a man in the way I think and also in my sexuality, I think

For me this [the lipstick video] is very much like Mars, the redness of it and the war. I'm obsessed with the color red, for some reason. It's the anger, the emotions, the angst... I don't know.

AB: I'm not a performer, but I feel like I'm really opening up through our collaborations for the past months, and I'm getting more comfortable with myself emotionally and sexually, because these girls are really strong and open sexually, especially Martynka. She has no inhibitions whatsoever.

YT: Not in front of the camera at least. She's like this, [opens her legs super wide] 'Here you go!'

MW: I feel more comfortable when I'm naked in photographs. I feel funny in clothes. I feel like they don't fit me and when I was a model I didn't like the way they dressed me up and put weird outfits on me. The only shoots I enjoyed were the ones where I wore lingerie or was naked. And then I started shooting with Richard and I felt so liberated, I finally felt beautiful! Because I didn't feel like someone was trying to make me into something I wasn't.

AB: Because women are constantly forced to adhere to the norm of femininity. So to see

someone who just walks into a room and is so open with their sexuality and absolutely fine with showing her vagina... And there is nothing wrong with it, why should there be? But we're so... When I grew up in Poland, it was a sin to masturbate...

MW: I think this [cultural baggage] is what I'm reacting against too.

**JL: I was just going to ask that, about whether rebelling against traditional Catholic values play into what you are doing.**

AB: Right now I'm at this point when I'm being rebellious. For me, in the beginning this project was about sex and spirit and how it plays such a role in creating cultures and religions and taboos. And my obsessions and fears about existence in general, which created this perfect pool of emotions that resulted in an eerie quality of anxiety and sexuality. And as the project moved on and I started feeling these amazing connections, I introduced new issues about sexuality and freedom and dominance. Because that's how I really see the girls.



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—Aneta Bartos

**JL: Can you say something about how you shoot?**

AB: Sometimes when I shoot, it's very conceptual. I rent these creepy hotels that give a sense of eeriness and it's very dark. I just put the girls there and tell them what to do. Other times, however, it's more spontaneous, where the girls come up with their own poses and ideas. MW: She shoots on Polaroid. She literally takes two pictures and she's done.

EM: And often you can't see what you're shooting.

AB: Oh yeah, I shoot blind because the Polaroid back is right on top of the viewer. So I basically point the camera and I hope it's going to be right. This is Yana, and we're in a hotel and I just stuck her in a closet. It's like a sexual nightmare: you don't know if she's going to come out of there to have sex with you or kill you. [All around laughter]. [Shows a picture with Elle in a wide legged stance turned against the wall and Yana crouching on the bed in child's pose]. And here I asked Elle to pose like she was a man so it looks like she's peeing on the wall and Yana is offering her ass. So it's a sexual situation but there's no connection.

**JL: It's a very vulnerable position that Yana is in.**

YT: I don't know, I'm in my comfortable position.

AB: She's always offering her ass, she thinks it's her greatest asset.

YT: Listen, I've been told, I've been told!

AB: I was shooting the other day and Elle was like, 'Let's just have this interview naked! Let's just be naked when the journalist comes in.'

**JL: I'm so glad you didn't do that!**

YT: We may do it for someone else.

MW: Only for a man!

**JL: Oh my God, that poor person. That would have been so intimidating.**

AB: [Shows a picture of Elle wrestling with Yana on a bed]. This was a spontaneous shot. It was supposed to be just Elle having a masturbating session, and Yana came to just hang around, we had had a few drinks and it was late, probably 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. And Elle was like, 'Come on Yana!' YT: And I wasn't feeling like being photographed that day.

AB: No, and she literally ripped Yana's clothes off...

YT: She raped me.

MW: It's not a rape picture!

YT: It was! I wasn't feeling it!

**JL: Did you feel raped?**

YT: I mean, yeah spiritually, I felt a little bit pressured because I didn't feel like doing something and you made me do it.

EM: Because you weren't comfortable with your body at that moment.

YT: Yeah I wasn't prepared for it. I hadn't showered, I just felt gross. So did I feel violated? Maybe a little bit.

**JL: It's kind of a gray zone and very sensitive stuff, but, we're talking about pictures of naked women so it's inevitable that all these things come up.**

EM: I'm conscious of my body all the time, except when you [Martyanka] shoot me, then I don't care for some reason. And I think I look horrible in those pictures but I like it!

AB: This picture is of Martyanka, it's one of the first pictures when she just...

MW: You told me to masturbate!

AB: Well, I told you to masturbate but I have to tell this story, it's really funny. So she's on the bed and I tell her to lay down and she's like, 'Oh yeah?' [Goes into doggy style position].

YT: I know, she just shows everything!

EM: It's almost on purpose.

AB: I felt like it was done on purpose. [Cacophony of voices].





Untitled, Aneta Bartos



Untitled, Aneta Bartos



AB: She raped me!  
 YT: Did you feel violated?  
 AB: In a way...I had never experienced that. And I'm like 'lower, lower!' And she goes down this much [shows an inch] and I try to get her down on her stomach and it's impossible. It took me ten minutes to get her from that place to finally go down on the bed.  
 MW: Let me just say this, to me that's not even racy!  
 AB: Yeah, but for me it was a completely new experience.

**JL: So is that why you're asking her to place her hand there?**

AB: Yeah, and I spent hours retouching her.  
 MW: Trying to hide my asshole.  
 AB: Yes because I thought it was pornographic. But then in the end I basically put it back.  
 MW: She called me and said, 'I've spent all day looking at your anus.' [Looking at pic of Elle fisting Martynka].  
 YT: This makes me a little queasy.  
 AB: I showed it to a curator and this was his favorite.

it guerrilla-style and we just go in and take our clothes off and jump in.

**JL: Why do you do it there?**

YT: Because it's private and people don't normally come in. But once in a while, families come in and we have to get out. We just swim to our bathing suits and put them on. I don't want to say which hotel because I don't want to get in trouble.

**JL: These are so dreamy and abstract, they're not necessarily about sex to me.**

MW: Yeah, they remind me of a dream sequence.  
 YT: This to me is like the Three Graces—they're muses. I'm not very exploitative; a lot of the sex workers I've covered are subjects that could easily have been exploitative. I feel like nudity in itself is sexual so I don't need to focus on that. [Moving on to Elle's photos].  
 EM: I only started photographing three years ago and before that I was a model. I'm fascinated with a woman's body, but it's kind of alien to me, it's not very emotional. I have problems and issues with my own body, but my interest in another woman's body is more like

**JL: It's a very dominant picture. And it makes me think of motherhood.**

YT: It's just a good way to shut her up.  
 AB: Here's Elle masturbating.

**JL: Why did you want to shoot her masturbating?**

AB: I wanted to do a masturbating piece on each of us. I even shot myself doing it, and the original concept was to have the original Polaroids hidden, because I thought it was so intimate, and I just wanted to have them as one-of-a-kind, and if someone wants to buy it I will charge a fortune because we're giving so much of ourselves.  
 EM: There's such a connection with this particular photo, because the actual picture was in the room with us, so if you have it, you have a piece of four girls masturbating.  
 AB: But then I decided that I would blow them up, because I started to feel more confident and comfortable with masturbation itself.  
 YT: Yeah, because you were brought up to regard it as a sin.  
 AB: I was brought up in a very strict Catholic culture.  
 EM: Me too. We weren't Catholic, but

a fascination with a material that I look at from a distance. I guess that it's kind of like Terry Richardson shooting women, but of course, I shoot without exploiting or degrading anyone. In the beginning, because I'm so busy, I was just like, 'Okay, let me just get some pictures out of the way.' So I shot the girls in their houses as they are and as I see them. But then I thought that it was really cool to have these girls that would do anything for me, anything I ask of them. So then I decided to go for the wildest ideas I could come up with. I always have very sexual, visual, weird dreams and I went back to my note pad where I had made drawings in the morning and started to take pictures that illustrated my dreams. So this is one of them. [Shows a photo of Yana in a back bend with flames coming out of her crotch]. It's a woman volcano, when she's angry she spews fire and lava out of her pussy. It's not Photoshop—it's real.  
 MW: Yeah, she farted.  
 YT: Shut up.  
 EM: The fire is not literally on her, it's next to her.  
 YT: She plays with perception a lot.  
 EM: A friend of mine said, 'This is very

Communist. That was also anti-sex.  
 AB: And this was the last one where I opened up, literally.  
 YT: You did!  
 MW: She finally spread her legs. [The discussion moves on to Yana's pictures].  
 YT: I haven't done any nudes until this project. I worked a lot with photographing people in the sex industry but I always had the girls dressed because I didn't want to show them naked because they're always exposed. I wanted to show their faces and emotions. These were shot a few months ago. I shoot under water.

**JL: Why?**

YT: Because it feels a little embryonic, and also because there's such a scarcity of water in nature. With the gradual destruction of our environment, water is a resource that is seriously threatened. It's so vital for survival.  
 EM: It was also very good to be here.  
 YT: They're shot at an indoor swimming pool.  
 EM: We had to shoot fast because it was a public pool and all of a sudden, families would show up.  
 YT: It's in a very fancy hotel so I kind of shoot

religious—a burning bush!' This is another dream that I recreated almost exactly the way it was, with Aneta and the wolf. [Shows a picture of Aneta lying on a concrete floor with a taxidermy wolf hovering over her crotch].  
 AB: She brought an assistant and she told me he was gay so I wouldn't get nervous.

**JL: So you'll be showing this?**

MW: We're meeting with curators to find the perfect situation to show this. We're thinking we'll show it either in late fall or early spring. We're ready now.

**JL: Will you continue with the project?**

Everybody in unison: Yes.  
 YT: We will continue for years, probably.

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