

TRACES OF SISTERHOOD



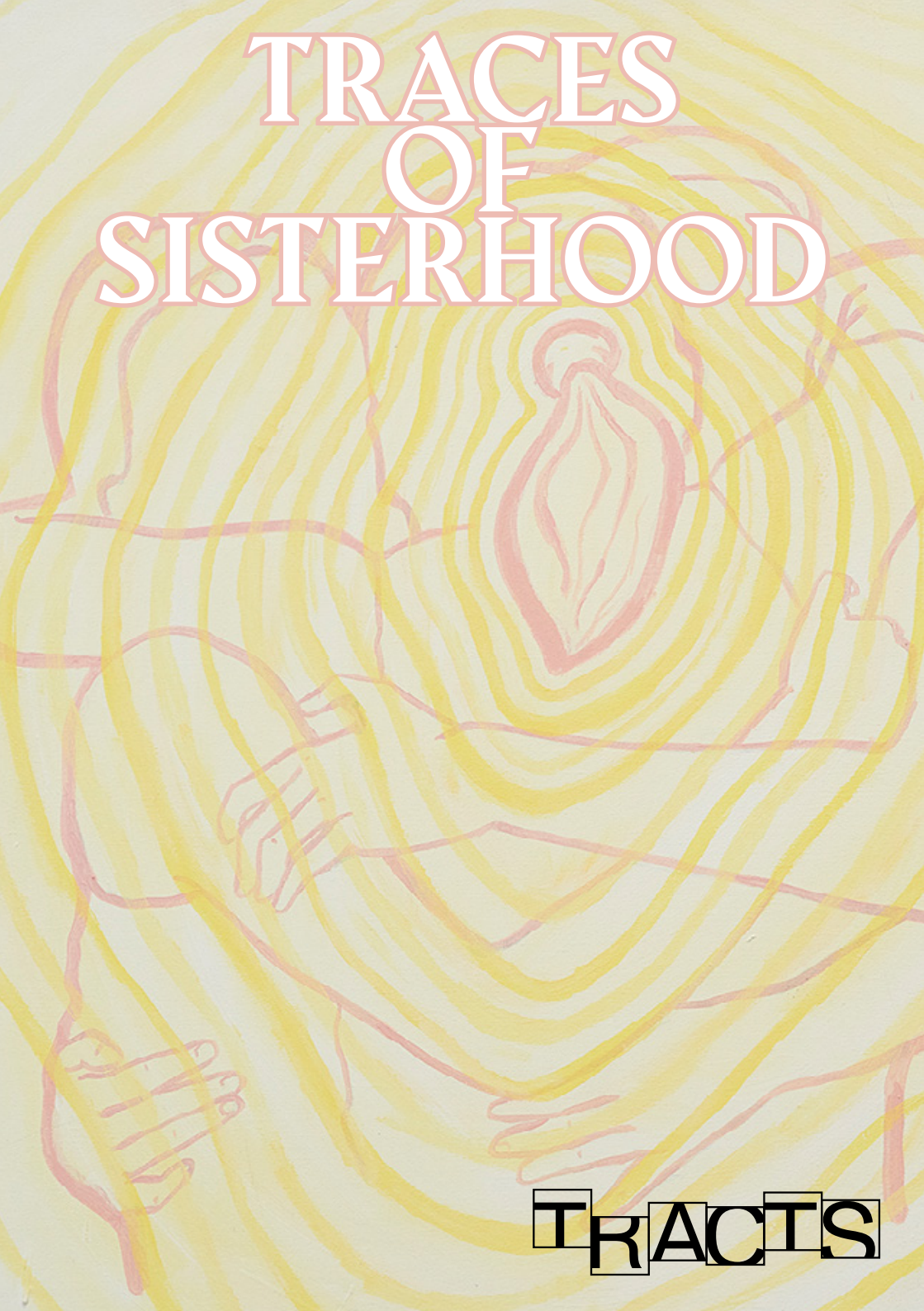
TRACTS

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Traces of Sisterhood
Edited by Eliza Proszczuk and Ewa Chomicka

Editing and proofreading of the Polish version:
Ewa Chomicka

Translation, editing and proofreading of the
English version:
Dorota Wąsik

Essay by Monika Weiss:
Translation by the author, revision by Dorota
Wąsik

Artwork design:
noviki.net

This publication outlines the topics discussed during the "Traces of Sisterhood" workshop (curated by Eliza Proszczuk and Ewa Chomicka, May 13–15, 2022) and the "*Traces of Sisterhood*" exhibition (curated by Eliza Proszczuk and Eulalia Domanowska, August 16 – September 16, 2022), which took place at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

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TRACES OF SISTERHOOD



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Introduction

Ewa Chomicka,
Eliza Proszczuk

Traces of Sisterhood:
workshop

In May 2022, the *Traces of Sisterhood* workshop was held at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. This three-day meeting launched a several-year-long project on sisterhood as a form of social organization and, more broadly, of being in the world. As curators of this initiative, we were interested in the meaning of the concept – the manner of revealing and developing new practices both in the international context, and in local communities. During the workshops, the perspectives of women from the world of art, culture, activism, and science converged¹. We became acquainted with various approaches to sisterhood and various forms of practising it – in everyday life, in artistic or activist practice, in social research. We endeavoured to capture its core values, we wondered about new forms of solidarity, and the potential of sisterhood as a model for the future social organization.

Although sisterhood is by no means a new concept, it has only just recently started making its way in public discourse. The Polish version of the Word software continues to underline the word *siostrzeństwo* as “suspicious” (as opposed to the well-established concept of *braterstwo*, meaning fraternity or brotherhood). When you enter *siostrzeństwo* in the PWN Online Dictionary of the Polish Language search engine, the system fails to find the term, and offers a question instead: “Did you mean: *starszeństwo* (seniority), *trzpiotostwo* (giddiness)?” The Polish Wikipedia only this year “allowed” sisterhood into its encyclopaedic resource of concepts², on the initiative

1 Workshop participants included: Agata Ulanowska, Agnieszka Brzeżańska, Agnieszka Rayzacher, Anka Leśniak, Elwira Sztetner, Eliza Proszczuk, Eulalia Domanowska, Ewa Chomicka, Iwona Demko, Iva Kovač, Kirstie Macleod, Magdalena Buchczyk, Magdalena Zych, Marta Majchrzak, Marta Romankiv, Monika Szpunar, Monika Weiss, Natalia Broniarczyk, Paulina Olszewska, Weronika Pelczyńska, Yulia Kosterieva, Zuzanna Hertzberg.

2 See: <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siostrzeństwo> (accessed: 17 September 2022).

of Marta Majchrzak, who also contributed to the present publication. Incidentally, she does not pretend that having the Wikipedia entry accepted was either a quick or an easy process.

The famous slogan *Sisterhood is Powerful* already in the 1960s emphasized the importance of the strength and force coming from female solidarity, the female community. These categories – community and solidarity – are the basic ones, on which most discussions referring to the concept of sisterhood are founded. They indicate the commonality of women’s experience, the need for mutual support, the need to strengthen the female voice and actions in order to improve the situation of women and to fight for equal rights together. The opposition to gender discrimination, the questioning of the dominant patriarchal order with all the inequalities built thereon result in an invitation to discuss a new form of social organization that reclaims the experience of women in the public sphere – which becomes inclusive and based on the values such as care, empathy, and solidarity.

However, as Karolina Sikorska points out in her article *Siostrzeństwo i jego dyskursywne użycia* [*Sisterhood and its discursive applications*], when you analyse the texts that appeared after the 10th Congress of Women (Kongres Kobiet, Łódź, 2018), you will find that there is no such thing as “one community of women” – and that for each particular issue, different women may represent different positions and value systems. When addressing various strategies of building relationships between women, the author describes them as the “the narration of solidarity over divisions”, “the narration of sisterhood as a struggle” and “the narration of difference”³. The case described by the author reveals the complexity of the category of

3 See: K. Sikorska, *Siostrzeństwo i jego dyskursywne użycia* [in:] “Acta Universitatis Lodziensis: Folia Sociologica” 2019, No. 70.

sisterhood, and the fact that the differences between women can sometimes outnumber the similarities, and that social discrimination goes far beyond gender – although it can be compounded by it (think all kinds of exclusion, related to the economic situation, skin colour, sexuality, social background, disability, etc.).

These themes and various nuances in the approach to the sisterhood category appeared both during the planning of the *Traces of Sisterhood* workshop, and during the discussions held within it. We treated the May workshop as the first step in jointly mapping the practices of sisterhood, and we decided that we would start with a women's meeting; with a basic reference to the community of female experiences, conditions, or problems, and also with a focus on thinking about sisterhood not only in the context of women, but as a social practice that can be implemented (and realized) between different groups.

During the evaluation session at the end of the workshop, having completed the joint process, the participants were asked to write down the phrases that – in their opinion – best expressed the idea of “sisterhood”. These threads, developed in the present publication, summarize and expand the topics discussed during the workshop; and they also open the discussion that we are going to continue in the years to come.

What, then, is sisterhood?

Sisterhood is: leaving one's comfort zone; joint action; a common goal; non-hierarchical cooperation; looking for forms of social organization other than patriarchy; inclusiveness; new ways of working with memory; empowerment; empathy; openness; honesty; community beyond divisions; caring; sharing; always remembering about those who are disadvantaged; presence, and awareness of presence; support and stimulation; building herstory; not thinking about oneself (and sometimes precisely: thinking about oneself).

Photos from the *Traces of Sisterhood* workshop:
Magdalena Starowieyska.



Traces of sisterhood workshop, module *Sisterly tablecloth* (conducted by: Eliza Proszczuk, Ewa Chomicka). The joint embroidering of the tablecloth became an occasion to talk and get to know each other in the group of workshop participants, and to exchange initial ideas about sisterhood. The activity referred to social practices: the tradition of joint embroidery of tablecloths as well as collective focus and conversation that accompanies embroidery.





Various approaches to sisterhood practices were presented during the discussion. Workshop participants shared their initiatives in the field of art, activism, science, as well as everyday experiences – practices of sisterhood relationships between individuals and various groups.





As part of the *Sisterhood in Practice* module, contemporary choreographers and dancers Weronika Pelczyńska and Monika Szpunar shared the methods of body-mindfulness that they propagate as sisterhood practices in the broadly understood performance arts milieu. For them, the horizon of sisterhood is defined by pleasure, freedom, tenderness, and care, oriented towards experiencing the body in motion. In their practice, they explore tools and techniques that strengthen and embody what is individual and collective at the same time.







The artist Agnieszka Brzeżańska invited the participants of the workshops for a cruise and a bonfire at sunset on the wild bank of the Vistula river. The FLOW features trans-disciplinary creative activities organized by herself and Ewa Ciepiewska, which have been happening for years on the Vistula river and in other locations of flow. By becoming a guide, the river leads towards reenergizing of the creative practice; it brings together artists, curators and community workers to be and to act together.





Visiting the *Decolonizations* exhibition at the Studio Gallery, which presented the artistic culture of the 1960s and 1970s in relation to the Vietnam War, protests against colonial violence, and their impact on the societies and cultures of the socialist countries at the time. During the tour, curator Paulina Olszewska focused on the female voices, and on how the artists featured in the exhibition expressed their opposition to war – the latter equated with male violence and domination.



Participants of the workshops in the courtyard of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

Introduction

Eliza Proszczuk
Eulalia Domanowska

Traces of Sisterhood:
exhibition

Traces of Sisterhood exhibition presented at the Salon Akademii gallery in Warsaw (August 16 – September 16, 2022) expanded the threads that the workshop has touched upon. Textile art – one of the vehicles for the development of feminist thought – became the medium for our message. The exhibition presented works related to the textile art by contemporary artists, as well as examples of using fabric to create sculptures, artistic objects, patchworks, and collages. It demonstrated how artists today either continue or return to the traditionally feminine technique, addressing it in new ways. They do not produce decorative works or functional objects; instead, they create contemporary objects of art engaged in telling stories about society, community, nature, issues of minority groups, etc.

Textile art has been developing from time immemorial, especially in rural circles. However, more than 100 years ago, women artists actively joined the creative effort in this domain, which became one of the legitimate artistic forms – as the vehicle for gradually increasing its own importance. Female artists continued to strive for the recognition of the art of fabrics on a par with painting, sculpture or architecture. One of the earliest examples is the work of Karin Larsson in Sweden. In Poland, Zofia Stryjeńska harnessed the medium as early as the mid-1920s, when she designed textiles for the Polish Pavilion at the famous World Exhibition in Paris in 1925, and in her subsequent cooperation with the largest weaving mill in Gliniany, Ukraine. After World War II, the Biennale of Tapestry, organized in the 1960s in Switzerland in Lausanne, was of ground-breaking importance. This was a fruitful time when many creators were interested in this field of art. Artists such as Magdalena Abakanowicz, Neda Al Hilali of Iraqi origin, living in the United States, Françoise Grossen from Switzerland, Americans including Lawnore Tawney and Sheila Hicks, Marta Taiple from

Finland, and others changed the history of art, and thus the history of contemporary perception of women in art. All of these artists drew from the ethnographic themes, and from the art of Scandinavian, African, Colombian and other women from different, particularly non-European, cultures. The Golden Lion Award for Lifetime Achievement was presented in Venice at this year's Biennale to Cecilia Vicuña, a Chilean artist and poet active in the United States.

Many contemporary artists also deal with textiles, which once again have become the carrier and medium of art. Consciously using tradition, they achieve other goals, related to, for example, community, feminism, ecofeminism, activism, social issues, etc. In Poland, such artists include Agnieszka Brzeżańska, Iwona Demko, Eliza Proszczuk, Agata Zbylut, Monika Drożyńska or Małgorzata Mirga-Tas – Poland's representative at this year's Venice Biennale, whose work enjoys recognition and much appreciation among experts and the general public. The colourful patchworks and pictures she created together with other Romani women constitute an interesting and original presentation of their culture.

At the Salon Akademii gallery, a series of double-warp fabrics by Eliza Proszczuk is among twentieth-century implementations of this traditional medium. They were created in cooperation with weavers from the Izba Tkactwa Dwuosnowowego [Chamber of Two-warp Cloth Weaving] in Janów Podlaski, in a workshop established by Eleonora Plutyńska, professor of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Eliza Proszczuk drew from the art of the Podlasie region, while introducing contemporary themes thereto. The leitmotif here are amorphous plant patterns linked to the symbol of femininity. Other examples are collages and patchworks by Anna Nawrot, who evokes the woman, her image, perception, and functioning in the social and the personal space. Soft, textile sculptures by Iwona Demko traverse the borders of various fields of art, while making a

reference to the tradition of the outstanding Kraków artist Maria Pinińska-Bereś; just like the objects by Stanisław Andrzejewski, fabrics by Magdalena Wiśniewska combining textile and exhibition design, as well as a video by a Polish artist living and working in New York, Monika Weiss, which is a part of a larger project, titled *Nirbhaya*. Using veils, the artist draws on ancient Greek culture, and narrates challenging problems of women in a poetic way. We also presented the fabrics by a Ukrainian artist from Lviv, Natalia Shymin, the painting *Radiating Glory* by Agnieszka Brzeżańska, and the works of Małgorzata Dymitruk from Podlasie.

The word “sisterhood”, which became popular in Poland as a concept – especially after the Black Protest of 2016 – can be understood as solidarity between women based on a commonality of circumstances, experiences, and problems. “Sisterhood is Powerful” – the slogan coined in the 1960s by a leading American feminist and writer Kathie Sarachild – refers to the strength of the community of women and to female solidarity. Solidarity and altruism of acting constitute the foundations of this phenomenon. On the other hand, the knowledge of herstory is one of the key issues that give us hope for social change. In addition to supporting each other in everyday life, it is necessary to document and present the work of women, their achievements, and their presence in social, cultural and artistic life; it is necessary to show and support traditional techniques used by women, such as the art of textiles.

The exhibition was accompanied with the workshops conducted by an Irish artist, Kirstie Macleod, focused around a magnificent dress with a historical cut, embroidered by women from Peru, Chile, Egypt as well as representatives of other nations and cultures.



Traces of Sisterhood exhibition, Salon Akademii Gallery in Warsaw, view of the first room.



Eliza Proszczuk, *Untitled* from the *Double Weft* series, two-warp technique, woven by Teresa Prymont, 2021; Eliza Proszczuk, *Untitled* from the *Dress* series, embroidery on lamb intestines, 2017.



Eliza Proszczuk, *Korowaj*, film, 2022; Eliza Proszczuk, *Untitled* from the *Dress* series, embroidery on lamb intestines, 2017.



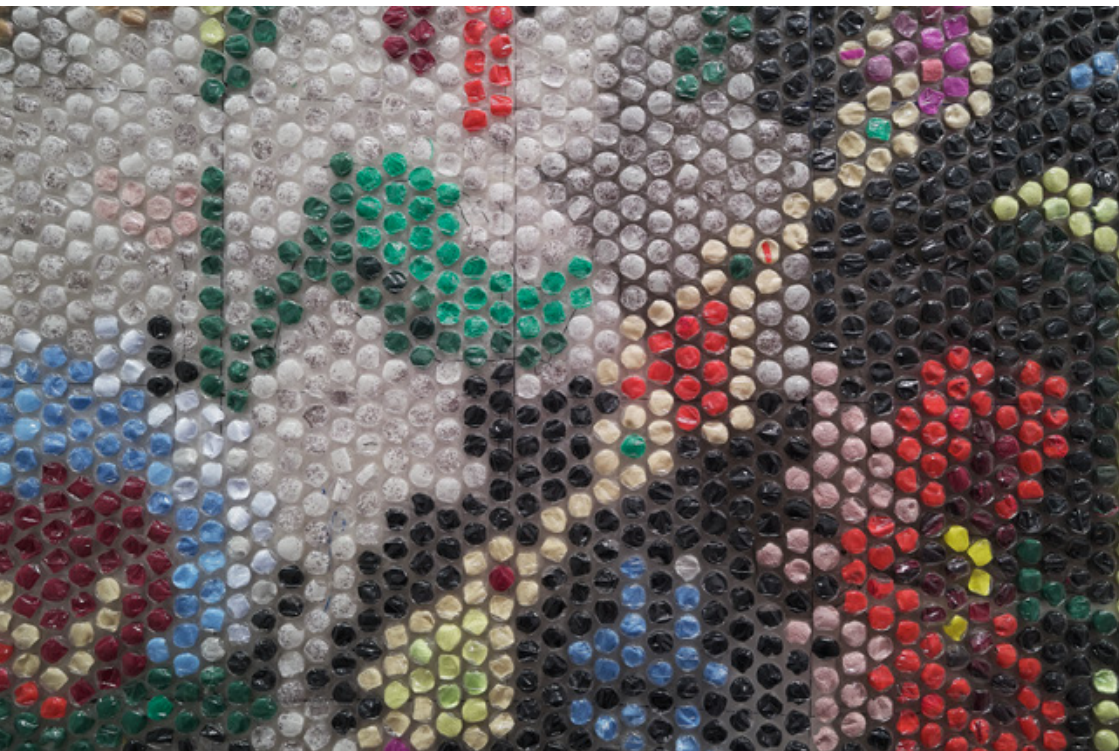
Agnieszka Brzeźańska, *Radiating Glory*, acrylic, 2002.



Małgorzata Dmitruk, *Lullaby*, hand embroidery, 2021–22.







Natalya Shymin, *Transformation*, bubble wrap filled with pieces of fabric, 2017–18.





Iwona Demko, *Sisterhood*, object, 2022.



Iwona Demko, *Sisterhood*, object, 2022.



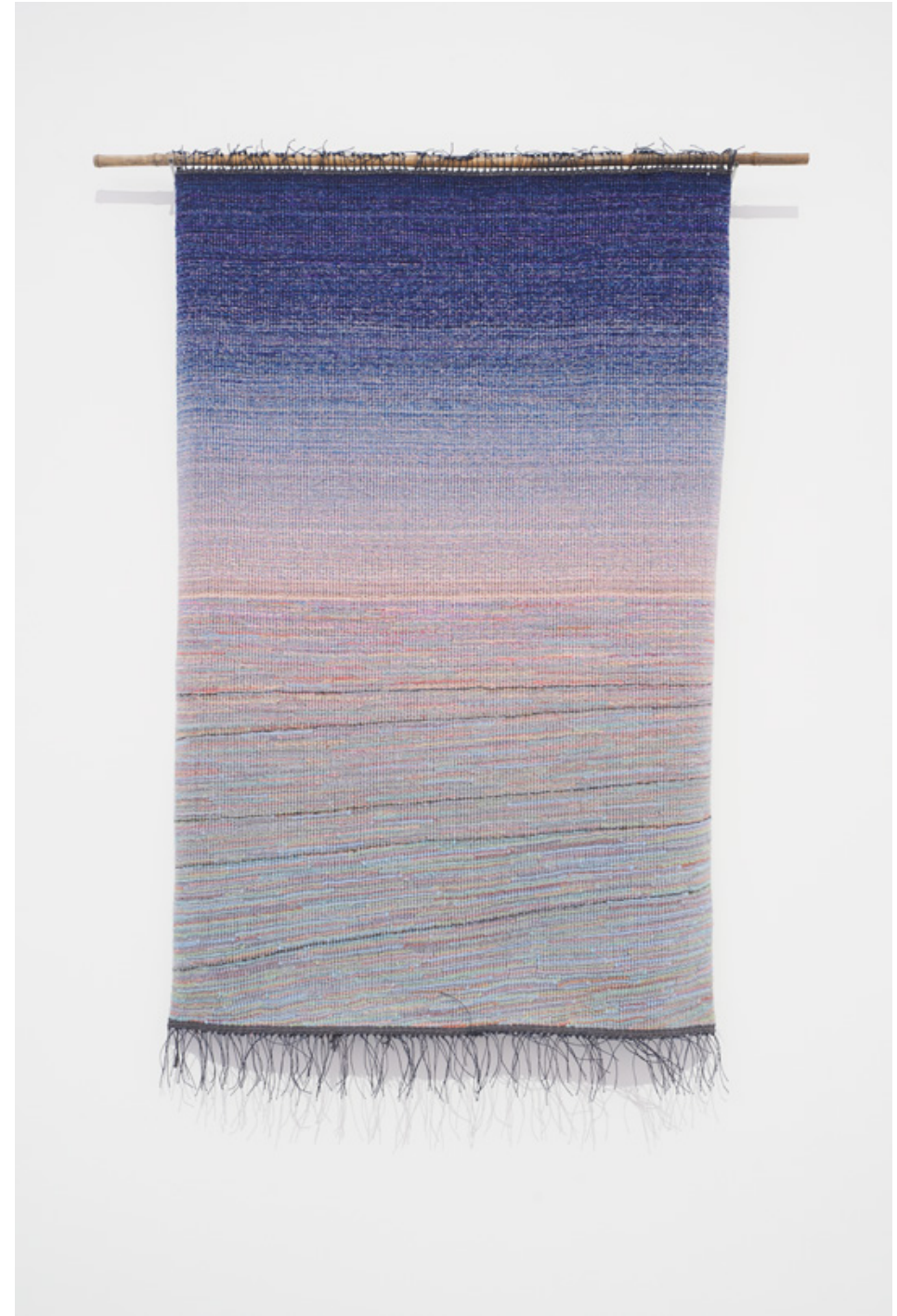
Monika Weiss, *Two Laments (19 Cantos)*, single-channel sound composition, film, 2015–20.



Traces of Sisterhood exhibition, third room, view from the entrance.



Agata Zbylut, *Champagne patriots*, dress, 2020–22.



Magdalena Wiśniewska, *Lhamo Laco/ East*, tapestry, 2022.



Traces of Sisterhood exhibition, third room, view from the entrance.



Stanisław Andrzejewski, *KA*, fabric, 1978.

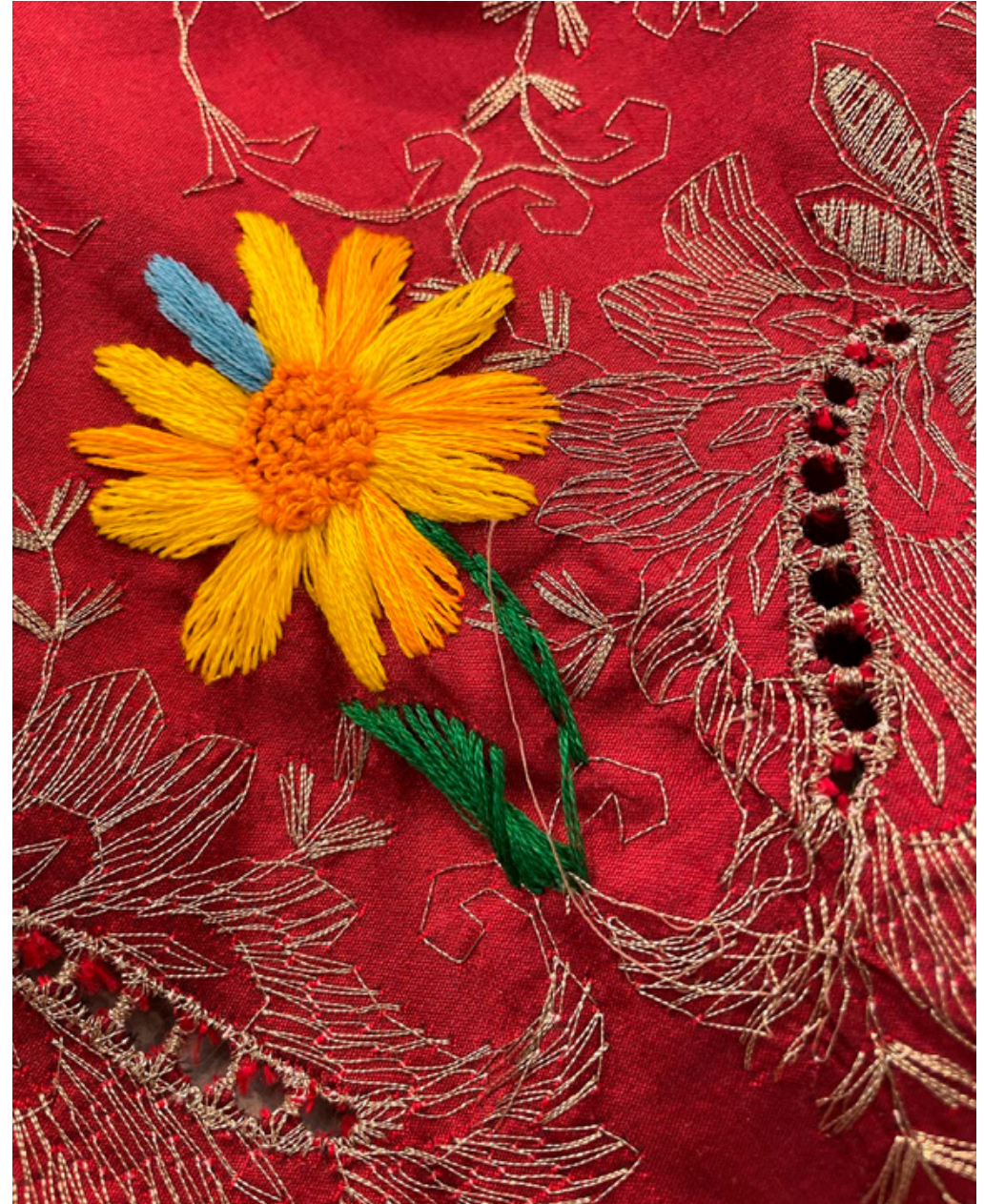


Bazyli Krasulak, *(my) Sisters*, digital print on plexiglass, 2022.



Anna Nawrot, textile collage from the series *One*, 2020.





Red Dress, 2-day workshop for women refugees from Ukraine, conducted as part of the *Traces of Sisterhood* exhibition program, photo by: Kirstie Macleod



**SISTERHOOD IS:
JOINT ACTION,
A COMMON GOAL,
SUPPORT AND
STIMULATION**



Marta Majchrzak – psychologist, social researcher, founder of Herstories.pl. Co-author of the famous reports on Polish women and youth (*Kids Power*, *Youth World*, *Women Power*), as well as the first Polish report on sisterhood. She is an expert of the OFFschool Foundation and the program director of Sisters of Europe Poland. Recipient of the Tarbut Fellowship.

Marta Majchrzak

On the Trail of Sisterhood



The banner of solidarity with LGBTIQAP people in Hungary by the activist Zuzanna Hertzberg. On the black cloth, on one side of the banner, there are words in Yiddish, and on the other side, in Polish: "Sisterhood. You will never walk alone. Radical compassion" (Yiddish version) / "Care - Deeds" (Polish version). The side fringes of the banner refer to the colours of the Hungarian flag (red, white, green).

I am wondering whether I should start my text about sisterhood with bad news, or good news. I shall start with the bad, because I like happy endings.

Would you agree that we live in a world where it is easier to recognize the lack of sisterhood than to perceive its manifestations? The results of our social research are disenchanting. 6 out of 10 women in Poland feel that other women are happy to see them fail. This trend is strongest among women between the ages of 18 and 24, but also in older age groups more than half of the women feel that other women enjoy their failures. This is data from 2018, when together with researchers led by Kasia Krzywicka-Zdunek we studied a large sample of 1,500 Polish women in a project for the RASP group. Then, during in-depth ethnographic interviews, we asked about support from unrelated women – the kind of support that women receive and the kind that they give. We heard a lot of stories, but only few of those were uplifting. There were stories about mutual dislike between women, about backstabbing rather than extending a helping hand. We heard stories about harsh and unfriendly judgements, about comparing ourselves to others, about the struggle between feeling superior to other women and feeling inferior to them. We often heard stories about longing for community and kinship with other women, and the difficulties in building that community and kinship. Women mentioned feeling jealous of men for the simplicity of their relationships, but also for the male ability to support each other in the workplace, thanks to which they do better in their professional life, whereas women tend to be lonely, supported by neither the other women nor the men, and being all the worse for that. The research results painted a picture of women that are rivals – more so and more often than allies. This is not the women's fault, either – it is because from early childhood we have been socialized to compete against other women. This rivalry takes place in

various fields or disciplines that refer to different cultural patterns of femininity. These patterns are as numerous as they are (often) contradictory. They can relate to the body, that is the extent to which I am pretty and sexually attractive compared to other women; to social roles – the extent to which I am a good mother or friend, the extent to which I am socially desirable or charming. They can cover a broad variety of areas. We constantly compete with other women, and we often lose ourselves in this competition, trying to win and follow the patterns of femininity as perfectly as humanly possible.

In conclusion, in our study, we heard stories about the mutual disciplining and instructing of women by women, to adhere to the patterns of femininity, to fall in line with the patterns of patriarchal culture. Hence the slut shaming, body shaming, and hate, coming from women and targeting other women. Hence also the insufficient support in the fight against the culture of rape. Women do not support each other in the fight against a culture that blames the victim of violence, rather than the perpetrator. When it comes to working life, women rarely told us about the support they received from other women in this sphere. Typically they do not bolster each other in the fight against the glass ceiling or the sticky floor, which, like flypaper, keeps us firmly in place – at low positions or line jobs – and prevents us from developing and advancing professionally. Finally, women do not support each other in the fight against the wage gap, which means that women employed in the same positions as men earn 14 per cent less, on average. Women also do not back each other in the fight against excessive domestic workload. We know from research that we are much more burdened with unpaid house work than men are: every day we carry out home chores about two and a half hours longer, compared to men. It turns out that women tend to hold other women accountable for how well they do their second job – that is,

how perfectly the children's clothes are ironed, how well the dinner is cooked – rather than supporting one another to change this tough everyday reality.

It would be a very dismal picture, were it not for the fact that a certain amount of change is visible to the naked eye. It is visible in the streets, when we are marching arm in arm, to fight for our rights. Women of various social classes, different generations, varying ethical, sexual, and religious identities protest together, and support each other in this fight. The change is also visible in both traditional and social media. More and more often we see women airing out various “embarrassing topics” they pulled from the closet – previously stuffed in there by the patriarchy – such as female sexuality, the menstrual cycle, childbirth, miscarriages, abortions, menopause, aging, motherhood dilemmas; and by doing so, making other women feel less lonely in their plight. These are nothing else than the gestures of sisterhood. Movements such as Me Too continue to spread around the world; they reached Poland as well. Increasingly often, hand in hand, we fight for equal wages, for reproductive rights, for us to live in a world that is equitable.

This is why I decided that the perfect time has come for the first Polish study on sisterhood – that is, on women supporting women who are not their blood relations. You may ask: “Why not fraternity?” Just as we need feminine nouns for jobs and positions, we need a concept that is not falsely universalizing – because “fraternity” (brotherhood) was built on strictly male experience, and then universalized. In fact, in the academic sphere, as well as in the world of activism, the term “sisterhood” has been present for several decades now. I started telling my friends and clients about that concept. Many of them supported me saying that using the term “sisterhood” was a natural next step. In fact, back then I was the content director of the Sisters of Europe – Poland, and I curated discussion

panels on sisterhood at the Jewish Culture Festival. And yet among many of my friends and colleagues, the concept – and the term – aroused controversy. People asked why I did not want to study “girl power” instead, which, unlike “sisterhood”, is a well-known term. From my perspective, “girl power” epitomises “T-shirt feminism” – a false idea that does not address the hardships and obstacles women have to face when trying to build a community. Some of my friends bluntly said that I should occupy myself with something less bizarre and fanciful – with something real. From my perspective, the longing for sisterhood, for the community of women, is not only real, but also universal. Finally, my colleagues insisted that I should do a study on feminism, rather than on sisterhood. And yet from my perspective, sisterhood is the cornerstone of feminism. Without sisterhood, feminism all too often and all too easily deviates from the fight for the interests of all women, and falls into the trap of fighting for the narrow interests of a certain group of women. It may be a neoliberal trap. Or it may be staying within a circle of friends, with women who are like us, and not caring for others, less-privileged ones.

Luckily, scientist Sandra Frydrysiak, PhD and the researchers from the Zymetria company contacted me when they heard about my intention to study sisterhood, and offered their help. Already in June 2021, we conducted the first sisterhood study in Poland. At first, we addressed a representative sample of over 800 Polish women and men, asking them to tell us what they associated sisterhood with. As it turns out, it is associated primarily with blood ties – with biological sisters and female cousins – but also with community and support from women towards other women. It turned out that only 27 per cent of Poles are familiar with sisterhood as a notion. When we presented our definition of sisterhood, explaining that it is a concept of community, understanding, and solidarity between women, regardless of the degree of kinship, social class,

ethnic or national affiliation, 45 per cent of Poles felt that they had encountered such a notion before. The difference between men and women is interesting in this respect – women much more often responded that they had heard about sisterhood so defined (51% of women said so, and only 38% of men). We went on to ask, to what extent Poles observe signs of sisterhood in their lives. It turned out that sisterhood is observed by 51% of Poles in their families, and by 49% of Poles among close friends. This means that women support each other in a close circle – of their family, close friends or colleagues, but then the question arises whether such relationships can be called “sisterhood”. From the responses, it becomes apparent that the least amount of sisterhood – of this solidarity and cooperation – is found at universities (33%) and in workplaces (35%). Clearly, there are spheres, which require systemic support that would enable women to bolster each other.

We also checked the difference between women living in rural areas versus women living in large cities, with more than 100,000 inhabitants. It turned out that women in the countryside were able to count on the support of other women much more often. 48% of women living in rural areas observed signs of sisterhood around them, while only 33% of women living in large cities had such observations. 73% of women living in rural areas believed that sisterhood might become a more common practice in the future, while in cities this response was much more rare, at only 55%. We also checked in which areas or domains women tend to support each other. Rural women support each other more often than women from large urban centres – regardless of the sphere or area of life where that support is given. Interestingly, this mutual assistance is practiced not only in the areas related to childcare and home care. Women in the countryside, much more often than those in the city, support each other in building self-esteem – of the kind that is based not merely on external appearance (55%

of women in the countryside versus 42% of women from cities over 100,000). Women living in rural areas more often than urban women help each other in the professional domain – they fight together for the right to promotion or advancement within the company (52% versus 35%).

I also promised you the good news and finally, here it is: worlds where there is more sisterhood exist right next to us. The results of our study clearly show that a world with more sisterhood is possible; that sisterhood is not some kind of utopia. The practice of sisterhood produces a snowball effect; sisterhood is contagious. By analysing women’s stories about their positive experiences, we can point to specific actions that have the potential of changing our worlds to more sisterly ones.

Firstly, just like on an airplane in the event of an emergency: take care of yourself before you proceed to help others. Lower your guard. On a daily basis, most of us keep our guard, which we use to hide and protect ourselves from other women; we pretend, we diligently follow the prescribed models of femininity, we fear judgements and ostracism. The more natural, the less perfect, and the more distant from the ideal or blueprint we manage to be towards other women, the greater the chance for kindness and for deeper bonds. Let us learn to ask other women for help without feeling that it is tantamount to admitting our own failure or weakness. It is difficult, but it is possible.

Secondly, let us try to stop female-to-female violence. It is harder to spot than male-to-male violence, which does not mean it is not there. On the contrary: it is bubbling under the surface of smiles and compliments. It is violence related to unfavourable judgment, critical comparison, gossiping. My practice of sisterhood began like this: when I felt an urge to make a critical remark about another woman, I asked myself if I would be able to approach her and tell her that to her face. If I do not have the courage or the desire to actually say it, I forget about it,

I do not tell anyone about it, and if possible, I stop thinking about it myself.

Thirdly, let us include. I love the word “inclusion”; it is very sisterly. Let us include and invite disadvantaged women to our professional and personal worlds. Let us include in an interdisciplinary and inter-generational manner, let us include beyond divisions. Let us connect the worlds in which we operate, even if they seem very different. The wealth that lies in such collaborations is a treasure waiting to be discovered.

Fourthly, let us speak out against the causes for the lack of sisterhood – that is, against patriarchy – but let us stop blaming people. The lack of sisterhood is not our fault, but we can all try to make it grow, so that there is more of it.

Fifthly, let us support other women without feeling superior – let us give them the kind of support that they need, in the manner that they need. It is difficult, but let us try to give exactly the kind of support that is needed as opposed to the support that we believe to be “appropriate”. Important note: men can support women in practicing sisterhood, they can teach girls that sisterhood is worth the effort, they can instruct their daughters and their sisters, they can draw attention to the fact that sisterhood is an important value.

From my perspective, sisterhood and its practice is a rebellion against the status quo. Sisterhood is a revolution. So let us be contagious in our sisterhood, let us include each other, and let us watch our personal and professional worlds change for the better¹.

1 The above text is based on my speech at TEDxSGH, as well as a lecture during the 3-day workshop “Traces of Sisterhood” (Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, 13-15.05.2022)

**SISTERHOOD IS:
EMPOWERMENT,
BUILDING
HERSTORY**



Eulalia Domanowska – art historian and critic, curator, lecturer at the WIT in Warsaw. Currently, the Director of the State Art Gallery in Sopot; she was previously employed as the Director of the Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko. She studied at the University of Warsaw, and at Umeå University in Sweden in the fields of Swedish art, museology, ethnology and gender art. Member of AICA and IKT (Association of Contemporary Art Curators). Curator of over 100 Polish and international projects, including exhibitions by Tony Cragg, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Henry Moore, and Ursula von Rydingsvard. Author of many publications on contemporary art issues.

Eulalia Domanowska

Textile Art – Herstories

Textile art is one of the vehicles for the development of feminist thought and the very idea of sisterhood. Its history as a contemporary, equal field of art on its own right begins over one hundred years ago; it is gaining recognition in artistic circles today. My text does not pretend to be a systemic description of this phenomenon. Instead, it is a review of the most important, breakthrough female artists who changed the history of art, and a few of their more contemporary followers.

First, I wish to introduce an artist who is very famous in the Scandinavian countries and in the Anglo-Saxon culture. Together with her husband – painter Carl Larsson – they created a model of a happy home. She took up the new design, which gave rise to the Scandinavian designing style associated with bright colours, wooden furniture, and beautiful fabrics that make the interior feel cosy and warm. He, in turn, popularized that style with his paintings.

Karin Bergsjö-Larsson was born in 1859, and her father, a businessman, made sure that his daughter received a sound education. Having finished the prestigious French school in Stockholm, Karin first graduated from the Slöjdskolan – School of Arts and Crafts (today's highly regarded Konstfack), and then the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, which she attended in 1877–1882. She studied painting. As soon as a year after graduation, she met her future husband, Carl Larsson. Their marriage, and the birth of their eight children made Karin stop painting, but instead she took up the design of the family home, and went on to create a truly unique style.

Apart from furniture and clothes for herself and the children, she also designed original fabrics. Pre-modern in character, they introduced a new abstract style in the medium of tapestry. Made in vivid colours, often embroidered with patterns of stylized plants, they offered a much lighter decorative formula than the national style, prevalent at the time. Bergsjö-Larsson was also inspired by the art

of the Orient. She interpreted Japanese motifs on black and white canvases. Furthermore, she studied and experimented with the technique of folk fabrics.

A representative example of her work is the tapestry titled “The Four Elements”, which she created in 1903, and which hung over the new sofa in the dining room. In this particular piece, she combined the Japanese aesthetics with the English Arts and Crafts style and folk art. She was the first woman to germinate such substantial change in textile design and in lifestyle, and her influence extended beyond her own country. She achieved her greatest successes in the years 1900–1910.

Another artist who dealt with textile art, among other media, was Zofia Stryjeńska – a Polish painter, graphic artist, designer of fabrics, clothes and even toys. Stryjeńska's applied art designs seduce the viewer. With her sense of form, colour, and rhythm, she created compelling patterns for *kilim* tapestries and fabrics that one would like to see interpreted by contemporary design artists. The artist's work was based on stylistic and thematic inspirations derived from Polish folklore, particularly from the highlands.

Stryjeńska is one of the most popular Polish Art Deco artists. She presented her works at the International Exhibition of Decorative Art in Paris in 1925; she received an award at the Venice Biennale in 1932; together with other artists, she created interior decorations for Polish ocean liners; and she designed a *kilim* tapestry for the Emperor of Japan. She sold rights to many of her patterns to the largest pre-war Polish weaving mill – the Gliniany (Hlyniany), owned by Mykhailo Khamula.

Hlyniany is a town located in western Ukraine, 50 km east of Lviv; since the second half of the nineteenth century, it had been the largest *kilim*-weaving centre in Austro-Hungarian Galicia region, and then in the Second Polish Republic. The local weaving traditions are being



Karin Larsson's plant stand, photo by: Carl Larsson-gården.



Carl's free-standing bed, with linen curtains and canopy embroidered by Karin, photo by: Per Myrehed.



Karin's and the girls' room, photo by: Per Myrehed.



Rose of Love – tapestry-macramé made of wool and fishing yarn (1909) and Carl's floral decoration around the door (gift for Karin's name day in 1894), photo by: Per Myrehed.



Karin's *Fabric from the reading room*, with the theme of a fabulous creature, tapestry frame sewn onto a thick woolen fabric, 1909, photo by: Per Myrehed.



Baroque chair with upholstery woven by Karin, ca. 1912, photo by: Per Myrehed.



Sofa in the dining room with copies of Karin's *Sunflower Cushion* from around 1905 and her tapestry *Four Elements* from 1903–04. The seat cushion is a traditional bed cover from Dala-Floda, with pompom fringes added by Karin, photo by: Per Myrehed.

resurrected today by the Polish company called “Splot” in collaboration with the Ukrainian “Zena” workshop.

Stryjeńska designed phantasmagorical, sophisticatedly coloured costumes and headgear for the gods of pagan Slavic pantheon. The physical prototypes for the costumes of Marzanna, Światowid or Perkun were sewn and used in performances by a contemporary Polish visual artist, Paulina Ołowska.

In March 2018, at the Museo del Novocento – an impressive museum of modern art, located right next to the Milan Cathedral – Ołowska made a performance whose protagonists were Slavic goddesses. “The performance of *Slavic Goddesses and the Ushers* is based on the work of Zofia Stryjeńska, one of the most brilliant artists of the twentieth century, born in Kraków” – the Vogue reported¹.

The costumes for the Milan performance were inspired by the 1918 *Bożki słowiańskie [Slavonic idols]* series. Stryjeńska's lithographs show pagan goddesses: Dziejzilia, Marzanka and Cyca, as well as gods Światowid, Radegast and Trygław. *Slavic Goddesses and the Ushers* was created in collaboration with Fondazione Furla, a Bologna foundation and art gallery founded by Giovanna Furlanetto, president of the Furla fashion house.

Another of our heroines is Anni Albers, who in 1931 took over the management of the Bauhaus weaving workshop, and worked at Black Mountain College in North Carolina in the USA with her husband Josef Albers after the attempt to revive the university in the United States. The artist created bold abstract compositions, in which she resorted to straight lines and clear planes of colour. In her utilitarian projects, she also experimented with unusual materials, such as metal threads or horsehair. As early as 1929, she designed an innovative wall covering for the Bauhaus auditorium in Dessau, made of

¹ Paulina Ołowska: *słowiańska bogini*, “Vogue” 2 October 2018 (accessed: 3 September 2022).

cotton and cellophane, which muffled sound and reflected light at the same time.

In 1949, Anni Albers had an individual exhibition at the MOMA in New York. This was the museum's first exhibition of textile design, and it was a significant step in shifting the understanding of weaving towards something more than craftsmanship. The exhibition presented experimental works by Albers, made of unusual materials, such as cellophane, copper, raffia, grass, or wood scraps. Among the innovative objects were free-hanging textile partitions, upholstery fabrics, and wall coverings.

An important time for textiles came in the 1960s. In 1962, the Lausanne Biennial of Textiles was organized for the first time, which contributed to a change in the status of textile art. Thanks to the efforts of curators and artists from applied art and architectural decoration fields, textiles entered the domain of fine art.

In 1969, at MOMA in New York, one of the ground-breaking exhibitions in this field took place, titled the *Wall Hangings*. The curator Mildred Constantine invited 28 artists, including six Poles, of whom Magdalena Abakanowicz made the greatest impression. But first, let us take a look at some of the other artists.

The changes in textile art went in several directions – firstly, the fabrics became crocheted objects; secondly – having gained thickness and texture – they became sculptures. The changes in the art were also accompanied by the critical reflection on the part of art theorists and philosophers. Thanks to books by Claude Levi-Strauss, such as the *Tristes Tropiques*, *The Savage Mind* and *The Raw and the Cooked*, it became clear that there is no good reason to consider the white culture of the West as superior to any other culture in any other part of the globe. Many artists – male and female – started to refer to the primal cultures of Africa, South America, to indigenous peoples and to local weaving traditions. Many

textile artists travelled around the world, to seek and find new inspirations.

One of those artists was Ewa Pachucka (Jaroszyńska). She studied in Łódź, and it was there that she found inspiration in the fabrics designed by Joanna Owidzka. Works by Ewa Pachucka crocheted out of sisal and hemp – titled *Cocoon I* and *II* – were featured at the above-mentioned MOMA exhibition.

Swiss artist Francoise Grossen began her creative adventure with architectural studies, moving on to textiles. Already in the 1960s she travelled and lived in the United States, and then in Africa, in Congo and Gabon, where she taught French. She was particularly inspired by items made of string, which are part of the local African tradition. In her works, string was raised to the status of sculptural medium.

American artist Leonore Tawney started out as a sculptor, but in 1954 she switched to weaving. She studied textiles in Finland with Marta Taipale. In 1969 she travelled to Japan, India and Thailand, and later on to Guatemala. After these experiences, she started creating three-dimensional works, using a special linen yarn in the undyed, natural colour, and in black. Her light, transparent, openwork pieces were inspired by the fabrics of the pre-Columbian Andes – especially the Peruvian woven gauze.

American artist Sheila Hicks graduated from Yale University, with a diploma on Inca textiles. She was involved in researching local weaving practices. She travelled across five continents, studying local cultures in Mexico, France, Morocco, India, Chile, Sweden, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and South Africa.

Another important figure is Neda Al Hilali – an Iraqi artist born in the Czech Republic, who later moved to California, where she studied and then created textile objects and installations out of fabrics. All these artists



Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Yellow Abakan*, 1970, photo by: Eulalia Domanowska.



Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Turquoise Abakan*, 1969, photo by: Eulalia Domanowska.

created their fabrics without the use of looms, and achieved 3D effects.

And finally, Magdalena Abakanowicz, who had dealt with various fields of art in her work, spanning over 60 years. She crossed boundaries, combined various media; she experimented and searched. Besides fabrics and textiles, and her most famous *abakany*, she also created drawings, sculptures, spatial installations, architectural designs, and statues in the public spaces – of cities and parks. Today her works are showcased in many collections in Asia, Australia, and the Americas, whereas the most of her pieces can be found in the United States and in Europe.

Marga Paz wrote: “Already in the early works from the 1950s and 1960s, one of the most characteristic features of her art was revealed: an invariable, relentless fascination with energy, monumentality and mystery of the natural world, expressed in her preference for organic motifs and biological structures, [...] the desire to root the work of art in the universality of nature.”² The artist instigated an actual breakthrough in the treatment of fabrics. She was able to bring them out into the spatial dimension, and create something between textile and sculpture – namely, her *abakany*.

Abakanowicz crafted spatial textiles, rendering a revolutionary breakthrough in this field of art, and creating a sensual world of a highly modern woman. After she had been invited to an exhibition in the United States, she spent a lot of time there in 1970–71. She then came into contact, on the one hand, with a wave of American feminist artists, such as Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, and on the other hand, with monumental sculptures by minimalists and Land Art representatives, which probably triggered the artist’s growing interest in sculpture.

2 Marga Paz, Magdalena Abakanowicz, [in:] Exhibition catalogue *W przestrzeni Magdaleny Abakanowicz [In the space of Magdalena Abakanowicz]*, Orońsko 2019, p. 66

Currently, many artists work with fabrics, which once again became a resonant medium of contemporary art. Consciously using tradition, with the help of textiles, they pursue other goals: for example, community-related, feminist, eco-feminist, activist, social, and so forth. Such artists in Poland include – among others – Agnieszka Brzeżańska, Iwona Demko, Eliza Proszczuk, Agata Zbylut, Monika Drożyńska, and last but not least Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Poland’s representative at the current, 59th Venice Biennale, whose presentation was an undisputed success. Her collectively sewn patchworks, composed like the Renaissance frescoes at the Schifanoia Palace in Ferrara, constitute an excellent and very original presentation of Romani culture.

Venice’s Golden Lion Award for lifetime achievement was granted to Cecilia Vicuña, a Chilean artist and poet active in the United States. For over 50 years she has been producing a variety of art including works related to political activism; she has advocated for the environment, for human rights and cultural homogenization, while striving to tell stories about unknown regions of the global world.

Forced to emigrate in the 1970s after the murder of President Allende, Vicuña settled in the Tribeca neighbourhood of New York. Chilean culture is a strong presence in her oeuvre. “My work,” she said, “rests in the as yet undiscovered potential of the undeveloped, where the sound, the weaving, and the language come together to create new meanings.”³

This is Vicuña’s one-sentence introduction to the world of her multidisciplinary art. It is this anticipation and deep introspection that guided Vicuña through the 50 years of her artistic practice, often starting with a thought or an image, which would subsequently turn into poetry, film,

3 Quoted in: K. Lok, *Cecilia Vicuña: Weaving the Common Thread of Language, Memory, Resistance and the Female Body in Her Spatial Poetry*, CoBo Social (accessed: 6 September 2022).

song, sculpture or collective performance. Her practice is characterized by a sense of ephemerality and the abrupt changes of the modern world.

In the 1970s, the artist became interested in ancient *quipus*, a method of documenting and of visual communication by tying knots on coloured strings that the Incas and other ancient Andean cultures had used. Vicuña recalls her first encounter with this ancient form of communication. “I saw a *quipu* in a book, probably in the early 1960s, at my aunt Rosa Vicuña’s house. She was a sculptor and she was in love with pre-Columbian art.”⁴ In the early 1970s, Vicuña began to create her own *quipus* made of non-spun wool, which transformed into site-specific installations, combining the tactile ritual of weaving and spinning with assemblage, poetry, and performance art.

Today her works are found in the collections of the Tate Gallery in London, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Santiago. Vicuña’s art often associates the *quipu* with the female body, as is apparent in works such as the *Quipu Menstrual* series, which was recently shown at the 13th Shanghai Biennale. *Quipu Menstrual* was originally conceived as a prayer for the glaciers destroyed by the mining industry, and it parallels this powerful consequence to the strength of menstruation and the vitality of the female body as a metaphorical resistance to greed, violence, and human interference with nature. One of the *Quipu Menstrual* objects was swaying under the ceiling and could be entered; the viewers would find themselves in the luminous space in-between the sculptures and bathe in the sounds of dripping water from the movie *Vicuña Semiya (Song of the Seeds)* (2015). The result was an imitation of rain and sun in summer. It was an amazing experience that fleshed out Vicuña’s omnipresent themes – balance, and nature.

4 Ibid.

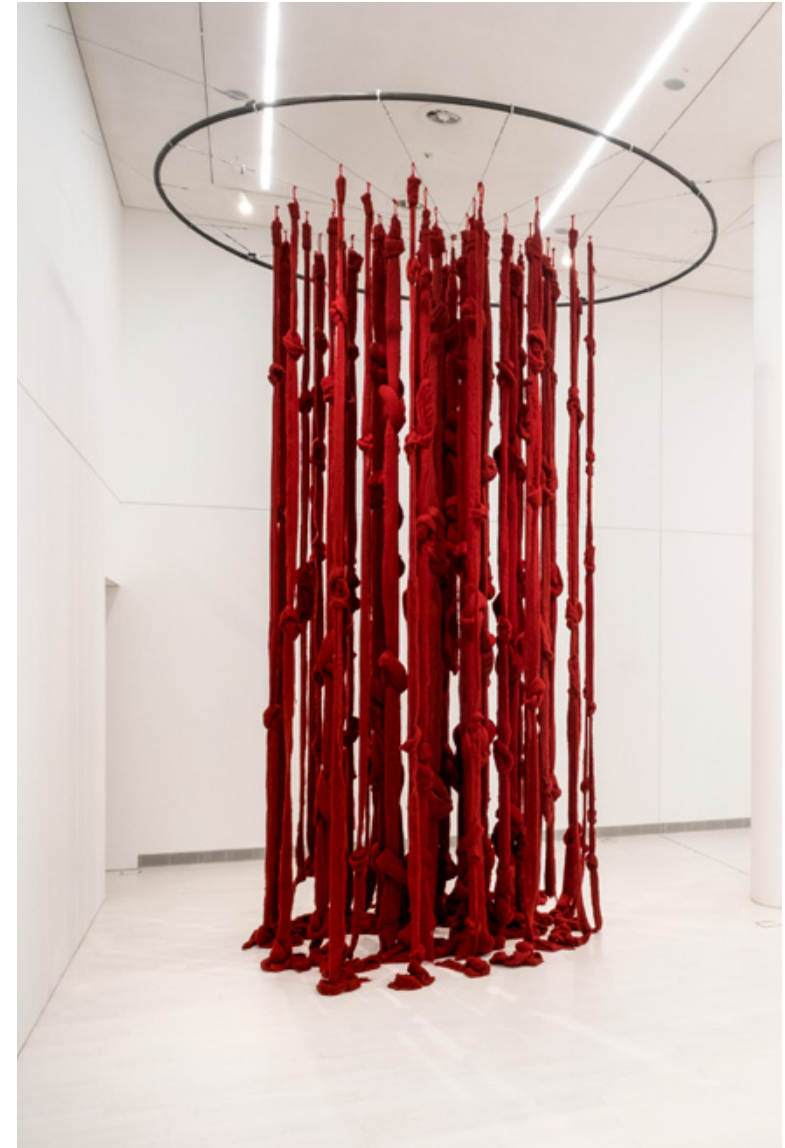


Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu, About to Happen*, CAC, New Orleans 2017, photo by: Alex Marks.

Cecilia Vicuña’s *Precarios*, placed on the walls, create a constellation of processed materials: plastic fragments, shells, stones, threads, and debris woven together in a gentle dance. These sculptures are delicate, rustic, like small pontoons or rafts made of drifting wood. They remain in an uncertain balance, while responding to concerns about environmental and humanitarian crises. Vicuña, who started her practice as a teenager, has been creating her “precarious objects” since the 1960s. Her works treat dematerialisation as a consequence of climate change, and provoke a broader conversation about displacement.

Let me conclude with the words of Magdalena Abakanowicz, who back in 1984 explained the rationale behind her artistic creation:

“Man created myths out of longing for a lost state of balance, for a prehistoric life that was a paradise, a blissful state without awareness. I observe how deeply rooted the sources of this inner struggle are; the struggle between the conscious and the inherited, between madness and wisdom, between dream and waking reality.”⁵



Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu Womb*, documenta 14, EMST, Athens 2017, photo by: Mathias Voelzke.

5 M. Abakanowicz, *O Androgynie*, [in]: *Abakanowicz. Katalog wystawy* [exhibition catalogue], Orońsko 2013, p.70.



Cecilia Vicuña, *About to Happen*, Henry Art Gallery, Seattle 2019, photo by: Chona Kasinger.



Cecilia Vicuña, performance during the documenta 14, Kassel 2017, photo by: Mathias Voelzke.



Cecilia Vicuña, performance during the documenta 14, Kassel 2017, photo by: Mathias Voelzke.

Eliza Proszczuk – visual artist, animator, educator, author of fabrics, spatial objects and collages. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw at the Faculty of Painting, and from the Post St. Joost in Breda at the Faculty of Visual Arts. In 2015 she defended her doctoral dissertation at her alma mater. She is a two-time holder of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and ZAiKS scholarship. She is currently working at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, at the Faculty of Interior Design, Textiles in Architecture Studio. Eliza Proszczuk creates socially engaged art, touching upon issues related to feminism and womanhood; she works with women in prison, patients of drug rehabilitation centres, refugees and displaced persons. She often finds inspiration in the traditional arts and crafts of north-east Poland.

Eliza Proszczuk

Traces and Quests of Sisterhood

Because I deal with embroidery and, more broadly, with textiles, I notice the traces left by women in history.

Learning from folk artists and using my own skills, I create fabrics whose form and content are contemporary, while the production technique remains traditional. I wish for my works to touch upon the theme of sisterhood, by which I mean: making female alliances, mutual care and support, and the use of natural materials.

For me, it was professor Eleonora Plutyńska that was the inspiration for creating double warp fabrics. She worked at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, from the end of the 1920s onwards. Magdalena Abakanowicz, probably the most famous Polish artist, completed her diploma dissertation work in professor Plutyńska's studio. In the 1930s, Plutyńska founded the Izba Tkactwa Dwuosnowego [Chamber of Two-warp Cloth Weaving] in Janów in the Podlasie region, passing on her knowledge and her creative approach to weaving. She decided to create a new type of carpets, encouraging weavers to create their own patterns instead of copying motifs from factory bed covers. The first pattern was "animals" ("zwierza") inspired by the theme of the Caucasian carpet. Then came further patterns. Certain types of carpets were established: "animals", "tree", "bouquets", "forest". Within those general patterns, the weavers invented their own motifs, woven from imagination. However, this was typically done with the significant participation of the artist, so instead of authorship, the word "tkała" ("weaved by") and the person's name often appear as the signature. Plutyńska also proposed a return to hand-spun wool and to natural dyes, which allowed for interesting colour effects.

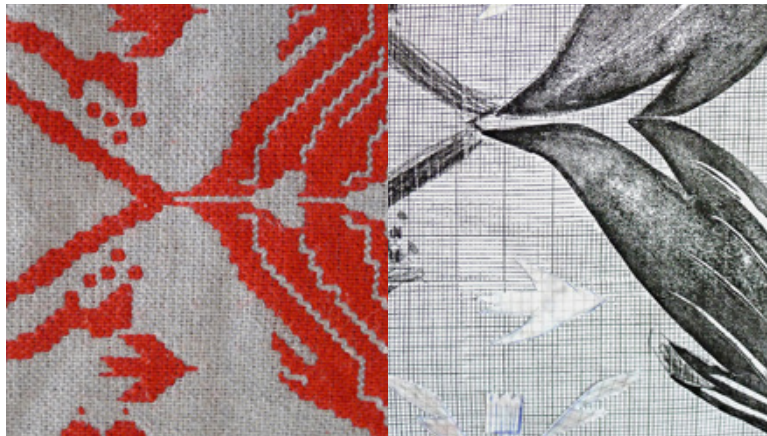
From my childhood, I remember the ubiquitous bedspreads lying on armchairs and sofa beds. I never liked them: they were woolen and coarse, and they scratched. For some reason, grown-ups loved them. In the People's Republic of Poland, such fabrics, spread on



Untitled, from the *Double weft* series, two-warp technique, fabric with an animal motif woven by Teresa Pryzmont, linen, wool, 90×150 cm, 2021.

lounge furniture, perfectly retouched the faded upholstery and added some colour to the run-of-the-mill greyness. For most people, it was quite beyond their reach to replace old, damaged pieces of furniture with new ones, yet almost everyone was able to afford the patterned, colourful and durable woven bedspreads. Some of those were handmade, using the double warp technique, and some were machine-made, using jacquard looms (for the average customer the effect was similar, but the connoisseur would easily distinguish between the two). The textile market shrank in the second half of the 1990s, when we started enjoying the new unbridled industrial design, and we no longer wished to cover our sofas. Nevertheless, the Chamber of Two-warp Cloth Weaving has survived, and furthermore, in the last several years it has been experiencing a renaissance. This is largely thanks to Japanese people's love for the textiles from Janów Podlaski.

A few years ago I started cooperating with the ladies of the Chamber of Two-warp Cloth Weaving in Janów – it is a collaboration, which gives us a warm feeling of kinship. The weaving ladies form a small local community; they are much older than me – this is the generation born at the end



Untitled, from the *Double weft* series, two-warp technique, woven by Karolina Radulska, 90×200 cm, 2020.



Untitled, from the *Double weft* series, two-warp technique, woven by Karolina Radulska, 90×200 cm, 2020.

of the World War II. My ideas do not always meet with their approval; sometimes they reject my concepts; sometimes my ideas annoy them. Before that, it had never occurred to me that my creations might be controversial.

Each of the weavers uses her own patterns (invented by herself or borrowed from the past and somehow transformed). It is frowned upon for one weaver to “borrow” from another. Rather, it is preferable to create fabrics based on those motifs that already exist within the general pattern that you are developing. This is how you can recognize the signature hand of a weaver. It seems to me that the modern weaver has a greater need for individualism than the weavers before her – and this sentiment is often articulated in our conversations. Due to the fact that some of the ladies do not wish to weave novel themes, I thought that I would design fabrics, combining my own weaving motifs with those already existing in the templates





Untitled, from the *Double weft series*, two-warp technique, woven by Teresa Pryzmont, linen, wool, 180x250 cm, 2021.



Untitled, from the *Dress* series, embroidery on lamb intestines, 2019.





Untitled, from the *Dress* series, embroidery on lamb intestines, 2019.

of the artists from Janów. As Anni Albers says, “The thread is an area of ever-expanding relationships. It is a line of inquiry, an event, a relational action.”¹ And this is how a carpet was created, woven by Teresa Pryzmont.

*I bought lamb intestines in an online store; they had already been cleaned in ashes and salted. I washed them, cut them open and dried them in the sun, and then embroidered on them. The string of embroidery was marked by veins as small as lace. I was embroidering for a year, maybe less. It was a very enjoyable, pleasantly monotonous activity. I then sewed the individual fragments together.

The work touches upon the profane sphere related to menstrual blood. I referred to the Jewish tradition of family purity and the state of *niddah* (separation) associated with menstruation. This was accompanied by the thought of Marilyn Strathern:

“I take a thread to be something that can be caught, both caught hold of and getting itself caught onto what is in its vicinity. Although going somewhere because it is coming from somewhere, a thread gains what striated substance it has in becoming entangled with other threads just as (at the moment when) the entanglements (knots) seem to make further tracing impossible.”²

- 1 Anni Albers, *On Weaving*, London 1974, p. 39.
- 2 M. Strathern, *Anthropological Reasoning: Some Threads of Thought*, [in]: “HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory”, 2014, No. 4 (3), p. 26.



Untitled, from the *Dress* series, embroidery on lamb intestines, work created for the exhibition *Blood. Uniting and Dividing*, POLIN Museum, Warsaw, 2017. Photo by Magdalena Starowieyska.





S. Gerschel Ainé, Portrait of a young Alsatian woman, Strasbourg, c. 1900
 Author unknown, Gretel, Lene & Salomé Krieger, postcard.

*In the first days of my stay in Strasbourg, my attention was drawn to the female symbol of Alsace, the large black bow that appeared on women's heads in the nineteenth century – and stayed there for good: "I wear a bow as a sign that I am French, an Alsatian!" The bow's size was a sign of wealth, and some bows were indeed absurdly large. Sometimes it was necessary to create a special wire structure to support them. Obviously, the whole "headdress" industry developed: dedicated fabrics' design (some regions of Alsace had their own characteristic patterns and colours), the artisans specialising in creating the bows appeared (first the fabric had to be properly folded, then sewn, and finally, starched). It all seemed quite funny to me... But of course, the reason for this glamorous symbol was not at all funny. After France became occupied and incorporated in the German Empire, Alsatian women thus manifested their national identity, and by doing so, they often put themselves in danger.



Documentation of the course of the workshop, Apollonia – European Art Exchanges, Strasbourg, 2017.

The "Embroidery and Identities" project was carried out in the workshop format. I invited women from different backgrounds and origins living in Alsace (including Strasbourg) to participate. I asked them to finish the sentence: "*Je me définis comme ...*" (I identify as...). Workshop participants embroidered their answers on one common piece of black fabric, which was turned into a large bow after it had been embroidered. The workshops were held in the city space: in galleries, community centres, cafés, hairdressing salons, etc.

I also managed to make a dream come true for a ninety-year-old Strasbourg resident, an Alsatian woman, to do with her wearing an Alsatian folk costume for a photo session, taken in her home. This was a gift for her birthday.

In the same vein, not only photographs (of workshop participants and Madam Phfirsch) were taken, but we also arranged a video recording of the memories of a woman immersed in the turbulent history of the city during World War II.



Mrs. Phfirsch at her home, Strasbourg 2017.



Kirstie Macleod – artist with a background in textiles, visual language, costume design and theatre disciplines. Her diverse portfolio includes photography, painting, drawing, installation and embroidery. Her work explores issues of identity, the subconscious, and the passage of time. She has worked as a textile artist for 17 years and has been involved with Red Dress for 13. Kirstie now lives in rural Somerset with her partner and children, balancing a simple life aligned with nature, yoga and meditation alongside the privilege of guiding the Red Dress into a new chapter of exhibitions all over the world. www.reddressembroidery.com

Kirstie Macleod

Red Dress

A 13-year, award winning, global, collaborative embroidery project 2009 to 2022

“Any time women come together with a collective intention, it’s a powerful thing”.

Phylicia Rashad

I felt moved to create the Red Dress Project 13 years ago to provide an artistic platform for women around the world, many of whom are marginalized and live in poverty, to tell their personal stories through embroidery.

Having grown up in various far-flung countries all over the world I later came back to the UK to study, and following an MA in *Visual language and performance*, I began my career as an artist. My unique practice was rooted in textiles but expressed in unusual ways; over the years I honed a language using high impact garments in film, animation, installation, and performance.



Sharmin Sadia (Kurdistan) and Tugba Gula (Turkey), Swansea 2022, photo by Mark Pickthall.



Heroinat War Memorial in Kosovo to honour 20000 women raped in the war, Red Dress worn by Kirstie Macleod, photo by Pam Dawes.

The Red Dress is the latest of my installation works. It was created in 2009 from a desire to initiate a piece of work that would draw together different identities around the world, without any borders or boundaries. A collaborative piece that would unite individuals whilst celebrating the universal language of embroidery and creative expression. The garment is constructed out of 84 pieces of burgundy silk dupion and has been worked on by 336 women and 7 men, from 46 countries, with all 136 commissioned artisans paid for their work. The rest of the embroidery was added by willing participants and audience at various exhibitions and events.

Embroiderers include female refugees from Palestine and Syria, women seeking asylum in the UK



Red Dress, Natasha Faye Hopkins, photo by Dave Watts.

from Iraq, China, Nigeria and Namibia; victims of war in Kosovo, Rwanda, and DR Congo; impoverished women in South Africa, Mexico, and Egypt; individuals in Kenya, Japan, Turkey, Sweden, Peru, Czech Republic, Dubai, Afghanistan, Australia, Argentina, Switzerland, Canada, Tobago, Vietnam, Estonia, USA, Russia, Pakistan, Wales, Colombia and England; students from Montenegro, Brazil, Malta, Singapore, Eritrea, Norway, Poland, Finland, Ireland, Romania and Hong Kong; as well as upmarket embroidery studios in India and Saudi Arabia.

Many of the artisans are established embroiderers, but there are also many pieces created by first time embroiderers. The only brief I gave the artisans was to in some way express their identity and culture, and to use their own threads. Some chose to create using a specific



Gisèle, Esther and Espérance (DRC), photo by Nicole Esseien.



Farhana Gabaly (Egypt), photo by Kirstie Macleod.

style of embroidery practiced for hundreds of years in their family, village, or town; others used simple stitches to express powerful stories and feelings from their past.

The Red Dress's 13-year creative journey around the world is now completed, with the dress assembled in its final configuration. Covered in millions of stitches, the 6.2-kilogram silk Red Dress is weighted as much by the individual stories and collective voices waiting to be heard as by the threads and beads that adorn it. Over the many years of the project the garment has evolved from an ambitious art installation to a global collaboration and platform for voices to be amplified and heard. The initiative has connected individuals from all walks of life, bringing comfort and raising awareness; it serves as a reminder of



Artisan Hilaria Lopez Patishtan (San Juan Chamula, Mexico), photo by Kirstie Macleod.

what is possible when we come together, supporting and uplifting each other.

The Red Dress has been exhibited in various galleries and museums worldwide, including Galerie Maeght in Paris, Art Dubai, Museo de Arte Popular in Mexico City, the National Library of Kosovo, an event at the Royal Academy in London, the Fashion and Textile Museum, London, and the Premio Valcellina Textiles Award in Maniago, Italy where it won first prize in 2015.

Moving forward, the Red Dress will be travelling to many different galleries, museums, and event spaces around the world – with a continued aim to be accessible to all. As well as bringing the garment to visit vulnerable communities and groups, Kirstie hopes to display the Red Dress in the countries of the commissioned artisans and exhibit the Red Dress alongside their own work in their chosen venue.

Practical and logistical support with commissions for the project was granted by the following charities, self-help development projects, social enterprises and various initiatives providing support to women in poverty: Manchester Aid for Kosovo supporting Sister Stitch in Kosovo; Kisany in Rwanda and DR Congo; Missibaba in South Africa; Kitzen in Mexico; Al Badia in Palestine; FanSina in Egypt and The Swansea Women's Asylum & Refugee Support Group, Wales. Seed investment for the project was provided by the British Council Dubai in 2009 and subsequent funding has been received from the Arts Council Lottery Fund, the British Embassy Pristina, Kosovo and two crowdfunding campaigns in UK.

SISTERHOOD IS:
SHARING,
NEW WAYS
OF WORKING
WITH MEMORY,
PRESENCE,
AND AWARENESS
OF PRESENCE

NW

Magdalena Zych – cultural anthropologist, curator at the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków (MEK), where since 2009 she has coordinated research projects and created situations of scientific and artistic cooperation. She develops the practice and reflection of reinterpreting ethnographic collections. Together with her teams, she conducted research and produced exhibitions on: the culture of allotment gardens (*The Art of the Allotment*), contemporary weddings (*Weddings 21*), and linking the 19th-century MEK Siberian collection with source communities (*Siberia. Voices from the North*), among others. She co-authored the exhibition *POWERBANK / women's power* presented at the MEK in 2022.

Magdalena Zych

The Stellar Trace of Sisterhood, or: about the *POWERBANK / The Strength of Women* Exhibition and a Cycle of Meetings

1.

The Pleiades appear in the night sky in the month of May. It is a beautiful constellation of shimmering tiny lights, visible rather clearly next to Orion. Astronomers classify them as the so-called open cluster. It is a young constellation, only about a hundred million years old. Another common name for it, the Seven Sisters, is derived from the myth of the nymphs, daughters of the titan Atlas and the Oceanid nymph Pleione, pursued by the giant Orion. Zeus brought them to the sky, so maybe that is why they appear in the Taurus constellation. In fact, there are several hundred of these stars, although when looking at the sky, we can see ten at most. They wander during the nights of spring and summer, only to disappear after the abundance of autumn. The Greeks believed that their appearance in the first days of May opens the time of safe navigation, and their departure in November marks the beginning of the period of sea storms.

I thought about the Greek nymphs living in the night sky, companions of the goddess Artemis, during the talks about sisterhood in the Academy space, next to the Vistula River, back in May. Artemis, equated in tradition with the goddess of fertility and death, was Apollo's sister; she looked after rivers and springs. The vicinity of the Vistula River was the natural context for these rising emotions, as well as for the quietly flowing currents of thoughts and feelings that we exchanged. We also spent a few moments on the river, enjoying its evening aspect, and the view of the moon just before it waxed full. I was thinking about the ancient Pleiades, because sisterhood as an idea with a specific shape has its own place in this part of the world. And although for some reason it is not yet to be found in the dictionary of the history of ideas, we can recognize its various incarnations. Deriving from the female experience of the family community, the emanations of sisterhood transcend this source context in so many ways.

2.

One is working with biographies and the crumbs of presence of other women from the past. Sometimes it is like staring into the darkness of the sky only to see them, the Sisters. You can feel their presence. All you need to do is to go to a place without the electric interference of lamps, to be patient, to wait for the clouds to part, and maybe even to look for a telescope. Iwona Demko calls this process an empathic herstory. I think that this term expresses rather well the manner in which we worked for many months, together with Dorota Majkowska-Szajer and Katarzyna Piszczkiewicz, on the *POWERBANK / The Strength of Women* exhibition (May 27, 2022 – December 31, 2023, Ethnographic Museum in Kraków). As curators of the story about the traces left by women in the museum collection, we travelled through the storage spaces, through documents, and through our own imaginations – to tell the tale of female agency, and the sources of female strength, manifested in inconspicuous objects or recovered memories.



POWERBANK / The Strength of Women, entry to the exhibition.
Photo by: Marcin Wąsik.



POWERBANK / *The Strength of Women*, Olaf Cirut's Herbarium. Photo by: Marcin Wąsik.

The exhibition, occupying spaces that now belong to the museum, but had been used by a branch of a large bank for decades, has become a space for generating and multiplying a wealth of energy. This is how we think about it, and this is what we invite you to enter. Today, where an ATM used to stand, herbs are blooming – each of them important for women's health and state of mind (thyme, poppy seed, mallow, flax, St. John's wort, rue, and yarrow), painted by Olaf Cirut who recalls his grandmother's herbalist world. Dozens of female images peek from the walls of the bank's vault – with bold gazes, straight into the lens, as if those girls, teenagers, women, and old ladies were challenging the time itself. We handed over the photo thread of Roma women to Elżbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz, Wojciech Szymański, Monika Szewczyk and Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, whose beautiful work reclaims the Roma herstory in this ethnographic context.



POWERBANK / *The Strength of Women*, red morocco leather shoes from Ustia-Zelene in Ukraine, 20th century, reminiscent of the character of Karen from Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales. Photo by: Dorota Majkowska-Szajer.



POWERBANK / *The Strength of Women*, a figure of Saint Onuphrius behind linen threads, a 19th century sculpture from the Hutsul region, Ukraine, from the collection donated to MEK by Helena Dąbczańska. Photo by: Marcin Wąsik.



POWERBANK / *The Strength of Women*, part of the exhibition including an oil print depicting the goddess Kali, with the Mother of God and Child (a girl) by Józef Franusiak from Koniemłoty (1975), with a bowl for bread dough by Krystyna Kot from Rakszawa (a wooden vessel on a platform), a cage for the queen bee (the queen-mother's bed), a sickle from the Czernichów rural district, and Makada the Queen of Sheba's prophecy written by Julia Kawa of Gorlice. Photo by: Marcin Wąsik.



Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Noćia*, kaplica, technika mieszana, 2020
 własność artystki

Wieloletnia artystka Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, mieszkająca w miejscowości Żelazna, jest jedną z ostatnich żyjących w tym regionie artystek, która w sposób wyjątkowy łączy tradycje sztuki ludowej z nowoczesnymi formami sztuki. Jej prace, w tym *Noćia*, są wyrazem jej wieloletniego doświadczenia w sztuce i jej wieloletniego zaangażowania w życie społeczne i kulturalne społeczności, w której żyje. *Noćia* jest dziełem, które łączy tradycje sztuki ludowej z nowoczesnymi formami sztuki. Wykonane z wykorzystaniem różnych technik, jest to dzieło, które łączy tradycje sztuki ludowej z nowoczesnymi formami sztuki.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Wiosna*, obraz olejny, 2020
 własność artystki

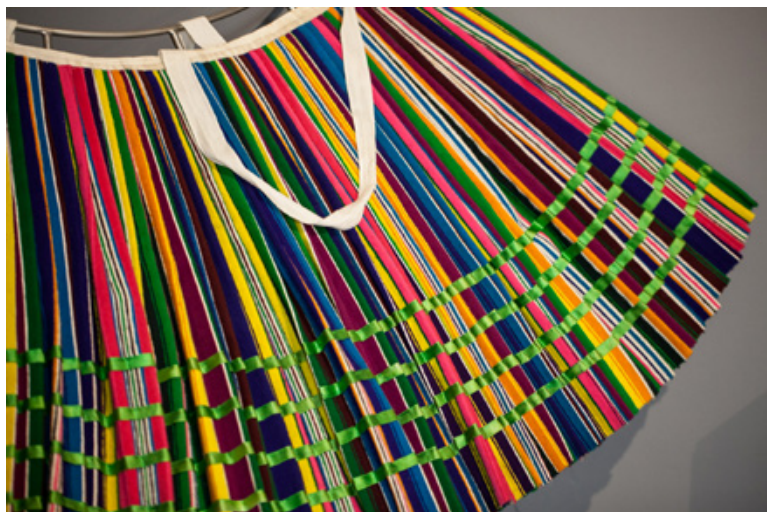
Wiosna jest obrazem, który przedstawia scenę z życia codziennego. Wykonany w technice olejnej, obraz ten jest wyrazem wieloletniego doświadczenia artystki w sztuce i jej wieloletniego zaangażowania w życie społeczne i kulturalne społeczności, w której żyje. *Wiosna* jest dziełem, które łączy tradycje sztuki ludowej z nowoczesnymi formami sztuki.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Żelazna*, obraz olejny, 2020
 własność artystki

Żelazna jest obrazem, który przedstawia scenę z życia codziennego. Wykonany w technice olejnej, obraz ten jest wyrazem wieloletniego doświadczenia artystki w sztuce i jej wieloletniego zaangażowania w życie społeczne i kulturalne społeczności, w której żyje. *Żelazna* jest dziełem, które łączy tradycje sztuki ludowej z nowoczesnymi formami sztuki.

ZYTA
 MARIANNA
 LUTOSŁAWA
 CECYLIA

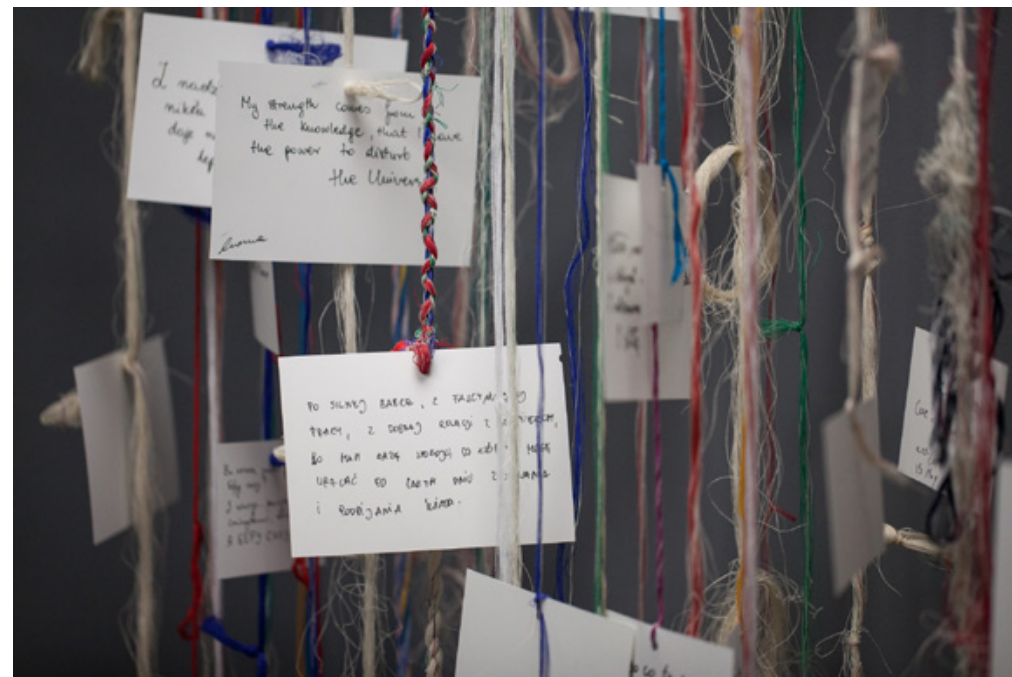
POWERBANK / *The Strength of Women*, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas chapel, *Noćia*, mixed media, property of the author, 2020, and a fragment of an art installation from the photographs of Roma women from the MEK collection. Photo by: Dorota Majkowska-Szajer.



POWERBANK / The Strength of Women, woolen homespun skirt made and worn by Stanisława Żegota from Komorniki, Łódź province, 1960s/1970s, sold to the museum by Zofia Czycz from Kraków. Photo by: Marcin Wąsik.

In the former break room, women's voices still resonate – including the story of Krystyna Kot from Rakszawa about baking bread, Anna Nowak-Sokół's tale about her Jewish grandmother who survived the war in the house where the exhibition is held, and the voice of Maja Luxenberg, who interprets a-hundred-and-something-year-old song lyrics from the museum's archive. You hear the complaint of a working-class maid in Dębniaki, today a district of Kraków, about the fate of a girl with an unwanted pregnancy. The complaint is poignant and current.

More than 80 imaginative objects are the sources of stories about female power. They include items of clothing, pieces of jewellery, underwear, work tools, documents, and works of art. You will find items of everyday use, and objects whose function was to trigger the process of ritual change. Objects, images, and sounds evoke great symbols and



POWERBANK / The Strength of Women, answers to the question: Where do you get your strength from? Photo by: Marcin Wąsik.

small gestures alike. They reveal the complexity of fate, the ambiguity of female roles and ways of acting, the adventures of the body, and the desire for freedom.

The *Niezbędnik [Essential guide]* by Dorota Majkowska-Szajer is an aid in decoding the meanings of the exhibition. Thanks to that guide, you can get to know the 36 heroines of the exhibition a little better. In fact, their number is much, much higher. They are embroiderers, paper cut-out artisans, painters, designers, maids, aristocrats, ethnographers, goddesses, housewives, emancipated women, outsiders, social activists... Their lives reveal unexpected connections, in various ways entangled with the collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków.

The warp of the stories, which the exhibition is narrating, is made of linen threads. Their bundles also serve to ensure that each man and each woman can leave their mark on the exhibition, recalling their own source of power on a small piece of paper (and the number of those is constantly growing).

The question is:

Where do you get your strength from?

3.

Personally, I get it from such meetings as the one in May 2022 in Warsaw, with Eliza, Ewa, Marta and Marta, Iwona, Zuzanna, Natalia, Magdalena, Magda and Magda, Anna, Elwira, Eulalia, Agnieszka, Iva, Yulia, Weronika, Monika, Paulina. Our names repeat, as do sisterly herstories sometimes – but they always do so in a different version, nuance, and mood. On the tablecloth we were invited to embroider, I began with the idea that sisterhood is like water. I felt that the nearby Vistula, the flow of glances and voices, and finally the power of Artemis – who appreciated the water so much – and her retinue of nymphs, was something that should perhaps appear on the weaves of the fabric for a moment. I also drew from the ideas and associations of the women next to me. I was charmed by the term “sisterchód” [wordplay on “sisterhood” and “walking”] invented by Weronika Pelczyńska and by Ewa Chomicka’s “sio!” [“sis!” – wordplay on “sister” and “off with you!”]. Eliza Proszczuk joined in the *POWERBANK / The Strength of Women* exhibition program and came to Kraków to embroider the same tablecloth within the exhibition space. This is how, each time we meet, the idea of sisterhood is filled with a material and sensual trace; it passes through our hands, and facilitates navigation...



POWERBANK / The Strength of Women, the River Sisters from Poland welcome the River Sisters from Ukraine – march from the MEK to the Vistula River, authors of the happening: Cecylia Malik and the River Sisters collective, 23 June 2022. Photo by: Joanna Urbaniec, archive of the River Sisters collective.



POWERBANK / *The Strength of Women*, the River Sisters from Poland welcome the River Sisters from Ukraine – march from the MEK to the Vistula River, authors of the happening: Cecylia Malik and the River Sisters collective, 23 June 2022. Photo by: Joanna Urbaniec, archive of the River Sisters collective.



Eliza Proszczuk and Dorota Majkowska-Szajer while embroidering the *POWERBANK / Sisterhood* tablecloth, 12 June 2022, "Esther's House" – Ethnographic Museum of Kraków, 11th KRAKERS Cracow Art Week. Photo by: Marcin Świdziński, archive of the East of Art Foundation.



Dorota Majkowska-Szajer and Janina Szajer while embroidering the *POWERBANK / Sisterhood* tablecloth, 12 June 2022, "Esther's House" – Ethnographic Museum of Kraków, 11th KRAKERS Cracow Art Week. Photo by: Marcin Świdziński, archive of the East of Art Foundation.



Results of the *POWERBANK / Sisterhood* tablecloth embroidering, 12 June 2022, "Esther's House" – Ethnographic Museum of Kraków, 11th KRAKERS Cracow Art Week. Photo by: Marcin Świdziński, archive of the East of Art Foundation.



Participants in the joint embroidering of the *POWERBANK / Sisterhood* tablecloth, 12 June 2022, "Esther's House" – Ethnographic Museum of Kraków, 11th KRAKERS Cracow Art Week. Photo by: Marcin Świdziński, archive of the East of Art Foundation.

Agnieszka Rayzacher – art critic and exhibition curator. Since 2005 she has been running the lokal_30 gallery in Warsaw, and the Lokal Sztuki Foundation. In her practice, she focuses primarily on researching and presenting the work of female artists and allies. She co-founded the Feminist Seminar discussion group devoted to art and feminism. She is the curator and co-curator of exhibitions presented in Polish and foreign institutions, editor and co-editor of books, and author of texts on female artists.

Agnieszka Rayzacher

Currently I Know Nothing, Sister

At this moment in time, when our entire comfortably arranged world collapses before our very eyes, sisterhood, empathy, solidarity and collaboration are as dear to us, and as needed as never before. At the same time, it appears that we are required to redefine our earlier understanding of these concepts, because the reality of war sharpens everything, putting forward new challenges that we did not know before, and forcing us to learn everything anew.

In the present situation, how can we talk about what happened before? Do we have the right to do that, and above all, does it make any sense? Our earlier actions seem irrelevant in the face of the nightmare happening just now, across the border. How do we reconcile this? In spite of everything, I will try to tell you about my activities, and about my constant striving to embed them in the current reality – about the exhibitions, about the Feminist Seminar, and about my dreams.

The time has come to start thinking about sisterhood – as well as about feminism – as a common cause, independent of gender. I have a difficult lesson in non-exclusion ahead of me, because – I have to admit – I feel very comfortable within the women-only group, sharing joy, drawing strength, offering mutual support, and exchanging knowledge. I believe many of us experience this in a similar way. However, just like many of us, I have also faced violence from other women. These violent women often pay lip service to feminism. I have thought about it for a long time. Where is this coming from? Why is it that these women turn out to be the guardians of patriarchy? It had bothered me so much that in 2020 I organized the exhibition *Wielbłąd nigdy nie zapomina* [*The camel never forgets*] at lokal_30. I wrote at the time: The exhibition concerns injustice sanctioned by social consent, through the social system. The best example of this mechanism is patriarchy – the system that had lasted for so long and has become so ubiquitous that we have failed and we continue



Anna Orbaczewska, *Untitled, After Fragonard* (2020) at the exhibition *The Camel Never Forgets*, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Bartosz Górka.

failing its ethical aspects and its influence on people's attitudes towards each other and towards non-human beings. Relationships of power, greed, and the belief in superiority of some over the others continue to have an impact not only on the fate of societies or communities, but also, above all, on the personal stories – of individuals and beings. In the exhibition, injustice and violence are shown using a metaphor – an intimate story about life, about extinction, about hurt feelings, or simply about ordinary situations behind which violence or exploitation is lurking.

Running a small institution – the art space called lokal_30 – gives me the opportunity to express myself in the form of exhibitions and publications on topics that are important to me. I am grateful for this privilege, for this space, which I believe is also the space of sisterhood,



Jan Moźdzynski, *Monument to the Prohibition of Oppression* (2019), *The Camel Never Forgets* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Bartosz Górka.



Dobromiła Hada-Jasikowska, *The Flag and The Manifesto* (2020), *The Camel Never Forgets* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Bartosz Górka.



Sofi Zezmer, *Cross Section LS1* (2016), *The Camel Never Forgets* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Bartosz Górka.



Diana Lelonek, *Birds* (2019), *The Camel Never Forgets* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Bartosz Górka.

where people who are close to me and close to each other are free to meet whenever they want. Another such platform for exchanging ideas is the Feminist Seminar, which we established in 2017 together with Agata Jakubowska, Anka Leśniak, and Magda Ujma. Initially, SemFem was a discussion group; with time we began to expand our meetings with artistic actions and performances – by Ewa Zarzycka and the Black Venus Protest (Magdalena Mellin, Monika Wińczyk), among others. The Seminar is usually hosted at lokal_30, but sometimes we also visit other places – it was held twice at the Galeria Studio in Warsaw, also at the Dom Norymberski in Kraków, at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, or in Sokołowsko as part of the Konteksty Festival.

We founded the Seminar with the intention of having – and most of all, sharing – the possibility of exchanging experiences, knowledge, skills, and feelings. From my perspective, it is also a very important space of support and assistance – and although we have planned topics for further seminars ahead of time, we often change them under the influence of current events, for instance: the refugee crisis, tightening the anti-abortion regulations, or intensification of the campaign against non-heteronormative people. I am not claiming that we directly support people who are experiencing broadly understood violence, but by taking up these topics, talking about them, and inviting conversation, we try to work on these issues on an on-going basis, to share our emotions, to learn from others, and to benefit from their experience related to a given situation.

We aspire to organize our meetings every two months – we announce them on our website at www.semifem.pl, as well as on our Facebook group, and in the media supported by lokal_30 Call for Papers, related to the current topic at hand. For me, this regularity is important, as I believe that despite the multitude of our other tasks, it is valuable to

come together, and create a group that is open, inclusive, and where anyone can join us at any time.

I will not list here all the initiatives, exhibitions, meetings, and publications in my practice related to the idea of sisterhood, but I would like to mention two that are particularly important to me. The first is happening now – as I am writing these words – that is, in July 2022, when



Feminist Seminar during the pandemic.



Participants of the Feminist Seminar (Zofia Nierodzińska, Magdalena Ujma, Iwona Demko), lokal_30, Warsaw.



Participants of the Feminist Seminar, lokal_30, Warsaw.



Participants of the Feminist Seminar as Izabela Maciejewska's Rainbow Team, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi (Museum of Art in Łódź), 2018.



A.I.R. Gallery, 1974, Wooster Street 97, New York, courtesy of A.I.R. Gallery.

we are putting into action the idea of a gallery exchange with A.I.R. Gallery of New York. The A.I.R. is an association of female artists established exactly fifty years ago – in September 1972, and the direct impulse behind this initiative was the absence of art created by women in museums, collections, and even in private galleries. Although by today the situation has changed, female artists and non-binary people still have to stand up for their rights, and there is still a lot of catching up to do – there are many names, achievements, archives, which, if not processed immediately, will become forgotten, as their value has gone unnoticed for too many years. Thanks to my long standing acquaintance with Joan Snitzer and with Jane Swavelly, I was able to bring about this exchange. In lokal_30, members of A.I.R. Gallery show *Lather, Rinse, Repeat*, about the constant need to repeat that the space of art must not be a space of exclusion. In turn, our exhibition



1990
The first exhibition of the A.I.R. Gallery was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. It featured the work of 12 women artists, including Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and Faith Ringgold.

1991
The A.I.R. Gallery was founded in New York City by artist and curator Ann Hamilton. The gallery's mission is to promote and support the work of women artists.

1992
The A.I.R. Gallery held its second exhibition, featuring the work of 15 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

1993
The A.I.R. Gallery held its third exhibition, featuring the work of 18 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

1994
The A.I.R. Gallery held its fourth exhibition, featuring the work of 21 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

1995
The A.I.R. Gallery held its fifth exhibition, featuring the work of 24 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

1996
The A.I.R. Gallery held its sixth exhibition, featuring the work of 27 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

1997
The A.I.R. Gallery held its seventh exhibition, featuring the work of 30 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

1998
The A.I.R. Gallery held its eighth exhibition, featuring the work of 33 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

1999
The A.I.R. Gallery held its ninth exhibition, featuring the work of 36 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2000
The A.I.R. Gallery held its tenth exhibition, featuring the work of 39 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2001
The A.I.R. Gallery held its eleventh exhibition, featuring the work of 42 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2002
The A.I.R. Gallery held its twelfth exhibition, featuring the work of 45 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2003
The A.I.R. Gallery held its thirteenth exhibition, featuring the work of 48 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2004
The A.I.R. Gallery held its fourteenth exhibition, featuring the work of 51 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2005
The A.I.R. Gallery held its fifteenth exhibition, featuring the work of 54 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2006
The A.I.R. Gallery held its sixteenth exhibition, featuring the work of 57 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2007
The A.I.R. Gallery held its seventeenth exhibition, featuring the work of 60 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2008
The A.I.R. Gallery held its eighteenth exhibition, featuring the work of 63 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2009
The A.I.R. Gallery held its nineteenth exhibition, featuring the work of 66 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2010
The A.I.R. Gallery held its twentieth exhibition, featuring the work of 69 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2011
The A.I.R. Gallery held its twenty-first exhibition, featuring the work of 72 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2012
The A.I.R. Gallery held its twenty-second exhibition, featuring the work of 75 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2013
The A.I.R. Gallery held its twenty-third exhibition, featuring the work of 78 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2014
The A.I.R. Gallery held its twenty-fourth exhibition, featuring the work of 81 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2015
The A.I.R. Gallery held its twenty-fifth exhibition, featuring the work of 84 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2016
The A.I.R. Gallery held its twenty-sixth exhibition, featuring the work of 87 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2017
The A.I.R. Gallery held its twenty-seventh exhibition, featuring the work of 90 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2018
The A.I.R. Gallery held its twenty-eighth exhibition, featuring the work of 93 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2019
The A.I.R. Gallery held its twenty-ninth exhibition, featuring the work of 96 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2020
The A.I.R. Gallery held its thirtieth exhibition, featuring the work of 99 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2021
The A.I.R. Gallery held its thirty-first exhibition, featuring the work of 102 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2022
The A.I.R. Gallery held its thirty-second exhibition, featuring the work of 105 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2023
The A.I.R. Gallery held its thirty-third exhibition, featuring the work of 108 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.

2024
The A.I.R. Gallery held its thirty-fourth exhibition, featuring the work of 111 women artists. This exhibition was held in the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art.



Lather, Rinse, Repeat exhibition, A.I.R. Gallery at lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Adam Gut.

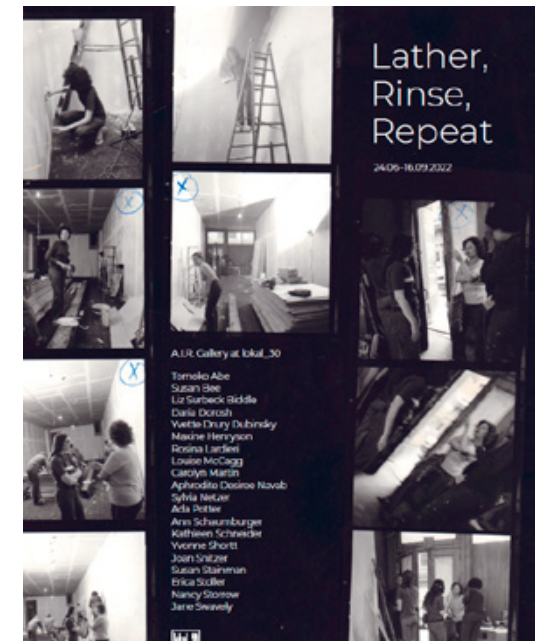


Sleepless in Warsaw – held in New York between August 6 and September 4 – will be a presentation of Polish feminist art from the early 1970s until today. I am writing this text on the eve of my departure to America, hopeful for my dream, towards which I have been working for several years, to come true very soon.

The second exhibition I wish to bring up is *Poganki* [*Heathen Women*]. It took place at lokal_30 in a difficult time of the Covid pandemic, in the spring of 2021. It was an exhibition about female closeness and relationships – romantic, sisterly, based on partnership, or physical. The title of the exhibition was inspired by Narcyza Żmichowska's *Poganka* [*The Heathen*], which is considered to be the first Polish novel about love and passion between women. Żmichowska is an important figure for me, and in the introduction to the exhibition I wrote: Many years after graduating from the Narcyza Żmichowska Secondary School



Lather, Rinse, Repeat exhibition, A.I.R. Gallery at lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Adam Gut.



Poster for the *Lather, Rinse, Repeat* exhibition.

in Warsaw, I returned to the figure of the school matron, whom at the time of my education I had considered an “old maid” who liked the French language, worked for the education of girls, and was involved in independence issues. From the perspective of a teenage girl, this was not a particularly fascinating biography. As a mature person, I discovered a different face of Narcyza – a female writer whom today I would call an activist, who gathered a group of women around her: the first feminists called *Entuzjastki* [Optimists] or *Radownice* [Positivists]; she was the author of the term *posiestrzenie* [sisterly ties], meaning female cooperation, empathy, as well as emotional relationships. It is this Żmichowska who writes letters to her companions – letters full of passion, tenderness and commitment. The same Żmichowska experiences deep sadness after breaking up with Paulina Zbyszewska, who previously wrote to her: “Listen Narcyssa, if your mother were alive, she would curse your love – or she would mourn our relationship with a heavy tear...” Finally, this Żmichowska dares to publish *Poganka* [The Heathen], a romantic novel where she herself hides in the guise of the main character, Benjamin. Gabryella (this was her artistic pseudonym) was an ambiguous figure, eccentric for the mid-nineteenth century – she smoked cigars, went horseback riding, and ignored the strict rules, which prescribed that a woman should marry and lead a settled, “respectable” life of a wife and mother. This promoter of intellectual and personal development of women was also a committed dissident-conspirator, for which she paid with over two years’ incarceration and further three years under police supervision.

In conclusion, I would like to share with you a dream of mine – the dream of creating the Emancipation Institute, a place that would be an institutional implementation of the idea of the Feminist Seminar and what we have been doing for years in lokal_30, namely, our exhibition program.



Karolina Breguła, *Let Them See Us* (2003), view of the *Heathen Women* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



Karolina Sobel, *I was lying too long in my bed* (2019), view of the *Heathen Women* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



Kinga Michalska, *Diary* (2011-21), view of the *Heathen Women* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



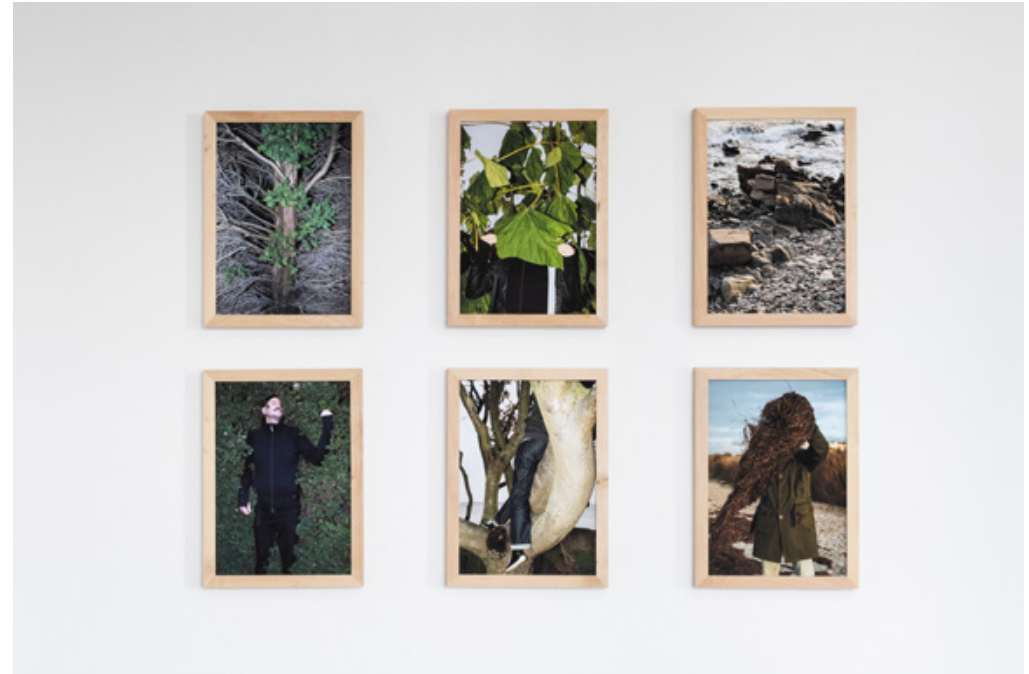
Liliana Zeic, *Sourcebook* (2020), view of the *Heathen Women* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



Liliana Zeic, *Sourcebook* (2020), view of the *Heathen Women* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



Maria Kniaginina-Ciszewska, *I dressed my girlfriend in the present that I had received from her, Present, 777* (2020), view of the *Heathen Women* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



Marta Bogdańska, *Love That Dares Not Speak Its Name* (2020), view of the *Heathen Women* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



Sleepless in Warsaw exhibition, A.I.R. Gallery, New York, photo by Kinga Cieplińska.



Work by Zuzanna Janin *Nobody is going to believe you*, Zuzanna, *Sleepless in Warsaw* exhibition, A.I.R. Gallery, New York, photo by Kinga Cieplińska.



Natalia LL, view of the *Sleepless in Warsaw* exhibition, A.I.R. Gallery, New York, photo by Kinga Cieplińska.

In fact, one could say that in a sense we are already running such an institute together with my co-workers and collaborators. Perhaps, after all, we should not give up the dream of a feminist, equality-based art institution. I see the need to create a larger place that would serve as a meeting platform, connecting people and their ideas. Maybe one day it will be possible.



Natalia LL, *Rima*, 1968.



View of Natalia LL's *Doing Gender* exhibition (2013), lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Franciszek Buchner.



View of Natalia LL's *Doing Gender* exhibition (2013), lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Franciszek Buchner.

Postscript. *Femmage* to Natalia LL

At the beginning of August 2022, in New York, I launched the exhibition *Sleepless in Warsaw*, devoted to the history of Polish feminist art, which began with Natalia LL's early works. I had no inkling that this would be the last time I have ever shown her works while she was still alive.

During my stay in the United States, already after I finished writing this text, I learned about the death of Natalia LL. A wonderful artist, a warm, good and beautiful person with whom we have been connected for exactly ten years – while I was studying her oeuvre, organizing exhibitions, publishing articles and books, endeavouring to include her works in the best institutional collections. I still cannot shake off this loss; the void in my heart is tremendous.

Natalia LL was an extremely modest person, even though she did realise the value of her art and was aware of the importance of the constantly expanding knowledge about it. During these ten years, she made it possible for me to study and better understand her work – thanks to our numerous conversations, looking through the archives, discovering new works. It was very important for me to change the way that Natalia LL's oeuvre was perceived in professional circles, as well as among the public and the art collectors – to influence and motivate them to undertake a more profound reflection and to analyse many of her excellent photographic series, performances and films. I wanted to demythologise her image as the “banana artist”, as she was often spoken of and written about in connection with her iconic series *Sztuka konsumpcyjna* [*Consumer Art*] (1972–74). Although this work is certainly of great importance to the history of art, its visual power slightly distorted the overall impression of Natalia LL's oeuvre, which was

definitely more complex and multi-threaded than that. I am glad that the researchers have finally directed their attention to the mystical themes in Natalia's work, to the ecological threads, and to her very intensive activity in the sphere of performance art. Natalia LL was also probably the first Polish artist to take up the subject of the vagina in art (*Rima*, 1968; *untitled*, 1973), and the romantic, sexual and emotional relationship between women (*Aksamitny terror* [Velvet terror], 1970–73, *Sztuka konsumpcyjna* [Consumer Art], 1972–74). She used the photographic medium in very conscious ways, constantly expanding its ranges and experimenting with it (including *Sztuczna fotografia* [Artificial Photography], 1978). Her works from the late 1960s and early 1970s grew out of the conceptual art movement, which, however, unlike the works created by men, was expanded to include themes related to sexuality, emotions, corporeality, and ecology.

Finally, I would like to recollect several exhibitions of Natalia LL's works, or shows with her participation, that I managed to organize during our cooperation. The first was *Natalia LL Doing Gender* in lokal_30, in 2013, accompanied by the publication of a small book by the same title. In 2017, also in lokal_30, the exhibition called *Zeitgeist* was held, showing four artists representing two generations and two waves of feminism - Natalia LL and VALIE EXPORT as well as Justyna Górowska and Diana Lelonek. *Zapisuję wydarzenia zwykłe* [I record ordinary events] in 2019/2020 was the last individual exhibition, which I presented during Konteksty in Sokołowsko, and then at lokal_30 in Warsaw. I do hope that in the future I will again have an opportunity to work with the oeuvre of Natalia LL, owing to whom the term "sisterhood" has gained a whole new dimension for me. I will endeavour to make the memory of her last as long as I can.



Natalia LL, *Pyramid* (1979), *Zeitgeist* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



General view of the *Zeitgeist* exhibition (2017), lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



Natalia LL, *Dreaming* (1978), *Zeitgeist* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



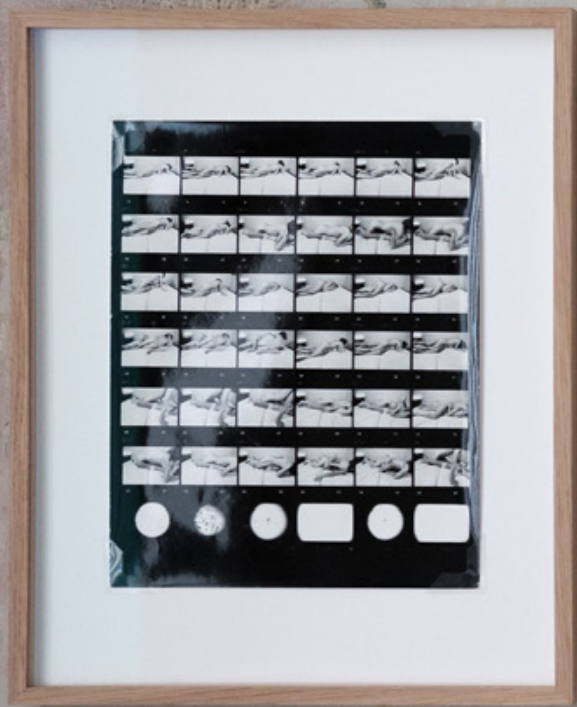
Natalia LL, *Points of support* (1978), *Zeitgeist* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



Natalia LL, *States of matter* (1980), *Zeitgeist* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Marcin Liminowicz.



Natalia LL, *Velvet terror* (1970-73), *I record ordinary events* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Bartosz Görka.



Natalia LL, *Intimate photography* (1968–71) and *Private life, I record ordinary events* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Bartosz Górka.



Natalia LL, *Identification of the place* (1971), *I record ordinary events* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Bartosz Górka.



View of Natalia LL's *I record ordinary events* exhibition, lokal_30, Warsaw, photo by Bartosz Górka.



Iwona Demko – visual artist, graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, where she currently holds a professorship. Curator of feminist exhibitions, initiator and organiser of the Year of Women at the Academy of Fine Arts. She is interested in herstory and the experience of women considered through the prism of changing social roles in history. For many years she has been involved in the affirmation of sexuality and female genitalia. Winner of the Maria Anto and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven Art Prize for supporting the presence and visibility of women in education and culture (2021).

Iwona Demko

Practising Sisterhood in the Domain of Art

When I was about to graduate from the Sculpture Department at the Academy of Fine Arts in 2001, the notion of sisterhood did not exist. Common opinion was that women were incapable of being each other's friends or allies. While this belief did not seem to be true in my personal life, this was indeed so in the art world. I had the impression that each of us stood alone, each one taking care of her own art. Worse, often we could have been hostile and envious of another female artist, seeing her as competition. Also, artists rarely referred to the experiences of their gender in their work – for fear that they would be delegated to the “feminist art shelf”. I was under the impression that most female artists were dissociating themselves from what was socially established as feminine. This involved both the themes and the means of expression used. In the sculpture department, in order to assert one's professionalism, it was necessary to renounce using makeup, to never wear dresses or skirts, to abandon the colour pink, the trinkets, or the pretty fabrics. It was an unwritten but somehow very obvious “natural” law. Consequently, it was inappropriate to maintain friendships with other female artists, because that would only draw attention to the gender aspect; it would be a confirmation of the very femininity from which one should distance oneself. It was widely believed that equality was an accomplished state, a done deed. At the same time, it was considered a compliment to hear that you “work like a man”, “are like a man”, and thus “stay pally with men.” Such behaviour was present not only in the milieu of female artists, but also in the milieu of female historians and art curators, who focused in their research primarily on the work of male artists. Much of this was just happening, without a great deal of awareness or reflection. Nobody thought twice about it, nobody analysed it. It was a “self-evident truth”, it went without saying. In retrospect, I would refer to all these mechanisms as the lack of feminist awareness. Each of us, as a woman, felt like an intruder in the world of art, like someone who broke

into an alien territory. And despite the fact that there were many female artists before me, only very few of them were included in the academic canon. Nobody talked about them. We had no knowledge of our female predecessors.

When you are growing up in an atmosphere of gender inequality from an early age, you treat that inequality as a matter of course, something natural, and do not rebel against it, thinking that it is meant to be so. You try to cope and make do with the circumstances in which you live. Despite the fact that I had friends from outside the art world, I really missed female artists that would be close to me, and with whom I could share similar problems that we faced in our professional field. Instead, I saw the manifestations of brotherhood and I envied those.

SISTERHOOD IN EMPATHY

My feminist consciousness started late and took a long time to build. Initially, in my work, I focused on my personal experiences. The works I created spoke about motherhood, menstruation, female sexuality, and male-female relationships seen from the perspective of a woman. The subjects of my works were clearly feminist. They related to the lives of people who were born with a vagina and were socialized into being feminine. Despite the fact that in my artistic work I focused on intimate, personal feelings, most women related to my work – according to the slogan “personal is political”¹. We were united by common socialization, as well as shared experiences related to female biology. When I created *28 dni [28 days]*, a work devoted to the menstrual cycle, many women spoke in gratitude, moved by my approach to the subject commonly considered taboo. Works on vagina affirmation also turned out to be conducive to sisterhood. The vagina owners felt empowered,

1 Reference to the essay *The Personal Is Political* published by C. Hanisch [in:] “Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation, Major Writings of the Radical Feminists”, 1970.



13th day, from the 28 days cycle, 2009



14th day, ovulation, from the 28 days cycle, 2009



24th day, from the 28 days cycle, 2009



27th day, Vagina Dentata,
from the 28 days cycle, 2009

appreciated. The sphere of shame was filled with pride. It was a sisterhood built on empathy and compassion.

SISTERHOOD IN PARTICIPATION

For a long time, I did all my work alone. In 2015, I decided to involve other people in my projects. The first such participatory project was the exhibition entitled *anioly.net* [*angels.net*] at the Art Gallery in Legnica. Women with experience in sex work became the theme of the exhibition. I resolved to establish a relationship with them in order to create an exhibition together. In the project, I have also involved women who were not engaged in sex work, as well as men. The work on the exhibition took a long time, and during the preparations I tried to establish rapport with the sex workers. I succeeded in making friends with the two who actively participated in the creation of the exhibition. They prepared their works for the exhibition, participated in the exhibition's assembly, and attended the opening. I was the first person outside of the sex work environment to know what they did. This was of great importance to them. After the exhibition, they actually gave up their former profession; we stayed in touch and still remain in touch today. In fact, today we no longer remember what had been the origin of our acquaintance. It is difficult to say how their lives would have turned out if we had not collaborated in the project. This was the sisterhood in an established friendship, in which the acceptance and the coexistence of women from different backgrounds were of key importance. The participation of other women in my projects gave me the opportunity to feel a strong, positive emotional bond, as well as the agency of my actions. I watched personal changes during the process of creating a work of art. I used my artistic position to present other women who, in many cases, would not typically find themselves in places that were available to me (many of them were not artists). I also gave them the opportunity to express themselves,



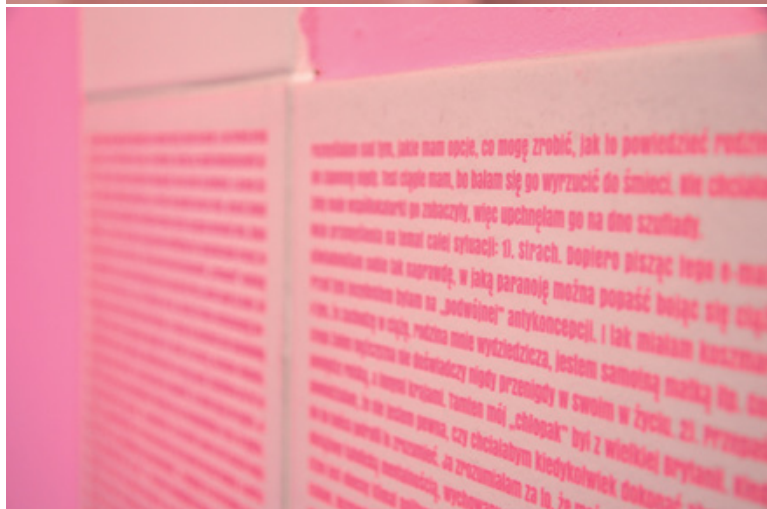
Garsromka, *Vulva suit*, 2021.



Garsromka, *Vulva suit*, 2021.

and to tell their stories, often intimate, that transcended their personal boundaries, triggering release and liberation. I collected stories about fear of pregnancy (*Majeutofobia*, 2018), audio stories about my own, female body (*Moje ciało*, 2019), or photos of the vulva (*Garsromka*, 2021). Women who were participants in those projects were featured at exhibitions as co-authors of the given work². They were proud to be co-authors. In the project *Mój życiorys* [*My bio*], I collected 60 bios written by women associated with the Kraków art university, with the intention to include these in the Academy's archives. I was also involved in the preparation of the publication in cooperation with 94 people who collected 46 interviews of women associated with the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, edited by Jacek Dembosz

² Catalogue of the *Ciałaczki* [*Body-activists*] exhibition at the Nuremberg House Gallery, Kraków 2020, p. 11, source: https://www.academia.edu/43087582/CIA%C5%81ACZKI_katalog_wystawy (accessed: 14.07.2022).



Maieusiophobia, or fear of pregnancy, 2018.

and myself³. Work on the preparation of the book lasted one and a half years, being another participatory project based on supporting the visibility of women. In many cases it was a job involving many personal conversations to stimulate and motivate the women who, due to their socialization, found it tremendously difficult and problematic to focus on themselves.

HERSTORIC EMPATHY (SISTERHOOD)

In 2016, I decided to break the time barrier in sisterhood. I wished to find out about the women who were the first to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. The list that I found in the archives of the Academy of Fine Arts included seventeen names of women who first completed a semester of studies in 1919/1920. During the course of my research, further names were added to the list, twenty-one women in total. Most of them were names that no one knew, and they had not featured in the history of the academy. I was determined to find out who these women were and what they had accomplished. The sculptor Zofia Baltarowicz-Dzielińska was the first to overcome the reservations of the academy professors and to begin her studies. I found her traces exactly 100 years after she joined the academy. Unfortunately, the university authorities at the time were not interested in celebrating this fact in any manner or format. Out of my feeling of powerlessness in this situation, the project *Alternatywne Wiadomości ASP* [*Alternative News of the Academy of Fine Arts*] was created⁴, which consisted in preparing of a fake edition of an academic journal, in cooperation with 43 other persons – including members

3 *Wspominając Akademię. Kobiety* [*Remembering the Academy: Women*], edited by I. Demko, J. Dembosz, Kraków 2021.

4 *Alternatywne Wiadomości ASP* [*Alternative News of the Fine Arts Academy*], Kraków 2018, source: https://issuu.com/iwonademko/docs/alternatywne-wiadomosci-asp_demko (accessed: 14.07.2022).



Remembering the Academy. Women – publication, 2021

of the academic teaching staff, university professors, an academic historian, students, graduates, and people from outside the Academy. The *Alternative News of the Academy of Fine Arts* celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the first woman joining the ranks of the academy's students. For the purposes of this special edition, I named myself Her Magnificence the Rectoress and created an alternative, parallel world led by women, who were also ruling the art market. The single printed issue was presented at an academic exhibition, thanks to which the centenary of women entering the university attracted the attention of a large part of the community. As a result, the Academy's Senate approved the motion to announce 2019 to be the Year of Women at the Academy of Fine Arts. A steering committee was created, consisting of myself, Agnieszka Marecka, and Edyta Maşior. The three of us coordinated the celebrations that lasted for over a year. These included numerous exhibitions, meetings with artists, workshops, texts about women creators, and publications on the theme. A summary of all the events was



So how many great women artists were there, exactly? exhibition, mia Art Gallery, 2021, photo by Jerzy Wypych.



So how many great women artists were there, exactly? exhibition, mia Art Gallery, 2021, photo by Jerzy Wypych.



So how many great women artists were there, exactly? exhibition, mia Art Gallery, 2021, photo by Jerzy Wypych.

collected in a digital publication available on the Academy's website.⁵ The Kraków Academy of Fine Arts – as the first university in Poland – also gained a special tab in their online website describing the history of women's struggle for the right to study.⁶

Archival research devoted to the first women studying in 1919/1920 has so far consumed six years of my life. I hope that this research will find its conclusion in a publication, in which each woman will have her own chapter

⁵ *Rok Kobiet z ASP. Jubileusz 100-letniej obecności kobiet w krakowskiej Akademii Sztuk Pięknych [Academy of Fine Arts' Women's Year. Anniversary of female presence at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków]*, Kraków 2021, ISBN 978-83-66564-21-3, source: https://www.asp.krakow.pl/images/aktualnosci/2021/Dokumenty/Rok_Kobiet.pdf, (accessed: 14.07.2022).

⁶ M. Pilikowski, I. Demko, *Walka kobiet o prawo do studiowania w Akademii, [Women's fight to study at the Academy]*, source: <https://www.asp.krakow.pl/akademia/kobiety-w-akademii>, (accessed: 14.07.2022).



So how many great women artists were there, exactly? exhibition, mia Art Gallery, 2021, photo by Jerzy Wypych.



So how many great women artists were there, exactly? exhibition, mia Art Gallery, 2021, photo by Jerzy Wypych.

devoted to her. I also endeavour to popularize the information about the women I rediscovered through exhibitions and through new, original works dedicated to them. One such exhibition was a presentation based on works created by historical women artists, presented on 300 kg of rubble brought into the gallery, held at mia ART Gallery in Wrocław⁷ in 2021. This time, the exhibition was co-authored

⁷ Wystawa *Ile właściwie było wielkich artystek?* [So how many great women artists were there, exactly?], 23.11--11.12. 2021, mia ART Gallery, Wrocław, curated by: Patrycja Bochenek, source: https://miaartgallery.com/pl/245_iwona-demko-ile-wlasciwie-bylo-wielkich-artystek#hash-about-event, (accessed: 14.07.2022).

by dead women who thus posthumously gained an active agency, so to speak. Along with the exhibition, a series of broadcasts was created on the online Radio Kapitał station devoted to 21 female students who have blazed the trail for the next generations of female artists at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. In total, 18 episodes were broadcast between October 15, 2021 and June 3, 2022, which can be played to on the Radio Kapitał website.⁸

Sisterhood based on the restoration of forgotten female figures has a huge impact on the shaping of the identity of contemporary women. If you are aware of the existence of your protagonists and your predecessors, it is easier to believe in your own strength and abilities. It is essential to remember those who came before us. This is herstorical sisterhood.

WIKI-ARTIVISM

In parallel with the archival research, I decided to popularize the information obtained through my activity on the Wikipedia – that is, in the most accessible of all places. Initially, I aimed to create entries devoted to the women I had found. It was a tedious job. First, it was necessary to develop texts, articles, and publications about these so far disregarded persons, in order to be able to create entries in the Wikipedia later. Before creating the entry about the first student, Zofia Baltarowicz-Dzielińska, I wrote a book⁹ based on the documents obtained from her heirs, including the autobiography of the sculptor. A completely forgotten woman has become one of the most important characters

8 Radio Kapitał, *Ile właściwie było wielkich artystek?* [So how many great women artists were there, exactly?] podcast, source: <https://radiokapital.pl/shows/ile-wlasciwie-bylo-wielkich-artystek>, (accessed: 14.07.2022).

9 I. Demko, *Zofia Baltarowicz-Dzielińska. Pierwsza studentka Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Sztuk Pięknych im. Jana Matejki w Krakowie, ISBN 978-83-66054-35-6, 2018.

in the herstory, and not only of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. Along with articles on historic characters, entries devoted to living women also began to appear. To date, I have created 26 new Wikipedia articles, including 11 entries about contemporary women artists and art historians. I treat my activity on the Wikipedia as an artistic activity within the space of the Internet.¹⁰

RECTOR'S ELECTIONS

With the conclusion of the Academy of Fine Arts Women's Year, rector's elections were held at the university. In the two hundred years of the university's history, there has never been a woman at the helm of this institution. I decided to take part in the elections to make this fact visible through the symbolic gesture, and to present a program written from the perspective of a woman during the election debate. My gesture became a contribution to the reflection on the participation of women in the structures of the Kraków Academy. It also facilitated "familiarisation" of the image of a person who goes beyond the standard (male) figure of the rector. Perhaps it also helped other women believe that their presence in the highest positions was within their reach.

CURATORSHIP PROJECTS

I also see my curatorial activity in terms of sisterhood. Since 2015, I have been collaborating with the director of the Nuremberg House in Kraków, Renata Kopyto, in organizing exhibitions to which only female artists are invited. Traditionally, we organize exhibitions that are launched on March 8. Likewise, I invite students and graduates to the March 8 exhibition series of *HERstoria sztuki* [*HERstory of Art*]; there were already

10 Wikipedia page: IwoDem, <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedytka:IwoDem>, (accessed: 14.07.2022).



Exhibition with the participation of female students at the ASP: *HERstory of Art II* – poster, 2019 /
 Exhibition with the participation of female students at the ASP: *HERstory of Art III* – poster, 2021 /
 Exhibition with the participation of female students at the ASP: *HERstory of Art* – poster, 2016.

three editions of exhibitions under this title. Since 2018, together with Renata Kopyto, we have been curating exhibitions devoted to forgotten women (Lou Andreas-Salome, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Gerda Taro, Unica Zörn). So far, thanks to this curatorial activity, it has been possible to present the works of over 100 different women artists. Catalogues published on the occasion of the March 8 exhibitions, also available on the Internet, constitute an important element of these efforts, and a significant aspect of documenting women's artistic activity.

Sisterhood can be accomplished in many ways. It can become an element of artistic activity. It encompasses the creation of works on feminist issues, and the use of the so-called “feminine means of expression”. It can include participatory projects with the involvement of others. Sisterhood can go back to the past, which has an impact on the present. It is about finding connections with those that are no longer here. It is herstorical empathy, that is, highlighting female characters and including their stories in the universal narrative. Sisterhood is bringing female values into the structures, places, and positions previously held by men. It means thinking about others, supporting them, giving them a voice, and giving them visibility. It is also gratitude, awareness, and strength that empowers in versatile ways.

Women's protests that swept through Poland since 2016 in response to the tightening of the anti-abortion law have become a milestone in spreading feminist awareness in our society. As a result, they drew attention to the idea of sisterhood, which is becoming increasingly popular. Sisterhood is a multiplied force that we can use to fight for our rights. It is worth uniting in sisterhood.

Anka Leśniak – intermedia artist, researcher, feminist, lecturer at the Department of Intermedia at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, member of the Frakcja group of artists and the Art and Documentation Association. Find out more at www.ankalesniak.pl

Anka Leśniak

Women at the Academies

Female students would feel more comfortable if they had the opportunity to study live nude painting with a female professor.

Teresa F. Ries, Letter to the Rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, 1931

A few weeks before the meeting in Warsaw during the *Traces of Sisterhood*, the exhibition *Women at the Academies* was opened, to which I invited Eliza Proszczuk, among others. So there was an opportunity to refresh our acquaintance, which had been made a few years before, during the Feminist Seminar titled *Dress as a tool of resistance*.

I am writing this text from my personal perspective – as an artist, but also as a researcher, and sometimes also as an exhibition curator. The main axis of my presentation will be the already mentioned exhibition, from which I shall draw links to other events, places, and people – sometimes distant in time and space. Nevertheless, these will be inter-related tropes that reconstruct the traces and the scraps of women's stories (herstories) and female experiences, thus strengthening their significance for us – contemporary women.

The exhibition *Women at the Academies* was organized at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, and the *Traces of Sisterhood*, organized by Eliza Proszczuk and Ewa Chomiczka, also took place within the space of the Academy of Fine Arts – in Warsaw. Therefore, the question about the presence and active attendance of us – women at art academies, about our place there today, in the past and in the future – will appear in the following passages of this text.

In 1999 I became a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. Most of the students in my year were women. This tendency continues at art academies to this day. The lecturers, however, were mostly men. It was also men

about whom I learned in art history classes – taught in the paradigm of male genius and gender-defined artist-model relations. I realized my ambivalent position during live painting classes, where women, more or less my age, posed in the nude. Immediately after I graduated, I began to explore the non-obvious and mutable relationship between the artist and the model, the creator and the recipient, the maker and the material. In the *Body Printing* series I was simultaneously the model, the material, and the author of the work, yet the audience, who were actively involved in creating prints from my body, were also co-authors or co-creators. In the video *Top Models*, I impersonated female characters from the paintings of old masters and, on the basis of more or less credible sources, I was attempting to reconstruct their identities.

While exploring various forms of the presence of women in art, I returned to the topic of women at art academies in 2011 in the project *Zarejestrowane [The Registered]*, concerning the life of young generation female artists, to which I also belonged. At that time, I approached the matter in statistical terms. I should add that by then I have made several unsuccessful attempts to apply for the position of “assistant lecturer”. I combed the websites of art universities and fine art academies in Poznań, Warsaw, Kraków, Katowice, Wrocław, Łódź and Gdańsk, and checked how many women are teaching art subjects. It turned out that the results are similar everywhere, and the share of female lecturers oscillates around 30%. Thus, the proportions of women and men among people studying and teaching at art academies are reversed in the employment structure.

The theme returned once again when I came across the work of the Austrian sculptor Teresa Feoderovna Ries (1866–1956) entitled *The Witch Preparing for the Witches' Sabbath* (1895). When studying the history of this work, which had been damaged several times, and the biography



Teresa Feoderovna Ries, *The Witch*, 1895, archival photograph from the artist's autobiography *Die Sprache des Steines*.

of the artist herself – an immigrant of Jewish origin, who was forced to flee Vienna after the Nazis took power – I could not help but notice to the issue of the (un)availability of artistic education for women. Teresa Ries was not able to officially enrol at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna because women were not admitted to universities at that time. However, her talent was noticed by professor Edmund Hellmer, a sculptor, who agreed to give her private lessons. Therefore Teresa Ries frequented the atelier at the academy, she used the models there, but she was not enrolled and so she was not registered in the list of students. A model from the Viennese Academy posed for the figure of the *Witch* – the work that broke away from nineteenth-century canons of representations, and is now considered a proto-feminist sculpture¹.

1 Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, (Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism), Oxford University Press, p. 248-249.

Teresa Ries writes:

Bored with carving busts, I decided to take up my own topic in sculpture. (...) On the stairs to the basement in the academy building, I stumbled upon an old broom. The Broom, the Witch, the Witches' Sabbath... The witch who holds power over man. My imagination soared and my thought found its manifestation.²

In 2019, thanks to the OeAD scholarship, I went to Vienna to pursue an artistic and research project on Teresa F. Ries at the Academy of Fine Arts there. This was shortly after I was employed at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, so the approval of the university and the support of the then Dean of the Faculty of Sculpture and Inter-media, professor Katarzyna Józefowicz, was of great importance. It was also in Vienna that thanks to the assistance of lecturers, including professor Marina Grzinic and Doctor Simone Bader I was able to meet Valerie Habsburg – an artist and a photographer who also worked with the story of Teresa Ries. Valerie managed to purchase the sculptor's private archive, which shed light on several previously unsolved issues related to her life and artistic output. This meeting gave rise to the TFR Archive initiative – a collective project led by a group of female artists of various nationalities, and it launched a series of exhibitions inspired by the story of Teresa F. Ries.³

My stay in Vienna coincided with the approaching hundredth anniversary of the admission of women to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, which was first made possible in the academic year of 1920/1921.

A few years later, in 1931, Teresa F. Ries sent a letter to the Academy's rector, which actually doubled as a job application. She presented her achievements and proposed to conduct classes in the nude study classes for

2 Teresa Feoderovna Ries, *Die Sprache des Steines* (Vienna: Krystal -Verlag, 1928), p. 13-14

3 TFR Archive's website: <https://teresafeodorownaries.com/>



Anka Leśniak, *The Restoration of the Witch*, part 2, 2019–20, video still.



Anka Leśniak, *The March for the Witch*, 2019–20, video still.

women. The student groups were coeducational, but the lecturers were men only. The artist never received a reply to her letter, which was put back in the archives and labelled “a request to separate male and female students during the nude study classes.”⁴ The professors who were bound by the ministerial order to open the university studies to women were clearly not ready to accept these same women among themselves. The first lecturer was employed at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna as late as 1947.⁵

The turn of the 1920s and 1930s is when women were finally admitted to study – on par with men, and according to the same principles – at art academies in Vienna, Berlin and Kraków, among other places. Thus, the hundredth anniversary of this breakthrough, celebrated at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna through a number of events, as well as the Women’s Year at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, which was announced thanks to the determination of Iwona Demko, PhD, created an opportunity to reflect and try to answer a number of questions related to the presence of women at art academies. From the perspective of my contacts, it was also interesting to compare the mechanisms of power within two universities established in completely different political circumstances and in different contexts: the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, a university with over three hundred years of tradition, founded during the monarchy, and the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, a university established just after World War II under the communist regime, which received the “academy” denomination only in the 1990s, like most Polish art academies. Thus, women had full access to the university in Gdańsk from its inception, and they even took part in its creation, as the co-founders and

4 Archiv der Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien, Geschäftszahl 963/1931

5 *100 years of Admitting Women to Study at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna*, <https://www.akbild.ac.at>

lecturers.⁶ However, gender discrimination still took place, and continued over the decades, in terms of employment and access to decision-making positions, among other things. So, even this example clearly shows that patriarchal patterns function independently of the political system – but that emancipation is also progressing and women appear increasingly often within the structures of art academies.

I decided to use my own life's coincidence: namely, that I was employed at the same faculty of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk – the Faculty of Sculpture and Intermedia – as the first woman-rector in the history of the academies of fine arts in Poland, professor Ludmiła Ostrogórska (the office she held for two terms, in 2008–2016). Shortly thereafter, professor Jolanta Rudzka-Habisiak held an analogous function at the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź (2012–2020), followed by the election of professor Mirosława Jarmołowicz as the rector of the Academy of Art in Szczecin in 2020. I therefore decided that Gdańsk – also due to its libertarian traditions, in which women played an active part, a fact that is sometimes forgotten – would be a good place for conferences and exhibitions, meetings and exchanging knowledge and experience between lecturers from different generations and from different universities. Also, it would be an opportunity to honour and remember the women who were important to the history of the academia. Although women at the academy are not only lecturers and students – which had been justly pointed out by Iwona Demko, the editor of the publication *Wspominając akademię [Remembering the Academy]* – still, the event in Gdańsk focused mainly on women lecturers, their ways of working with students, and relations within the

structures of the academy. The task of the project was to draw attention to the problem rather than to cover the full spectrum of issues and people that should be included in a more comprehensive study of the topic, which was not possible due to the constraints of time and limited financial resources. Nevertheless, the complementary forms of power distribution – the exhibition and the conference – showcased a number of interesting threads, which we can now continue to spin.

The heart of the exhibition consisted of sculptural and installation works, complemented with photographs and videos, which oscillated around the process of sculpting, shaping matter, and the history of women – as models and as artists. Sculpture and women sculptors in the context of the theme of women at art academies are of particular importance, because this field used to be considered a male domain, an activity particularly unsuitable for women who wished to engage in art. The works of contemporary artists were intertwined with archival materials – including pieces from the archive of Teresa F. Ries, and photographs by Valerie Habsburg showing the building of the “School of Master Sculptors”, where Ries was not able to study because she was a woman. In my video, contemporary students appear in front of this very building during their classes of sculpture in stone. As a starting point for her video telling the story of women's struggle for the right to study, Marion Porten chose an anonymous female bust from the Gliptoteque of the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, which became her main visual motive. Agnieszka Babińska, in her turn, captures a damaged and dismantled sculpture of a man, probably Lenin, in a photograph taken in Ukraine, and she is asking a question about the durability of the monuments, and therefore also of the ideas they are supposed to represent. This work enters into dialogue with the installation *Dom-Schron [Home-Shelter]* by Sylwia Jakubowska,

6 *Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Gdańsku ma 70 lat*, <https://dzieje.pl/kultura-i-sztuka/akademia-sztuk-pieknych-w-gdansk-ma-70-lat>

showing an in-between state – perhaps one of construction, or perhaps one of destruction. Both of these works resonated strongly in the context of the war that broke out two weeks before the opening of the exhibition.

Ania Włodarska drew our attention to the precarious nature of working at the academy, where you can work under a temporary contract for many years, without the prospect of permanent employment, uncertain whether your contract would be extended. In her works, Iwona Demko postulates the introduction of feminine forms in the names of academic titles – believing that their absence is a form of tacit discrimination. In her performance, Vivian Crespo Zurita – an artist from Cuba studying in Vienna – protests against the colonial perspective, still present in visual representations found throughout the academy buildings. In the documentation of the exhibition to which she invited her female graduates whose diploma work she supervised, Agata Zbylut draws attention to the difficulties on the labour market which art schools graduates, especially female ones, are struggling with. Martyna Jastrzębska also presented the documentation of the work she did together with her students. In the action titled *za/ od/ prze/ wy/ SIEW [planting/separating/rejecting/sowing the SEEDS]*, the group gathered seeds of various plants and carried them on jute fabric, while marching towards the NOMUS museum. The seeds that made it all the way were planted in the ground in front of the museum. Those that have fallen out along the way may perhaps sprout seedlings in the most unexpected of places. Metaphorically speaking, the project posed a question about the artistic path from the “academy” to the “museum”. A lot could be said about the exhibition, in which 27 artists took part, but I shall leave that for another article.

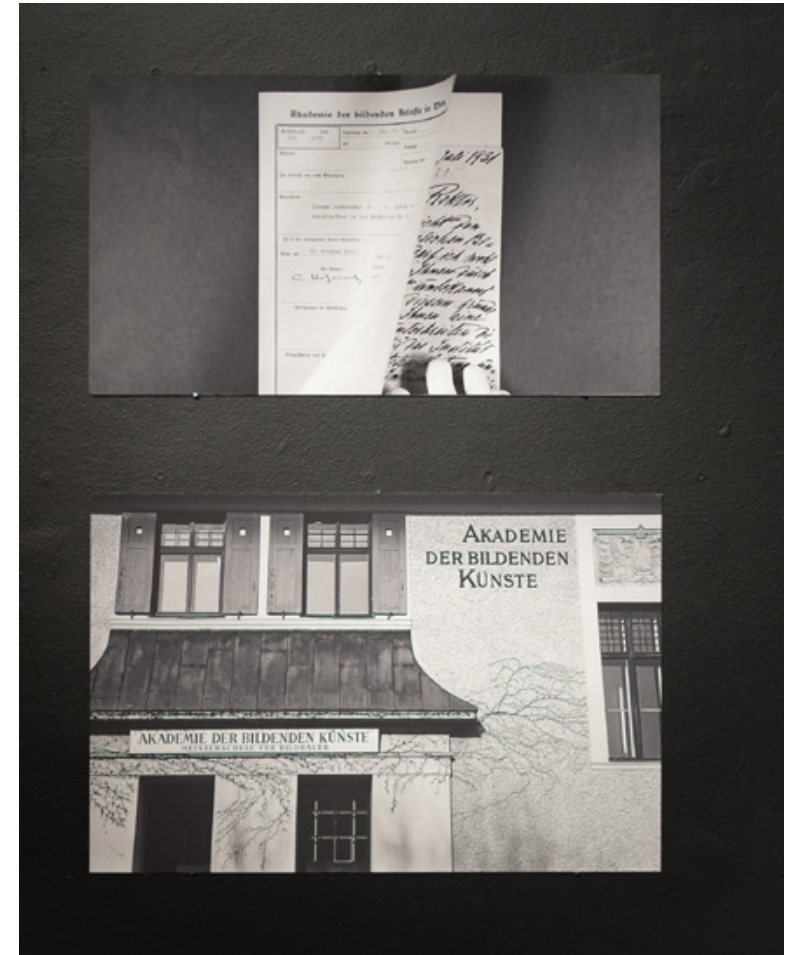
The conference with the participation of 19 speakers was an opportunity to exchange experiences between artists and theoreticians who address the subject of the heritage

of women at art academies in their work. The testimony of professor Izabella Gustowska, artist, academic lecturer for several decades, but also someone who is deeply invested in the promotion of women’s art, is particularly striking. One of the points on the agenda was the collective film *Love Stories* that she made together with her students – Martyna Miller, Maja Okamgnienie, Joanna Pietrowicz, Maria Subczyńska, Katarzyna Wojtczak and Weronika Wronecka, during the production of which the relationship between the master and students turned into a lasting friendship.

All through the conference, important figures were remembered, such as Teresa Sierant, art theorist, long-time art history lecturer, and founder of the Gdańsk Academy of Fine Arts library; professor Alfreda Poznańska from the Wrocław Academy of Fine Arts; and the first lecturers of design. Teaching methods and experiences were also discussed, as well as building non-hierarchical relationships and partnership-based rapport. A strong accent was the speech that professor Marina Grzinić from the Viennese academy had given, in which she presented her students, graduates, and young artists – representatives of ethnic, religious or gender minorities fighting against stereotypes. Katarzyna Lewandowska spoke about anti-discriminatory actions and protests against excluding and oppressive political and social attitudes, which she organizes together with the students of the Gdańsk Academy of Fine Arts. Irena Zieniewicz presented a project that empowers and gives voice to women, carried out together with artists from Kenya as part of the Szczecin Academy of Art project.

In conclusion, although there is still a lot to be done regarding all the issues I have here mentioned, each of these experiences – initiating a project, taking action, carrying out the initiative to the end – builds contacts, strengthens ties and sisterly relationships based on mutual understanding and trust.

P.S. Recently, I edited video-documentation of the above-mentioned Feminist Seminar. At some point in the discussion, we start to rack our brains over the feminine equivalent of Polish “braterstwo” (brotherhood). As in the English “sisterhood”, the idea of “siostrstwo” comes up, and then a few more suggestion. The year was 2018... Today, there is no doubt: it is definitely “siostrzeństwo”!



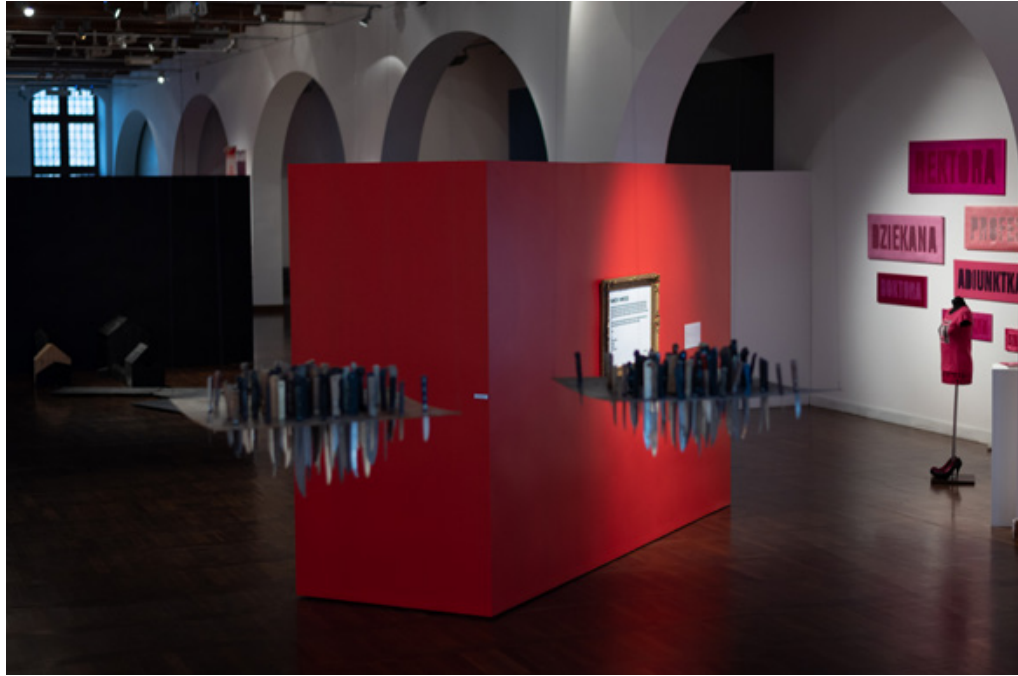
Women at the Academies, Valerie Habsburg, Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, School of Master Sculptors, Teresa F. Ries' Motivation Letter, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Women at the Academies, in the foreground: Simone Bader, *101 years*, next to Iwona Demko, *Feminytywy [Feminine Noun Forms]*, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Women at Academies, from the left: Anka Leśniak, *The March for the Witch*; Agnieszka Babińska, *Is this Lenin*; Vivian Crespo Zurita, *The Power of the Ancestors*, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Women at the Academies, exhibition view, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Women at the Academies, Remembering the Academy, publication edited by I. Demko and J. Dembosz, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Women at the Academies, Agata Zbylut, *Queen Bee*, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Women at the Academies, exhibition view, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Women at the Academies, from the archive of Teresa Ries, TFR Archive, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Women at the Academies, Marion Porten, *Woman at the Academy*, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Vivian Crespo Zurita, *The Power of the Ancestors*, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Women at the Academies, exhibition view, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Women at the Academies, view of the exhibition; in the foreground: Sylwia Jakubowska-Szycik, *Home-Shelter*, objects, Agnieszka Babińska, *Is this Lenin*, photography, Vivin Crespo Zurita, *The Power of the Ancestors*, photo by Kacper Krajewski.

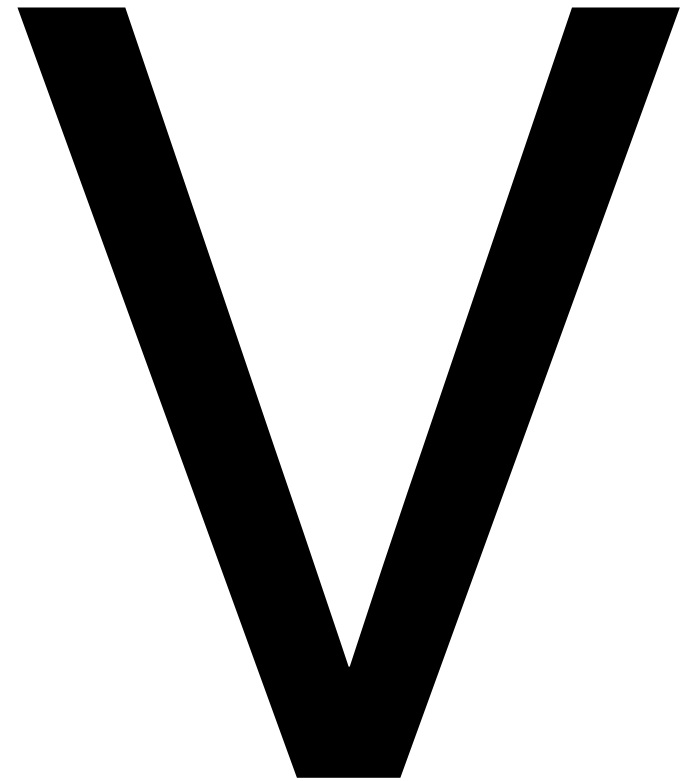


Women at the Academies, in the foreground: Jolanta Rudzka Habisiak, *Moon Lake*, object-installation; in the background: Dominika Kowynia, *Raging Girl*, painting, photo by Kacper Krajewski.



Women at the Academies, za/od/prze/wy/SIEW [planting/separating/rejecting/sowing the SEEDS], performative action under the supervision of Martyna Jastrzębska, PhD, 19 November 2021, photo by Anna Rezulak.

SISTERHOOD IS:
CARING,
NOT THINKING
ABOUT ONESELF
(AND SOMETIMES
PRECISELY:
THINKING
ABOUT ONESELF)



Paulina Penc – multimedia artist, experimental jazz singer, feminist, activist fighting for gender equality and women's rights. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw at the Faculty of Media Art, in the studio of Leon Tarasewicz. She explores socio-cultural identity, spirituality, sexual politics, social media, and femininity, referring to female strength, intuition, and emotional intelligence. She addresses the theme of life and death, based on shamanism and her own experiences. She expresses her ideas in a cleansing, trance-like state – both in visual arts and in music.

Paulina Penc

Fukkatsu

Since 2010, the theme of violence against women has been a recurring theme in my art – this was merely a year before my liberation from a thirteen-year-old, brutally devastating relationship with a sadistic, high-functioning psychopath. I was already so overburdened with traumatic experiences that the images came to me from beyond any intent or calculation. With time, in the process of therapy, I began to broaden my awareness of the psychological mechanisms of violence. The knowledge I thus obtained saved my life. This translated into increasingly intentional creativity and willingness to help women who experienced similar situations. I started to study psychological publications on: violence against women, psychopathic traits, psychophagous traits, relationships between a violent person and a woman experiencing violence, the Stockholm syndrome, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and the patriarchal culture. This is what my series of paintings called *Homofemia* is about – about the brutal reality that deprives a woman of her dignity. In 2012, I joined the Congress of Women, contributing to the *Hollaback* wall and exhibiting the *Homofemia* painting series in the Marble Hall, at the Palace of Culture.

At that time, I felt a great bond with women fighting for their rights, with women who supported each other, with women sharing similar stories and similar experiences. I will never forget a Senegalese woman dressed in ethnic linen clothes, who had tears in her eyes after seeing my paintings, when she said: “I was sure that the author of these paintings was a black woman like me. I experienced a similar story; I thank you for these paintings, they are uncompromising, strong and very African”.

Her words became to me a symbol of true sisterhood and female solidarity; they gave me strength.



Homofemia 2, 210/160 cm, linen, tempera, 2011

When I saw literally hundreds of women during the panel at the Fourth Congress of Women, lining up at the podium to each tell her story, I was very moved. I realized then that what happened to me does not make me different or inferior, that it does not stigmatize me. I realized that my case is not an isolated one. This triggered my desire to learn more about the statistics on domestic violence against women around the world. The results of this search were alarming, whereas the social awareness, unfortunately, still is – as it was then – very limited, negligible even. Many years have passed and although I do see some changes for the better, this is still a subject that is swept

under the proverbial rug. In 2011, I was victimized in court, twice. In 2014, despite my already very high awareness and my activity in the fight to combat violence against women, I repeated the old pattern and entered into a one-year relationship with another psychopath. It was a typical compulsion to reiterate the trauma.

Personally, I was able to cut myself off from the violence much later. In 2021, after six years' proceedings, I won the court case on the grounds of mental and physical abuse, life threats and stalking. During my six-year trial with my torturer, I felt an even greater desire to fight any gender inequality, with an emphasis on violence that happens within the four walls of the home. In 2015, I set up a website in the social media called: "Stop violence in a relationship", where I shared the verbal and visual content: studies based on psychological and psychotherapeutic materials, enriched with my own experiences. The website has received widespread attention. The creation of this outlet had an essential purpose for me: to help women in situations similar to mine. I thought: if the knowledge about the mechanisms of violence and abuse literally saved my life and I managed to cut myself off from the perpetrator, let this knowledge – in a nutshell – be "out there" on the Internet, because it might also save someone's life and liberate them from debilitating dependencies.

I also want to emphasize that breaking free from such a relationship is only the beginning of a long process, the tip of an iceberg.

It is only later that the further fighting for oneself begins, which is post-traumatic stress disorder therapy – including many other kinds of therapy: therapy of compulsion to repeat the trauma, the Stockholm syndrome, and often a long battle with the torturer who uses various forms of stalking long after the "relationship" ends; sometimes for the rest of your life. In addition, there is a background of the socio-cultural system which, to put

it mildly, still leaves much to be desired, and not only fails to support, but often plunges the people who have been experiencing violence even further down. In conclusion, a woman has to face some arduous work in the process of "returning to herself" and individuating – incidentally, the latter is also the title of my next painting series, which is about the process of becoming whole again, and confronting the ghosts of the past.

The "Stop violence in a relationship" website inspired the founding of the "Surwiwalki" [She-survivors] group on behalf of the Women's Rights Centre. The co-founders of the group are Aleka Polis, Zuzanna Janin, and I. Together, we wrote the She-survivors Manifesto, which aims to increase social awareness and is a form of appeal to all state institutions that should protect women who experience violence, and should give them the opportunity to receive therapy. I dare risk a statement that the Manifesto is a weapon in the fight against the patriarchal system; it is also a counterbalance to all harmful cultural stereotypes, to quote but a few of its tenets: "As long as you remain silent, you are alone", "It is not a shame to talk about being hurt; it is shameful to hurt someone!", "We are strong, not weak! Together we will be stronger!", "We want to acknowledge the wrongs, not to underestimate them!", "Pathology cannot be the norm!", "Nothing justifies violence!", "Domestic violence is everyone's concern."

The entire She-survivors Manifesto can be found online at: <https://cpk.org.pl/co-robimy/surwiwalki/>

As an artist, as a feminist, as a mother, and as a woman, I wish to point out that our sisterhood varies; and that it does not always look so colourful. My own experiences have shown me, more than once, the cases of female envy, conspiracy, jealousy, depreciation, devaluation, fighting against each other, and what especially saddens me – in case of some female artists-feminists – is



Individuation 4, 135/124 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2012.

that they would erase the art of our colleagues through permanent and consistent omission. “Supporting” all too often results from the intention of sheer nepotism and cronyism, rather than the actual, true solidarity.

I also observe how, in everyday life, women often depreciate each other’s competences and skills, question each other’s abilities, ridicule or mock each other. As humans, we are not free from the competitive spirit; we have different

characters, different personality types, some of us are more empathetic than others, each of us comes from a different home, we have different beliefs instilled in us, we have had different childhood experiences. I do not wish to either idealize or stigmatize women.

However, I think that this fighting one another, this struggle among women is largely due to the difficult cultural conditions in which we have lived for generations. By this I mean patriarchy. A similar psychological mechanism was observed in the African American ghetto – when “whites” have been fighting “blacks” for centuries, the “blacks” will eventually “bite” each other.

The same psychological pattern characterizes the relationship between the abuser and the person on the receiving end of violence: the abused. I personally experienced it the hard way. In the process of slow “killing” of his partner by the executioner, at some point the person experiencing violence herself “continues the work” of the perpetrator through self-destructive acts and self-annihilation on many levels of life. It is a result of abandoning oneself in favour of the torturer, the result of the Stockholm syndrome, but also of the post-traumatic stress disorder. It would take longer to dissect this and many other problems, but here I just want to signal the existence of the phenomenon, and to emphasize how important it is in such situations to receive professional assistance from a group of competent specialists focused on the topic of violence. My photography series titled “Erasing” is very personal, and at the same time extremely universal, and it addresses just that. The same patterns are characteristic for both social and individual psychology.



From the "Erasing" series, 2012, 22x16 cm, 13/2-15:25/

I am very much like my mother. I was deeply affected by her departure. Our relationship was uniquely beautiful. We were one another's truest friends. Neither my mother nor I ever liked competing; we were able to sincerely admire other women and to support them. The sentiment of envy had always been difficult for us to comprehend. Maybe it is a bit idealistic, but that is the way I am, and that is why I would like to end this text with the wishes I wrote for the Women's Day of 2019 for all of us – Sisters. These wishes are relevant and appropriate for any occasion. Let this be our Sisterhood:

"I wish to all Women, female Friends and Colleagues, that they feel free and included.

I wish for history textbooks to incorporate chapters on the centuries' old erasing of us – women from social, political, cultural, and intimate spheres by depriving us of the right to education, of the voting rights; through domestic violence, and through public violence.

I wish you a clear field of view. On this wonderful Day, I wish for us – Women – to have the courage to step out of the role of a nice, naked object, a fetish, a thing, a nude on the couch, a nanny, a vestal virgin, an artist's muse, a hostess, and a breeding machine with her duties of periodical vacuuming and dusting.

I wish for women to be proud of being mothers, but let this not be their only right and correct social aspiration.

I wish us the right to diversity.

I wish us all the liberation from the patriarchal system, which I see as the greatest crime against humanity, because it has successfully erased and continues to erase us – female people – from nearly every sphere of life.

We 'have not existed', and we continue to be ignored.

The Encyclopaedia of outstanding men is an expression of erasing women from social, cultural, scientific and political life, for many centuries.

I wish that the harm done to women be called what it is, without euphemisms – because it has the longest tradition in the history of human race. I wish that this harm no longer be marginalized, concealed, ridiculed, omitted, boycotted, belittled, or ignored. I wish that Women and Feminists stopped calling religious radicalisms 'cultural differences' and stopped speaking of tolerance in this context, because that means complicity in violating human rights! Another Islamic woman is fleeing her country to live with dignity!

No to religion-motivated crime!

I wish us Women and Feminists courage and solidarity – in the defence of all of us, so that our daughters and granddaughters feel more and more secure. I wish us boldness, that we are not afraid to say ‘no’ to our men colleagues in high positions, in defence of our views, that we forsake hypocrisy, and that we get rid of conformism and opportunism – even if we do so at the expense of our private gains or personal advantage. It is our common good that counts.

On this wonderful Day, I wish that we stop fighting each other and envy each other – like in the ‘black’ ghetto – where the ‘whites’ have been fighting ‘blacks’ for centuries, and the ‘blacks’ eventually ‘bite’ each other.

So let us free ourselves from destructive psychological mechanisms.

I wish that we stopped competing for the sake of pleasing men.

I wish for us, women, that there be fewer nightclubs where women are the objects, and men are the imperious clients.

I wish us newspapers, airline magazines and hotel chains where the woman is not advertised as live flesh in the ads for nightclubs, restaurants, burgers, Rolexes, Vuittons, perfume bottles, and spa salons.

I wish us women the right to our agency and dignity.

I wish for the situation to be reversed – with naked, dancing men in movies, in advertising banners, and on Facebook – perhaps then our discomfort will be understood.

I wish that all women would stop being attacked by intrusive advertisements for beauty salons, hairdressing salons with artificial hair, and face-modelling fluid foundations.

I wish us the courage to model our lives.

I wish us the abolition of masculinism and chauvinism at universities and academies, so that more women rectors, more women professors, more women lecturers, and more women artists would appear.

I wish that the dictionary of synonyms did not change the gender neutral word ‘heroism’ (the Polish ‘bohaterstwo’) to ‘bravery’ (the masculine ‘męstwo’). I wish that Professor Bralczyk [a renowned Polish linguist] would stop insisting that only masculine nouns should be used for certain jobs and positions (dyrektor – masculine “director”, bankier – masculine ‘banker’, sędzia – masculine ‘judge’), and only feminine nouns for others (sekretarka – feminine ‘secretary’, sprzątaczką – feminine ‘cleaner’, opiekunka – feminine ‘caregiver’); and that his views would cease to be opinion-forming.

I wish for us to live in a democratic State, not based on hypocrisy and lip-service equality, but a State in which a woman is truly and actually a human being, where her rights to dignity, freedom, self-determination, and equality are not violated.

I wish for all of us to have a greater psychological awareness so that violence would not be downplayed and perceived as a whim of women and an invention by those who have not experienced it and do not know what it is.

I wish for justice.

I wish for all women to have the courage, so that they would not be ashamed to call themselves feminists, because feminism is humanism.

Finally, I wish that men would have the courage to be humanists, and that they be present in the fight for women’s rights.

For when an individual is sick, the entire nation becomes sick.

I wish us all health and happiness!”

My latest series of paintings – called “Fukkatsu” – is about our strength: the strength of women, our intuition, emotional intelligence, motherhood, and primal knowledge for which we had been burned at the stakes. Our power goes beyond the rational view of reality. We are the link between life and decay; between two worlds; between the universal and the particular; between culture and nature. Evil and fear are subjected to cleansing rituals, and thus tamed. The trauma transforms into the strength and richness of the sensibility of the world.

The condition for cultivating righteous sisterhood is to be a good sister to yourself. Accepting your own limitations, forbearance, and gentleness are liberating.



From the series *Fukkatsu*, *Kiss me beautiful*, 120/100 cm, mixed technique, 2022.

Monika Weiss is a Polish American transdisciplinary artist living in New York. She was trained at the Warsaw School of Music prior to studying at the Academy of Fine Arts with the conceptual artist Ryszard Winiarski. The artist holds currently an appointment as Professor at the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, Washington University in St. Louis. Weiss' work continues to be featured in international exhibitions, publications and collections including solo shows at CCA Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw, Lehman College Art Gallery, New York, and Museum of Memory & Human Rights, Santiago, Chile.

Monika Weiss

Nirbhaya

Nirbhaya¹

I. *Lament*

Language is a sovereign system that signifies and exists in relation to what it describes, but at the same time retreats, becoming pure language. In my art, lament questions language, polluting its purity. As a form of expression that arises from speech, lament represents the moment when speech and words break down, as well as the moment of facing the loss of meaning. Lament is the sound and silence of trauma. In my work, lament and body are intertwined because lament – the space of postlanguage – is a psychosomatic experience and act. It is an ever-changing space of historical, cultural and social dimensions. It is an act of symbolic resistance, of leaving signs and traces of presence in opposition to the heroic fantasies of conquest and power.

In my projects, history is shown from the collective viewpoint of those who are or were marginalized, oppressed, forgotten, erased or destroyed. I work with traces, remnants, post-histories, postmemories, archives and fragments. Being neither a witness nor a survivor, I invite others to spend time in my films, sound installations, sculptures, drawings and public projects, which is to spend time in the space of lamentation understood as a form of expression that comes after language.

Lament is an extreme expression of despair in the face of loss. As Judith Butler writes, grief furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency

and ethical responsibility². In ancient Athens, public acts of mourning were legally prohibited and punished. Lament was recognized as pollution of the rational and masculine space of the city with the dirt of despair. In many cultures, women practiced organized group lamentation rituals, in response to the absurd and grotesque loss of life through war. Lament, especially when shared with others, is an act of political power, not just a response to individual loss. The idea of the archive, understood as a record of phenomenological experience, appears in my art in an attempt to seek meaning beyond language, and beyond history understood as a history of violence. Lamentation takes a form of expression that is excluded or expelled from language – the latter understood as a system or structure of meaning in relation to *événement*. As a loss of language, the lament traverses the flat surface of the archive, becoming music.

In the oldest, archaic examples of rituals of lamentation, e.g. in ancient Greece, the relationship between the world of the living and the world of the dead takes place as a symbolic dialogue between two beings, one present and one absent, as if located on the other side of the boundary. This borderline position often means that the lamenting protagonist finds herself between two antiphonal groups of mourners³. Such an imaginary dialogue between the traveler and the tomb was imbued with austere brevity, characteristic of the archaic style, which later developed into a refrain, incantation, repetition and echo. The primary form that I work with in my most recent films and sound-music compositions, is the ancient ternary form of Lament, A—B—A (sometimes called the song form), which is possibly the oldest known form of music. In ternary form, the initial address would be followed by a response (i.e.

1 *Nirbhaya* appears in this text in italics when the word refers to my project, and without italics when the word refers to a name given posthumously to Jyoti Sing.

2 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, New York: Verso, 2004.

3 Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, second edition, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002.

recollection of past events), and finally the reiteration of the initial address. The oldest known forms of archaic Lament are meant as an imaginary dialogue with those who are no longer here. This dialogue later developed into the musical and poetic forms of refrain and choral incantation, evoking suspension of time. The specific technique of montage that I employ to construct my films is based on the overlapping and reversal of images and sounds to create a space of suspended and circular time akin to this method of incantation.

II. *Two Laments (19 Cantos)*

In 2014, curator Amit Mukhopadhyay, based in Kolkata, India invited me to propose a public project for New Delhi. After a period of intense and intuitive research, I focused on two events which I understand as *two wounds* in the space of New Delhi: the India Gate monument (1921), designed by Edwin Lutyens as a copy of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, and the horrifying gang rape on a moving bus (2012), of a young woman posthumously named Nirbhaya (“Fearless” in Hindi), who subsequently died from internal wounds.

Both events – *wounds* are related to a specific city, but in my art they become catalysts for a series of projects of global, and also double nature, where colonization of cities and colonization of bodies are intertwined in their meaning. Subsequently the title of the cycle of films/ sound compositions became *Two Laments (19 Cantos)*, 2015-2020, a work that later inspired the monument/ anti-monument *Nirbhaya*. *Two Laments (19 Cantos)* is a cycle of short silent films, each between 2 – 30 min. and a series of sound compositions for individual voice, chorus and abstract soundscape. As I was beginning this work, I was concerned about not being from India, but a dear friend, acclaimed Indian American poet Meena Alexander convinced me to continue with my project. In each *Canto*





Two Laments (19 Cantos), 48:34, sound and film, 2015–20, film still.



I filmed one woman performing silent gestures of lamentation as a kind of offering of beauty and dignity to both Nirbhaya and to the city of Old Delhi, which was destroyed by the British in 1858. In one of the 19 films a poem by Meena Alexander appears, *Moksha*, dedicated to Nirbhaya.

On 16th December 2012 in Munirka (Delhi), 23-year-old Jyoti Singh (posthumously named Nirbhaya) was brutally gang raped on a bus moving through the city, and subsequently died from inflicted wounds. In the transcripts of the court trial I found a statement from one of the perpetrators who remembered seeing a red ribbon coming out of her body. The red ribbon, which upon further investigation turned out to be her intestine, meant that her insides were pulled out. This fact became a traumatic catalyst for my cycle *Two Laments (19 Cantos)*. Dedicated to Nirbhaya (“the Fearless One”, sometimes also referred to as the “Daughter of India”), *Two Laments* is also inspired by Jan Kochanowski’s *Treny* (19 Laments), written after his daughter’s death.

Nirbhaya is a contemporary *flâneuse*, a young woman who treats her city as a place to move through freely, to be present and visible. The *flâneur*, who is also, and perhaps forever, *un voyeur*, is a figure culturally rooted in the context of public space as *a priori* belonging to men, a symbol of the male right to gaze and to be seen. Nirbhaya is punished for her specific behavior within the space of the city. According to testimonies of Nirbhaya’s rapists and murderers, her rape, torture and subsequent death was supposed to be a lesson given to all women. She is punished and executed in the public space of the city precisely for behaving as if she were a free individual, i.e. a man, inhabiting the city space as its rightful citizen.

The rape of 2012 was a grotesque and extreme form of prolonged torture, which took almost two hours, while the bus was driving through the city of Delhi, unchallenged, cutting through its center with a red ribbon of indifference.

Recalling the closed trains heading towards Buchenwald through the center of Weimar – their tracks very close to inhabited houses, their wagons leaking screams and pleas for help – the bus cutting through the body of Delhi is both a proof and an accusation of all cities around the world. Rapes committed in cities around the world are acts of war and aggression that go beyond desire and sexuality, in fact they exclude them. The rape of a woman is often culturally tied to the notion of punishment for her freedom and understood as a form of sacrifice, referring to the concept of *homo sacer*. It is also actively removed from cultural memory. The city – understood as a public space – protects its heroic memory, which should not be polluted by the memory of low, non-heroic crimes committed against women. We need monuments engraved with the names of rape victims and, consequently, we need monuments to women who died as victims of war waged against them.

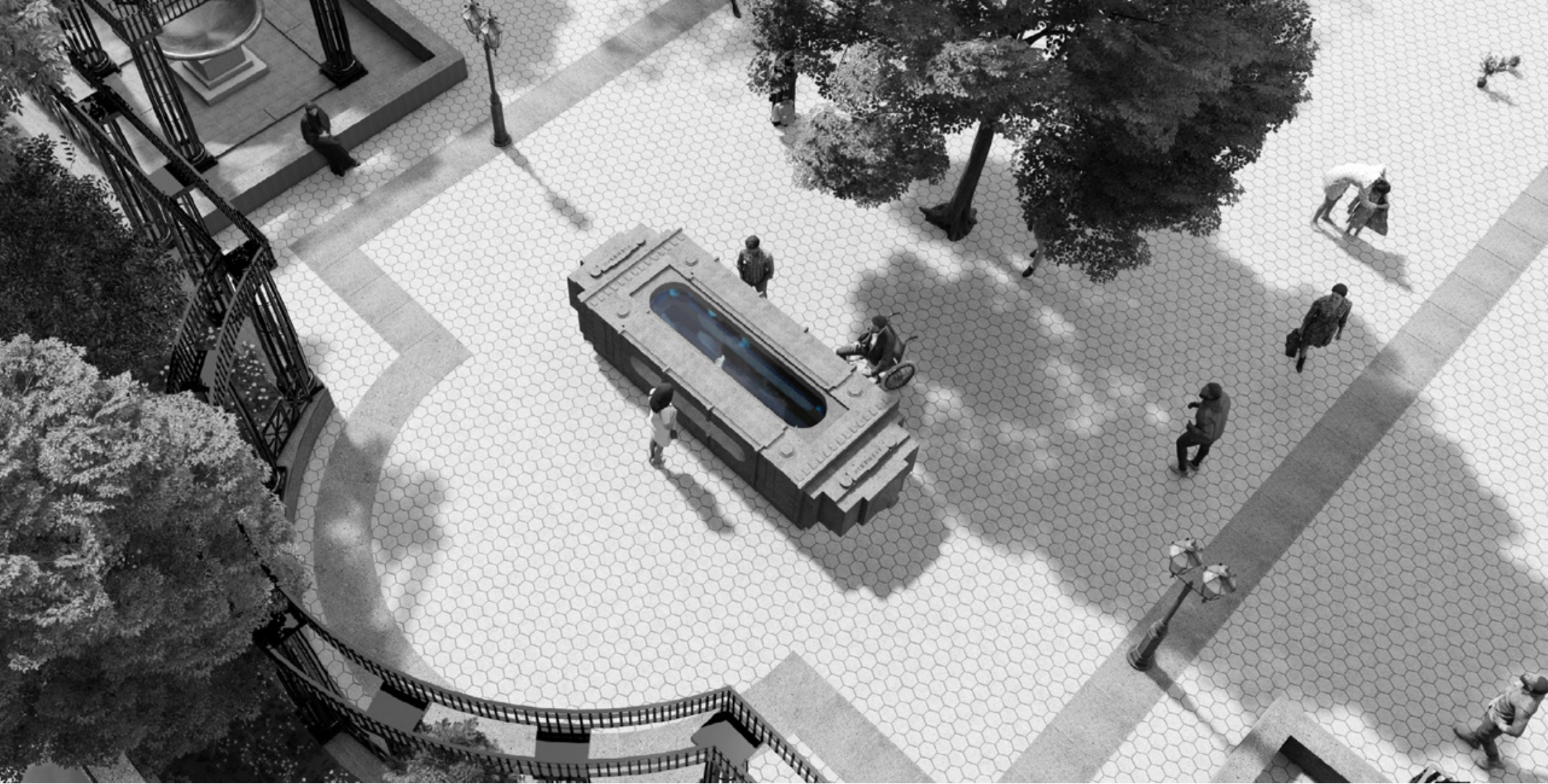
19 Cantos is a cycle of film projections and sound compositions. Extremely slow, gradual and repeated gestures of lamentation are performed by female volunteers, whom I filmed in Delhi, St. Louis, Warsaw and in my New York studio. In most of the *19 Cantos*, thanks to the film montage, the presence of Nirbhaya is evoked as a double presence. The slowness of time and of movement, as well as the specific tempo that I create in my work, are intended to extend but also to veil the symbolized moments of trauma. I call this process *unforgetting*. In *Two Laments (19 Cantos)*, the red ribbon becomes a veil that becomes a sea that swallows Delhi, the meta-city that represent all cities in the world bearing marks of historical trauma.

In the 1858 issue of *Illustrated London News*, a large drawing documents Old Delhi from a bird's eye view just before its siege and its destruction by the British Empire. The drawing is entitled *The Day before the Siege*. The accuracy and beauty of the laborious craftsmanship of this drawing reflects the details of a city

doomed to death, a city that rose in anger against colonial occupation, a city whose architecture was not in line with the aspirations of high, European culture. In response to the architecture and urban structure of Old Delhi, full of tangled, non-geometric lines, Edwin Luytens designs New Delhi, modeled on Paris, full of geometry and European taste. He places India Gate (1921) at its center, as an enlarged version of the Arc de Triomphe. From my point of view, this is where the architectural rape of the city occurs. In *Canto 3 Nirbhaya* seems to lie on the drawing-map *The Day before the Siege*. Moving very slowly with her eyes closed, her body becomes doubled, becoming its own echo, a repetition. Dressed in a long black gown that gradually becomes soiled with the dirt, as if stained by the city itself – the doubled Nirbhaya covers the city with her body and her veil, slowly disappearing, leaving traces and headscarves on its surface.

III. Nirbhaya

In 2018 Eulalia Domanowska, on behalf of the Centre for Polish Sculpture in Orońsko, invited me to propose a public project, as part of the permanent collection and Sculpture Park in Orońsko. I proposed *Nirbhaya*, a monument/anti-monument devoted to all women around the world who continue to experience violence. A sister, 6-month version of the project is scheduled to open in Spring 2023 on Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, a Gateway to the United Nations in New York. *Nirbhaya* is presented at Dag Hammarskjold Plaza in partnership with the New York City Parks Department of Art and Antiquities, World Council of Peoples for the United Nations, and Streaming Museum with support from Polish Cultural Institute in New York, Adam Mickiewicz Institute in Warsaw, and New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA). The project is curated by Nina Colosi and Sherrill Kazan. Since 2019 Lamar Johnson Collaborative supports technical production of the project.



Nirbhaya, 2023, forthcoming public project at Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, in front of United Nations, New York; stone, water, film, sound.



Built to reference a triumphal arch, *Nirbhaya* is a sculpture situated within public space, resembling ancient sarcophagus and filled with water. A video image at 1:1 scale is projected into the water, depicting a woman dressed in a long black dress and veil. Her silhouette moves very slowly, as if she were lying or dancing inside the sarcophagus. The woman gradually becomes a green tree. Her silhouette and face alternate, composed of dozens of women I continue to film, including myself. *Nirbhaya* is a response to two forms of rape: colonial and individual. In this work I lay triumphal arch on the ground and mirror it with itself, transforming it into a horizontal vessel. I draw attention to the heroic verticality of typical, traditional war monuments, which, through their sanitized language of architecture, usually ignore the truth about war – a crime and a tragedy for all involved. *Metamorphosis/Dafne*, 2021, an ambisonic sound composition devoted to victims of gendered violence, will be included as an online sound companion to the *Nirbhaya* monument at Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza. Inspired by the story of Daphne (“Dafne” in Polish), the mythological nymph who escaped rape by self-transformation into a tree, the piece evokes the escape from the violence marked by death, but also by reincarnation into a new life form.

IV. Unforgetting

The gang rape and slow, prolonged killing of Jyoti Singh, as a lesson to the *flâneuse*, represents crimes committed against women around the world. *Nirbhaya* is not a project about one city or one country. The red line left behind by the bus crossing Delhi stains and crosses national, historical, geographical and cultural borders. The India Gate monument, raised by the British Empire at the central point of New Delhi, modeled on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris (commemorating the Indian soldiers who died for the Empire during World War I) represents a typical heroic style of memory, especially European, institutionalized and

devoid of any embodied trace of death and war. *Nirbhaya* project challenges this monumental verticality, heroic masculinity and colonial criminality – usually commemorated in a reduced form of public memory. My project proposes an intimate, embodied *unforgetting* of the trauma of rape and torture of women everywhere. At the same time it is a tribute to the suffering and heroism of women, the *Fearless Ones*. It proposes to rename victims as heroes and invites to take part in the horizontal and fluid form of new monumentality and transformation.

At this moment in time, when both in Poland and in the US we try to reckon with our own public memory and history, *Nirbhaya* asks: Who is remembered, who is forgotten, and how do we *unforget* violence, in order to remake a world without it? Violence against women and girls has been described by the World Health Organization as a global public health pandemic: one in three women worldwide experiences physical or sexual violence in her life. *Nirbhaya* asks questions about whom we commemorate in the public sphere, because the question of visibility and invisibility in public space (as philosopher Hannah Arendt would put it) is directly related to how we learn history and therefore how we might reimagine the future. It is important to witness this work now because violence against women is only rising. *Nirbhaya*'s message closely relates to the fifth goal of the United Nations, which is gender equality and human rights.

SISTERHOOD IS:
HONESTY,
NON-HIERARCHICAL
COOPERATION,
LOOKING FOR OTHER
FORMS OF SOCIAL
ORGANIZATION

W

Weronika Pelczyńska – choreographer, dancer, performer. Graduate of the SEAD Experimental Academy of Contemporary Dance in Salzburg. Scholarship holder of the following programmes: DanceWEB 2013 ImpulsTanz, Carte Blanche 2013, Alternative Dance Academy 2017 and 2019. She has choreographed many theatre performances. Since 2011 she has been leading individual and collective art projects, including: *Europe. Investigation*; *It Will Come Later*; *sphere*; *Still Standing*; *Spherical*. Co-creator of *Centrum w Ruchu* (Centre in Motion) and *Sisterhood Practices* initiative. Lecturer at the Theatre Academy in Warsaw.

Monika Szpunar – dancer, performer, choreographer. Graduate of the ACTS/Ecole de Danse Contemporaine in Paris, and London Contemporary Dance School in London. Co-creator of The Yonis girls' band, a choreographic initiative of sisterhood practices, and the Body Laboratory at the Cracow Choreographic Centre. She also creates original projects and performances and works as a choreographer for theatre performances and films. She is interested in moving dance to new, unconventional spaces, in social activism through dance, as well as working in collective and interdisciplinary projects, created in collaboration with others.

Weronika Pelczyńska, Monika Szpunar

Sisterhood Practices (*sisterchód*)

Sisterhood practices

it is a bond,
 it is a relationship,
 it is a way of looking and interacting with the other,
 it is respect for the diversity and variety of talents,
 it is a support network,
 it is a shared experience,
 it is accompanying and sharing,
 it is recognition of one's own and other people's
 uniqueness,
 it is knowing that you are not the only one,
 it is realizing that there is someone out there who is similar
 to us, as well as someone who is different from us,
 it is watching yourself and the other, taking an example
 from her,
 it is setting an example,
 it is realizing that there is someone you follow, and
 someone you precede,
 it is a sense of self-worth, dignity, and a sense of humour.



Documentation of the *KULA* outdoor performance. The choreography was created in collaboration with Weronika Pelczyńska, Magda Fejdasz and Monika Szpunar. In the photo: Monika and Magda, photo by Klaudyna Schubert.

It is a choreographic initiative established as a result of collaboration between the creators of theatre, performance art, and science: Weronika Pelczyńska, Magda Fejdasz, Monika Szpunar, Aleksandra Janus, Patrycja Kowańska, and Aleksandra Osowicz. In our work, we share that which is common, and we are joined by the care for the other and her contribution. The title appeared instinctively:



we do not want to use it as a proprietary name; it is more of a communication platform. The practice of sisterhood mostly materializes in action, and this is its primary goal. By working together, we create a space where we strengthen individual skills and embody the synergy of being together and focusing our attention.

For us, the initiative of sisterhood practices is a strategy of cooperation in a collective, within which we form various pairs. A meeting as a duo serves as the basic element of building a sisterhood network, which grows thanks to the consecutive, new relationships. We explore the multidimensionality of collaborations in duos – both on stage and as part of the creation process itself, setting ourselves goals for which we are accountable together. It gives us a sense of security: the feeling that I am not alone, that I have a sister. In this way, we try to create a friendly and open environment for creative work.

In our activities, we deal with the politics and ambiguity of the body, touching on the complex topics of gender inequality, the need for conscious ecology, and memory (history). The projects during which we had a chance to explore the practice of sisterhood as a method of creation were, above all, original performances: KULA (Centrum w Ruchu), *Still Standing* (FestivALT), and *Kuliści* (Jan Kochanowski Theater in Opole), as well as workshops and social projects – *Tu Muranów: the body archive* (POLIN), *Nieprzetłumaczalne [Untranslatable]. A creative and practical laboratory for artists from Belarus and Ukraine* (Nowy Teatr), and *Elegantka. Dance and choreography workshops* (Łazienki Królewskie), in which the need to spread sisterhood affects both the way the subject is approached, and the process of creation itself.

Our means of communicating sisterly values include choreography, improvisation, and dance. The search for postmodern dance and performance artists is especially inspiring to us. We make sure that the participants are

informed about the origin of a given methodology as part of the exercises and proposed tasks.

During the workshop titled *Traces of Sisterhood* [which could also be translated as: *In the Footsteps of Sisterhood*], we shared the practice of the American improviser, choreographer Ishmael Houston-Jones, who in his research pointed to the political and multidimensional nature of how we perceive the body socially. We ourselves became familiar with this practice at the workshop conducted by dancer and choreographer Maria F. Scaroni.

The workshop participants were asked to express themselves freely, making statements concerning their own body, for instance: I am strong, I am a woman, I have long arms, I am a mother, I need rest, my stress accumulates in my shoulders, etc. While one of them was speaking her statement, the others were arranging themselves in two groups. If they agreed with her, they would stand next to her; if they disagreed, they would stand opposite, facing her.

With each statement, we changed places, creating a minimum of one and a maximum of two groups in space, depending on the given statement. In this way, we would watch ourselves embody fellowship with some – so that we can build it with others, in turn, while changing perspectives. The statements that united us all into one body were deeply moving.

The statement “I am a sister” generated interesting results, because – surprisingly – it divided the group. As our example has shown, it turned out that the word “sister” is socially associated with blood ties, rather than friendship or camaraderie. Our goal is to expand the meaning of the word by practicing together and by supporting other women.

As part of the practice of sisterhood, we wish to draw attention to the agency of the individual. By caring for a single body, we want to support and strengthen what is our “here and now”: our commonality. Sisterhood practices

are about being in touch, about forming a bond, about sharing.

We attribute the practice of sisterhood to all people or groups who care for the process of creating together; who strive for the transparency of that process and for openness to the other person; and who question the authoritarian model of leadership.

Take a look around the space you are in. Make it real for you. Map it carefully. Notice the distances and proportions at which objects lie, stand, and hang around you. If you are in an open space, give yourself more time to do so.

Subsequently, turn your attention to your breathing. See the body position you are in. Do not try to change it; but find comfort and stability in it. Perhaps you are standing on two legs, perhaps you are putting more weight on one of them; perhaps you are sitting, or lying down? Perhaps your hands are resting freely on your body, perhaps they are interlocking; perhaps you are holding an object or touching a surface? As you breathe, allow your attention to wander along your body. Listen to your body from head to toe. Move your attention simultaneously inwards and outwards, to the front and the back, left and right. Perceive movement in what may appear to be stillness.

Recall that when you experience this, you are in fact in constant motion: you are spinning at nearly sixteen hundred kilometres per hour. Try to heighten awareness of the body in the meeting with the other – your sister, another person, the planet, the matter. Perhaps, from that other – her – perspective, you are now reclining, upright, standing on your head, falling apart, rolling, jumping, dancing. This is sisterhood for me – returning to one's individual body, in order to experience the common body anew.¹

¹ This exercise was published in the "DanceFloor" Performative Arts Micro Journal 2022, No. 3



A picture taken by photographer Klaudyna Schubert for her original exhibition *Dance Until We Are Lost*, which was presented in 2021 as part of the Kraków Dance Festival titled *See the dance*. Pictured: Magda Fejdasz and Monika Szpunar, photo by Klaudyna Schubert.









Sisters session prepared for the needs of the workshop and the laboratory of sisterhood practice. In the photo: Weronika Pelczyńska and Magda Fejdasz, photo by Marta Ankiersztejn.



A scene from the *Still Standing* performance, staged at the former KL Płaszów concentration camp near the Memorial to the Victims of Fascism in Kraków. The performance was created in collaboration with Weronika Pelczyńska, Aleksandra Janus and Monika Szpunar. In the photo: Weronika and Monika, October 2020, photo by Klaudyna Schubert.



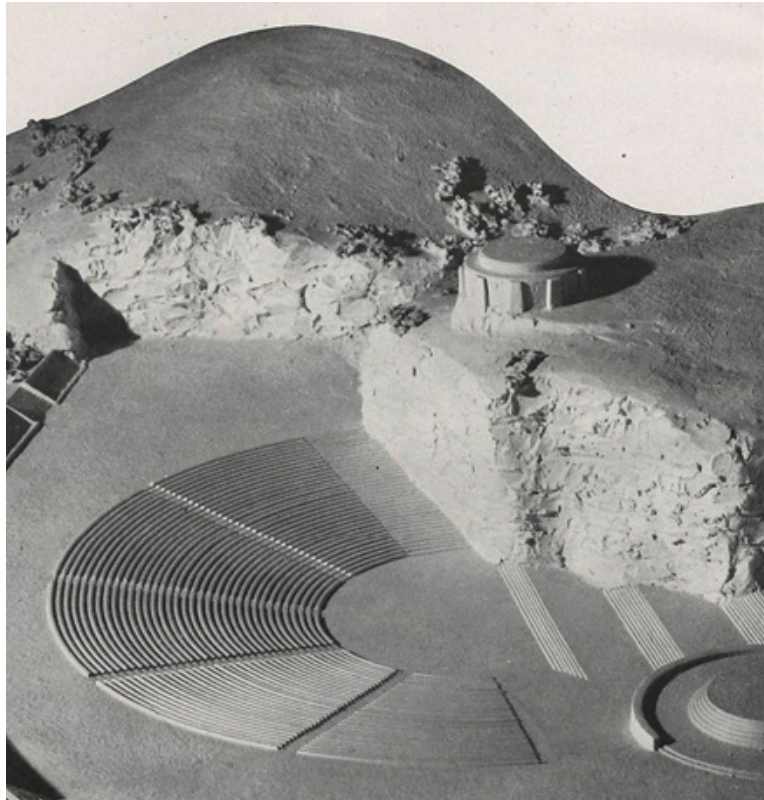
Weronika Pelczyńska, Aleksandra Janus and Monika Szpunar, photographed after the *Still Standing* performance, Kraków, October 2020, photo by Klaudyna Schubert.



Marta Jarnuszkiewicz – visual artist. She creates multi-channel video installations, animations, movement compositions, and performative actions. Since 2016, she has been working as an Assistant Professor in the Intermedia Studio at the Faculty of Interior Design in Warsaw, and as a lecturer at the Warsaw Film School. Her creations have been shown at the Academy Salon in Warsaw, Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam, Teatr Nowy in Warsaw, and BWA in Zielona Góra, among others. Winner of the main prize in the Best Media Art Diploma competition at the Wro Media Art Biennale in Wrocław, and the main prize in the *Coming out 2014* competition.

Marta Jarnuszkiewicz

ANABERG: Performative Action by Women from the Local Community of St. Anne's Mountain



Model of the rotunda and amphitheatre at Góra św. Anny, 1934–1938, source: Poloniae Amici website – polska-org.pl.

At the level of founding assumptions, *ANABERG* was created in a very specific and disturbing time “in-between” one lockdown and the next. Social isolation, which we have been experiencing with varying intensity since 2020, has materially affected my creative needs. Monotonous episodes of time spent at home were shaken up by media reports from the press and the radio. I believe that for a multitude of women, an extremely intense moment came with the protests against the tightening of abortion laws, which erupted again in October 2020. I watched the situation unfold from the quiet space of my home, having decided against actively participating in the strikes. At that

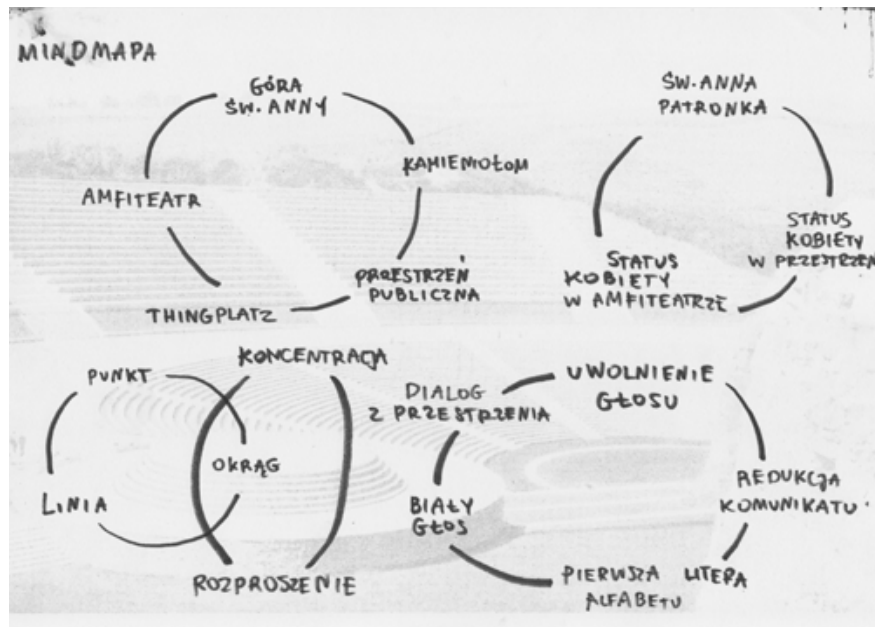
time, I was taking care of my several-month-old daughter and my several-year-old son, having no space in my life to participate in mass demonstrations on the streets of Warsaw. However, quite unexpectedly, this briefly described yet complex situation triggered something inside me that continued to brew. I accumulated the themes that I decided to collect and express in my subsequent work. I drafted nets of connections between the private sphere and the public space. I searched for a place for myself and for other women within it. I thought about taking up space, blocking and appropriating areas of the streets or points in urban space. I analysed the ways in which women take their place and speak out in the public sphere. The beginning of the twenty-first century is a time of very interesting and important social changes for women in Poland, which Agnieszka Graff, PhD aptly described as the *actualisation of women*; i.e. *making women real*.¹

Simultaneously, I was experiencing the time of early motherhood, while struggling with questions about our condition in the context of a dynamically changing future. The feminist perspective of taking up a doctoral dissertation involves a decision conditioned not only on the level of personal life and the special moment of giving birth to a daughter – but also a personal reaction to the political and social developments “in the background”, which undoubtedly affect the shape of our thoughts, feelings, and concerns.

Parallel to the above-mentioned reflections, during my doctoral inquiry I came across the name of Sankt Anaberg (Annaberg) – the Mountain of Saint Anne – and then an architectural object of the Third Reich – a monumental amphitheatre (*Thingspiele*) in that location, designed in the 1930s by German architects Franz Bohmer

1 ‘Make women real’ – speech by Agnieszka Graff, PhD during the Congress of Polish Women, on June 21, 2009

and Georg Petrich. At the very basic level of analysis – or rather merely an inspiration at that time – I felt intuitively that working with this place would soon open up new threads that were interesting for me. In 1998, Jadwiga Sawicka, a visual artist, gave her individual exhibition at the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw the title, which was also a statement: *The form calls for use*. In reference to the artist's words, I had an analogous and irresistible impression that the form of the amphitheatre called me to “use it” – with the simultaneous sense of obligation to redefine the character of the place and change its energy.



Mind map for the *Anaberg* performative action in the amphitheatre at Góra św. Anny, Marta Jarnuszkiewicz, 2021.

1)

Ten women dressed in white shirts walk in a compact, decisive, but ununiformed step. Each one is marching in her own natural way. They are connected by the pace and the rhythm, and by the order of the lines

to which they belong. As the American feminist essayist Rebecca Solnit writes in her *Wanderlust*, marching together affirms and creates solidarity within the group². The practice of walking together generates a democratic, mobile community. Women on the move in the *ANABERG* project do not give up their individuality like members of the Tiller Girls troupe or soldiers of the military brigade. The people marching in a line explore the space, outlining in it an ephemeral spatial sculpture that enters into a powerful dialogue with the scale and monumentality of the object. In this case, countability in architecture of a monumental scale is a consciously applied procedure that allows for the identification of an individual, giving her importance, visibility, and position in space. Movement in the *ANABERG* performance reveals the very basic agency of our mobile bodies, both individual and collective. It refers to the tradition of marching as a pilgrimage, meditation in motion, or a trance. It is also a dialogue with the unifying, showy architecture, accustomed – so to speak – to certain



Anaberg, video still, photo by Lena Pierga, Gabriela Piwar, Góra Św. Anny, 2022.

2 R. Solnit, *Wanderlust* [Opowieści wędrówne, Karakter, Kraków, 2018, p. 343.]



Sketch for the *Anaberg* performative action in the amphitheatre at Góra św. Anny, Marta Jarnuszkiewicz, 2021.



Anaberg, video still, photo by Lena Pierga, Gabriela Piwar, Góra Św. Anny, 2022.

behaviours. The line of women maps the space. The movement of female bodies gives shape to an ephemeral spatial sculpture drawn in the area of an empty amphitheatre. The countability of women is a force that is contrasted with the specific countability and enormity of this architecture.

2)

After a few minutes of traversing the space, each woman takes her own place within it. The line that had previously served creation now disintegrates, forming an image of scattered points, from which the performers decide to speak. Erika Fisher Lichte, a well-known German theatre expert, claims that:

*The voice creates three types of materiality: carnality, spatiality and sound.*³

Therefore, I wanted to build a sound and movement situation that would shape the space to widen it beyond its visual boundaries. This decision was inspired by the words of Erika Fisher-Lichte:

*The sound space extends wider than the geometric space in which the performance takes place, including also that which surrounds it. Thus, the boundaries of the performative space, which opens up to what is 'beyond', are getting blurred. [...] Thanks to sounds and noises, the surrounding space becomes part of the performative space, expanding it to unexpected dimensions.*⁴

Working with sound is a natural consequence of working with movement in the field of choreographic or performative practices. The human voice offers a kind of mediation between the inner and the outer world. By releasing the voice from the body, we become a living instrument. Women in the amphitheatre use the traditional, open-voice singing, so-called "white singing" or "white voice". It is a vocal technique practiced since ancient times, identified particularly with folk music, used by traditional cultures in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, it is called an archaic technique, in which the most important

3 E. Fisher-Lichte, *Performatywność*, Księgarnia Akademicka, Kraków, 2018, p. 85

4 E. Fisher-Lichte, *Performatywność*, Księgarnia Akademicka, Kraków, 2018, p. 85

quality is the intensity of the sound and its penetration. Through the maximum use of natural resonators within the human body, intensive work with the diaphragm and maximally open throat, this technique allows for the production of a voice on a very broad scale. The “white voice”, taught mainly by amateurs to amateurs in rural communities, arose from the need to make the sound heard in open spaces, for example when working in fields or meadows. Folk song researchers claim that unison choirs using the white singing technique, in traditional cultures, were directly related to the community’s belief in the magical powers of this type of sound. What is more, the natural voice emission releases, relaxes, and removes blockages in the body, while at the same time being mindful of one’s own instrument – i.e. one’s own body, and focused on individual experience. However, what is equally important, the practice of white singing in traditional cultures was based on working together in a group, and thus on a community experience. The parallelism of these two qualities – focusing on one’s own body, which at the same time is able to react to external voices and adjust to them – is an important value for me in the context of my creative pursuits concerning the relationship of the individual with the community. The chorus of women working on the principle of consonance is an image of the female community that builds bonds within, with each other. Women focused on cooperation create a contemporary song that evokes a number of extreme emotions and impressions. During the discussions with the *ANABERG* project participants, at some point I also realized that working with the voice allows me to create images. The siren song, the whale calls, the state of alarm, the wall of sound, the shell, the vibrating wave are just some of the concepts that were triggered in our collective imagination during the preparation for this performative activity.

The body-sound relationship as it concerns contemporary women belongs to the un-worked-through, unconscious spheres. Already at the childhood stage, we are faced with prohibitions – such as “do not shout”, “be quiet(er)”, “control your emotions”. I am not trying to say that building these kinds of social norms only applies to girls. However, socially, we hardly give ourselves permission to release our emotions through screaming or other forms of bodily expression (including sound). Our voices are therefore culturally blocked; we do not know their plasticity, their sound variety or possible pitches. The tensions accumulated in our bodies, defensive reactions, cultural blockages, negative stimuli coming from the environment, as well as the image of what a woman should be – as shaped by modern media – lead to our voices being inhibited by the intellect. Touching one’s true voice, its true sound, is therefore a process of opening up, familiarising oneself with it, letting go, as well as group acceptance. During the workshops for the participants of the *ANABERG* project, I tried to mobilize their voices for new methods of expression and emission. The next challenge was to free their sound from the constraints of language and its communicativeness. An open chorus of sound transmits no message.

I decided to simplify the content of the message to a minimum. The letter A is the first letter in the Latin alphabet and the most common letter in the Polish alphabet. From a technical perspective, open vowels provide much greater sound carrying capacity during articulation. Thus, the sounds made by women sculpt the surrounding space beyond the limits of the visual. This special moment in a performative action explores the acoustic possibilities of the amphitheatre. The broad stream of “A” – as I believe – creates energy in its sound that is quite primal, and communal; connoting various emotions, content and images. Importantly, women speak



Sketch for the *Anaberg* performative action in the amphitheatre at Góra św. Anny, Marta Jarnuszkiewicz, 2021.



Anaberg, video still, photo by Lena Pierga, Gabriela Piwar, Góra Św. Anny, 2022.



from the space of the auditorium, that is, the place to which history had assigned them for a long time, and soundlessly. I wished to reverse the functions – the stage remains empty, and the communication comes from the audience. Thus, I redefine the sound-visual centre of the amphitheatre, by building an event in the periphery, that is, within the audience. The reversal of the audio-visual order of the space is another layer in the dialogue between the performers and the place.

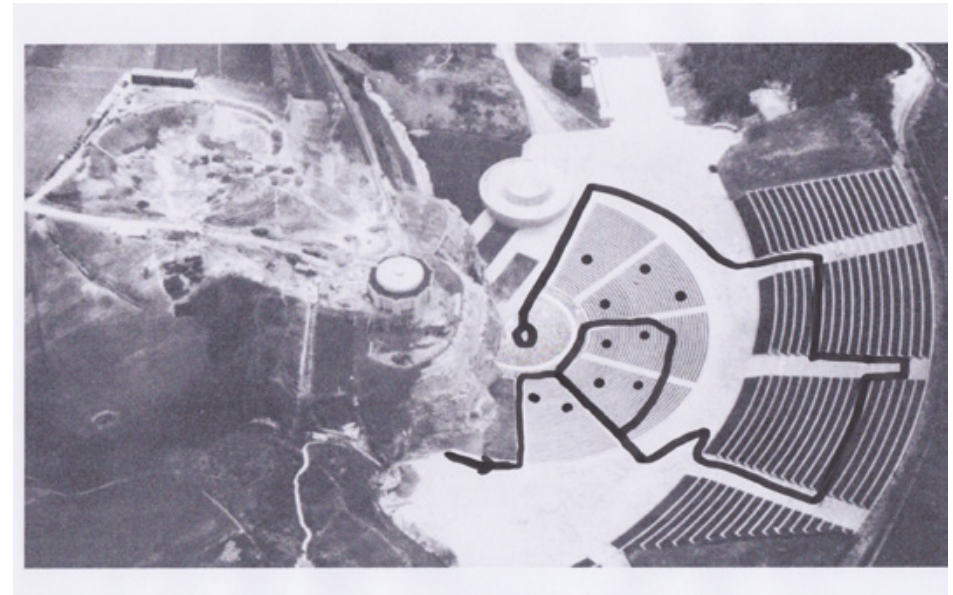


Anaberg, video still, photo by Lena Pierga, Gabriela Piwar, Góra Św. Anny, 2022.

3)

The final action in the sequence is the circle formed by the women on stage. At a very basic level of

argumentation, the figure of the circle refers to the circularity of the stage itself, as well as the entire amphitheatre. During the workshops, the participants (myself included) often intuitively sat in a circle, thus creating a safe space for conversation. The observation of this trend has revealed how deeply the circular figure, rooted in our culture, becomes a renewable and up-to-date integration mechanism. No wonder that the Round Table Talks in 1989 adopted that circular shape, thus emphasizing the community and solidarity dimension, putting everyone on an equal footing, eliminating divisions. The circle can therefore be a symbol of social transformations and open dialogue. The semantics of this ideal geometric figure, however, is much richer. It goes from the founding myths of creation and the cosmic structure of the universe, through megalithic spatial forms, to circular plans of important city buildings, and even entire urban projects. Various spatial arrangements reveal a rich, often multi-layered symbolism.



Sketch for the *Anaberg* performative action in the amphitheatre at Góra Św. Anny, Marta Jarnuszkiewicz, 2021.



Anaberg, video still, photo by Lena Pierga, Gabriela Piwar, Góra Św. Anny, 2022.

The circle as a complete form, “without beginning and end, is the most important and universal of all geometric symbols in mystical thought.”⁵ Romanian religious scholar and philosopher Mircea Eliade argued that “symbols never disappear from the field of mental actuality. They can change aspect, but their role remains unchanged. You just have to sever their new masks.”⁶ Thus, the manifestations of magical thinking in modern culture are still needed, and we continue to practice them. In the *ANABERG* project, this tendency was very palpable. The formation of a circle on the stage of the amphitheatre is like the last phase of action, leading to the closure of the generated energy, ending the action in silence and concentration. What is particularly important, the circle is also strongly associated with the metaphor of a mountain as a special place – between heaven and earth. The participants close their action with a subtle movement inscribed in the figure of a circle, where the ritual movement goes beyond the rational understanding of the world⁷.

5 J. Tresidder, *Dictionary of symbols [Słownik symboli]*, Wydawnictwo RM, Warszawa 1997, p. 146.

6 M. Eliade, *Sacrum, mit, historia Sacrum, myth, history*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa, 1974, p. 26.

7 Fragments of the doctoral dissertation by Marta Jarnuszkiewicz, titled *ANABERG*, developed under Mirosław Bałka's supervision; as part of the doctoral proceedings conducted at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

Tea Hvala is a writer, editor, critic and translator focused on feminism. Since 2018, she has been running the City of Women's library, publishing programme, and art education programme. She (co-)authored numerous zines, teaching materials and a children's book, and edited the travel guide *A Path of Their Own: 25 Excursions into Women's History* (2021).

Tea Hvala

City of Women, City of Hope

As women working in culture, members of the City of Women team are well aware of the clash between the demand for productivity, efficiency, discipline and flexibility on the one hand, and the demand for a creative-entrepreneurial verve, curiosity, stubbornness, originality and erudition, on the other. We also perceive the gap between the equality guaranteed by law, and actual gender inequality. The exploitation of the Covid-19 pandemic to introduce new forms of control and “old traditions” (the latter are often made-up and no older than their advocates) has also made us realise that we must continue to keep alive the collective memory of the work, efforts, and dreams of our predecessors – not least because they have seen it all before.



Alja Lacković's performance on 18 May 2022 to share the educational-research module *Performing Gender* with the public. Led by artist Teja Reba, the participants attended weekly meetings between October 2021 and May 2022 in the framework of the European project *Performing Gender – Dancing in Your Shoes*. Photo by Nada Žgank.

Let us begin at the beginning: the City of Women festival was initiated in 1995 by a governmental institution called the Women's Policy Office to foster gender equality in the new nation state of Slovenia, founded in 1991. While the idea of promoting women in (and through) the arts was a worthwhile cause, the economic conditions for this endeavour were volatile from the outset. In addition, the

festival was from the very beginning subjected to the usual “concern” that – in the words of Vera Kozmik, the then-director of Women's Policy Office – “now is not the time to enforce gender equality and human rights, because you have accomplished everything you set out to do. These are hard times, culture must be sacrificed to save the economy – a refrain which repeats today”.¹

In 1996, the festival as a legal entity was placed in the financially underfunded and private NGO sector where it remains until today. Despite its precarious position, the Association for the Promotion of Women in Culture – City of Women was and remains a pioneering organization. It advocates feminism and gender equality in the arts and culture or, more specifically, the recognition and promotion of (mainly, but not exclusively) women artists and art collectives who make contemporary, bold, experimental, critical, socially engaged, political, and transdisciplinary feminist art. In broader terms, City of Women strives to provide support, resources, visibility and care for artistic, activist and theoretical practices and discourses, which resonate the association's core values: equality, diversity and solidarity.

The International Festival of Contemporary Arts – City of Women is our largest event, held annually in October in a number of venues across Ljubljana. The festival is theme-based and curated by the programme director who is selected by an independent board every few years: in 2021, Teja Reba was replaced by the current director Iva Kovač. The fluctuation of honorary presidents, programme directors, other staff members as well as external selectors guarantees the festivals' freshness despite its almost thirty-year history. However, the City of Women is more than a festival. Throughout the year, the association (co-)

¹ Quoted in: Tea Hvala, “Nikoli ni prezgodaj”, accessible at: <http://www.cityofwomen.org/sl/content/2014/nikoli-ni-prezgodaj> (26 May 2015).

produces and post-produces new artworks, maintains its library and archive, educates and mentors, advocates for better working conditions and equal opportunities in the arts and culture, participates in public debates and campaigns, and engages in a number of art-based community projects. In the following pages, I briefly present only some of these activities.



In June 2022, choreographer and dancer Vita Osojnik held a three-day workshop with the students of the Slovenian University of Third Age in the framework of the European project *Performing Gender – Dancing in Your Shoes*. Participants were invited to explore and subvert the normativity of gender roles. Photo by Nada Žgank.

Advocacy

In 1991, the restoration of capitalism in the new nation state of Slovenia contributed to the re-traditionalization of society to such an extent that feminist groups and their allies spent more time defending the rights they had gained in socialism (including the right to terminate unwanted pregnancy) than fighting for – and winning – new rights. However, there have been some important improvements. In terms of reproductive and sexual rights, the paternity leave for working fathers was lengthened, prostitution was decriminalised, sex education was reintroduced to schools, the law on domestic violence prevention was improved, and the Istanbul Convention was signed.

Also, after long campaigns, the Slovenian Criminal Code recognised sex without consent as rape in 2021, and the constitutional court legalized same-sex marriage and adoption by homosexual couples on 8 July 2022. The City of Women was not at the forefront of these struggles but did actively support them. For instance, in 2021, we organised #metooinculture, a public reading of testimonies about sexual harassment and violence in the arts and culture, together with the initiator of the #metoo campaign in Slovenia, the 8th March Institute.

On the initiative of the City of Women, the Koroška Pride Institute and Dutch artists Bambi van Balen and Max*ine Vajt designed and carried out the *Queering Folklore* art campaign with a view to strengthening the Carinthian LGBT+ community. They did so by introducing queer interpretations to traditionally painted beehive panels, which were then scattered across the town of Slovenj Gradec during the Pride Parade on 4 June 2022. Photo by Koroška Pride.



In terms of labour rights, the conditions continue to worsen – especially for women. Precarity is rampant; the pay gap is growing and currently amounts to 7%; every fourth woman and every tenth man above 75 is likely to experience poverty; and despite the fact that most women, also those in culture, work full time, their pensions are almost 18% lower because women continue to do most of the unpaid care work and house work. The position of women in culture has not been fully researched yet, but the research that does exist clearly points to gender inequality. In film, for example, data from 2018 has shown that 89% of

films in Slovenia are directed by men, 78% of the scripts are written by men, and 77% of all movies are produced by men. Huge gaps are noticeable in other areas as well: a very low percentage of women artists are produced and presented in the main cultural institutions, while gender discrimination is rampant. To address these issues, the City of Women prepared Guidelines for Gender Equality in Culture (2020), a strategic document (in Slovenian language) on the most pressing inequalities in culture and the measures that would ensure equal opportunities for women workers in this field.

In 2020, the state of emergency brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic on the global level coincided with an authoritarian, oppressive regime in Slovenia. The latter was met with resistance: over a hundred weeks, every Friday, a large alliance of NGOs, informal groups and individuals protested in Ljubljana and other towns against the previously unthinkable backlash and its aim to reintroduce 19th century rules for women and other humans. In the words of writer and activist Svetlana Slapšak, the current honorary president of the City of Women, these protests taught us that “culture is indeed the best ally for invention, understanding, development and enjoyment. Cultural events, actions and retractions were crucial in empowering us to stand our ground when faced with repression. Allied with culture, we were able to laugh at stupidity and ridicule the threats, we were able to rethink our own insolence and forgiveness, and to reflect, speak, and sing without pause. We were able to refuse the imposed ‘tradition’ and create new, democratic, alternative, and subversive traditions”².

2 S. Slapšak, “The Zonards”, <http://2021.cityofwomen.org/en/content/opening-address-0>, 2021. Accessed: 29.8.2022.

Recipients of the 2022 Women on Women Awards at the ceremony on 8 March in Ljubljana. From left to right: the Koroška Pride Institute, the SOS Help-Line, writer Suzana Tratnik, the Legal Network for the Protection of Democracy, and the Kombinat Women's Choir. Photo by Nada Žgank.



Community Building

A new tradition, invented by the City of Women in cooperation with partners from Croatia, North Macedonia, and Ireland is the annual granting of Women on Women Awards. Bestowed for the first time in 2020, the awards highlight and expose the invisible work, stories, courage, and determination of individuals as well as collectives fighting for a better world. Our search for feminist heroines is our response to the systematic erasure of women from the historical canon, and the awards are presented with the following motto in mind: If we want history to be written in our name, we have to write it ourselves.

The same feminist guideline has inspired us and two sister organisations from Zagreb (Common Zone) and Skopje (Tiiiit! Inc.) to make three bilingual travel guides into women's history of Slovenia, Croatia, and Northern Macedonia. Our Slovenian-English guide is called *A Path of Their Own: 25 Excursions into Women's History* (2021). It invites you to visit twenty-five towns and villages on Slovenian territory that were home to women pioneers who have paved the way to a professional life for women. It presents revolutionaries who had fought for a decent life,

and the first women to make a living by doing paid work, including factory workers. By getting to know the places where they lived and worked, we wanted to rescue these women from oblivion and imprint them in our collective memory: to have them inspire us, teach us something new and, above all, bring us closer together. May the books or their online version (wowplaces.fierce-women.net) bring you to many joyous, emphatic, passionate, and curious excursions into women's history!



Since the release of *A Path of Their Own: 25 Excursions into Women's History* (2021), the City of Women has been organising bus tours to commemorate women's history *in situ* – accompanied by stories about pioneers such as Zofka Kveder, the first professional woman writer in Slovenia. Photo by Nada Žgank.

Art projects involving people from different communities, especially from marginalised groups constitute a regular feature of City of Women programmes. In 2017, under the artistic direction of Teja Reba, we helped found the No-Border Craft support group for women asylum seekers and refugees in Ljubljana. The initiative was born from the observation that they were barely present or represented in social integration programmes, and that they lacked opportunities for empowerment. What

began as a series of get-togethers with discussions and workshops grew into a solidarity economy: the group became autonomous and encouraged its members trade their crochet textiles and participate in cultural activities.

Another attempt to try out new models of solidarity and knowledge exchange between different communities was the formation of the WoW Group in 2019 as part of the Creative Europe project Women on Women. The participants, all of whom have migratory background, collaborated with artists and created a cinematic self-portrait entitled *Catastrophe Blues I* (2020). Their installation *Catastrophe Blues II* (2021) invited audiences to experience what it means to instruct and be instructed by exploring systems of hierarchy and power. They posed an important question: “If the power structures need to be changed, what actions are you willing to take?”

Our most recent community-based production, focused on underprivileged women, began in March 2022. Facilitated by artist Selma Banich, the Politics of Touch project is “choreographing resistance” with the help of movement, the sense of touch, and the idea of social justice. Past examples of community-based art events we either hosted or produced include Andreja Kulunčič's *Women.Index* with women who have experienced violence (2007); Milijana Babić's *Building a Bright Future* with children and their grandparents (2011); the *I'm Walking Behind You and Watching You* (2013) project by Teja Reba, Leja Jurišič and Barbara Kapelj Osredkar with 129 women of all ages (2013); Mariantònia Oliver's *Las Muchas* with elderly women (2015); Dina Rončević's *Car Deconstruction* with young girls (2016); Rosana Cade's *Walking:Holding* with local LGBTI+ community (2016); and more recently, Nataša Živković's and Sara Šabec's theatre performance *Everything is Alright* with high school students (2021).



In 2021, the year of lockdowns, the City of Women and Ljubljana Puppet Theatre coproduced the *Everything Is Alright* theatre performance, directed by Nataša Živkovič, co-authored by Sara Šabec and eleven high school students. Together, they studied school as an institution. Photo from the premiere on 9 October 2021 by Nada Žgank.

Arts Education

The City of Women claims that access to, creation of, and knowledge about critical, socially engaged contemporary art are essential to the development of a society based on equality. Inspired by feminist takes on critical pedagogy, and recent developments in queer pedagogy, our educational materials, workshops, participatory art productions and other activities are designed for young people aged 12+. Our equally important target group are teachers and youth workers who want to discuss gender (in)equality and introduce contemporary art practices (as well as venues where these can be experienced) to their pupils or students. Our workshop series Contemporary Art Mosaic, our online *Contemporary Art Glossary*, and teaching materials such as *Reflecting on Gender, Power and Empowerment Through Art* offer them a variety of fresh approaches to contemporary art and controversial social issues – both within and outside the classroom.

In the past, we offered practical courses in socially engaged performance art at a time when such knowledge was unattainable in the Slovenian system of art education. However, due to financial limitations, most of our

educational activities and materials are based on archives: audio-video documentation of art events and reproductions of artworks. It is worth mentioning some precious exceptions, such as our #8MarchEveryDay quiz series, annually disseminated among primary and secondary school teachers on the International Women's Day. By structuring a 45-minute lesson in the form of a fun quiz, we encourage them to invite their pupils to address the social, political and economic causes of gender inequality, but also celebrate women's achievements and learn about the long history of struggles for women's rights. Another playful format is the socially engaged card-game Fierce Women, created by Common Zone, which acquaints players with the accomplishments of women in the fields of culture, politics, feminism, human rights, and art. In 2020, Common Zone in collaboration with the City of Women and other partners prepared an additional, free deck of playing cards called Fierce Women WoW, also comprising eight historic personalities from Slovenia.

In March 2020, only days before the lockdown, the City of Women promoted its #8MarchEveryDay quiz in Tam-Tam Street Gallery in Ljubljana with the *What is Feminism?* illustration by Vesna Bukovec.



Every semester, the City of Women invites students of higher education institutions in Ljubljana to explore the connections between the focus of their studies and our many activities. During the spring and autumn Open Doors Week, we offer thematic presentations, workshops and lectures adjusted to the content tackled in individual modules or classes. Some of the possible starting points are offered in advance but we are always happy to take on the challenge of finding content in line with individual needs. Our core offer includes lectures, presentations and semi-structured debates on the history of City of Women and other sister organisations and festivals in Slovenia; the management, organisation, logistics, production and promotion of the festival; feminist pedagogy and our arts education activities; our contribution to the research on women's history and its popularisation; and our archival activities.

Open Archive

The process of opening our rich archive to artists, researchers, students, curators, art historians and activists began in 2016 with the first stage of digitalisation and its presentation at the Škuc Gallery. It continued with an international conference *The Archive as a Process: How to Archive Contemporary Performing Art and Keep Them Alive?* (2017) where representatives of art organizations from the region exchanged existing practices and models. In 2018, we continued to digitalise and upload materials to the Web Museum – a repository for the storage of and access to digital audio-visual cultural heritage, run by Ljubljana's Museum of Modern Art and Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (MG+MSUM). The repository currently stores about 350 of our units as well as the archives of other art NGOs. Also in 2018, we curated the *Transfer/Circuits* exhibition, which featured the works of twenty performance artists who presented

their work at the City of Women festival since 1995. While this particular exhibition existed both offline and online, our very first exclusively online exhibition was launched in 2019. Entitled *Looking Back to Look Forward* and curated by osborn&møller, it highlighted the works and artists that speak to the unique history of the former Yugoslavia region and focus on collective actions, precarious labour, structural exploitation, solidarity and poetic protest.

Protective gloves met collage/assemblage, drawing, writing, sewing, embroidery, crocheting, knitting and gluing at the *We are Hard Pressed – Let's Nail It!* workshop for high school students, led by artist Lea Culetto at the *Corneous Stories* exhibition in Škuc Gallery in Ljubljana on 12 October 2020. Photo by Nada Žgank.



Last but not least, a very important aspect of our archive is the Special Library for Contemporary Arts and Feminism – City of Women. Thanks to the voluntary work of dedicated librarians, over 500 hard-to-find books on feminism, art, art theory, women's history and social studies are already publicly accessible while another 1500 books are still waiting to be included in the shared catalogue of Slovene libraries. (Book donations are welcome!)

Open Future

Today, the City of Women relies on European, national and municipal public funding yet most of these

funds are intended for the festival and other events whereas the production of new works by contemporary women artists is marginalized despite our efforts to the contrary. In the words of theorist Katja Praznik, this inevitably means that the breadth and quality of our activities “is the result of underpaid or discounted labour of the executive team and other creative workers”. She concludes: “Cultural policy is thus interested in the representation of women but is not willing to support the City of Women’s aims to also become a producer of women artists and create a comprehensive platform that would support the emancipation of women artists including fair economic and working conditions. The attitude of cultural policy toward the City of Women is best described as an engendering of an appearance of openness and support for women’s equality. It is built on inequitable production conditions of a hierarchical cultural policy and on the wings of an identity politics that obscures the class stratification of artistic production.”³

So, can our future be any different – any better – than the past and the present? After nearly three decades, on the threshold of the 28th edition of the City of Women festival, we have come to the conclusion that we have no choice: *it has to be different*. It has to be hopeful, resistant to pressures, and open to bold, critical and socially engaged art that refuses to be measured and framed.

3 Katja Praznik, “Women, Art and Labor, or the Limits of Representational Politics”, in: “City of Women: Reflecting 2019/2020” (Ljubljana: City of Women, 2020), p. 33.

In 2018, Lenka Đorojević and Alja Lobnik curated the online and offline archival exhibition *Transfer/Circuits*. The offline version took place in the Old Power Station in Ljubljana. Photo by Nada Žgank.



The opening of the 27th City of Women festival took place on 2 October 2021 at Alkatraz Gallery in Ljubljana. *The Fourth Corner: Rights for Our Fights* exhibition by Dr Xenia, a collective body of four authors from Celje, began with their performance of the *Rights for Our Fights*. Photo by Nada Žgank.



Marta Romankiv was born in Lviv. She is an interdisciplinary artist, curator, creator of installations, video works and social situations. Her work focuses mainly on the subject of social exclusion, especially nationality, citizenship, and the related social inequalities and problems of identity. Her projects are usually participatory in nature and are situated on the borderline between the spheres of activism, social science and art. The artist lives and works in Poland.

Marta Romankiv

“You Can Count on Me.”
From Art to the First
Trade Union
of Domestic Workers

Art is revolution. This was the idea promoted by Joseph Beuys, one of the most influential artists of the last century. Beuys emphasized the power of art to exceed its own limitations and to change reality. But what role can artistic projects play in the process of actual change? And can they offer a solution to the real needs of specific groups? For me, as a migrant from Ukraine, who has lived in Poland for seven years and has personally encountered all the difficulties and challenges of migration, the artistic dimension of the migration processes is particularly important. In this article, I consider the possibilities afforded by socially engaged art, as illustrated with the example of a project we conducted together with Ukrainian women working in Poland.

The revolutionary power of art

Joseph Beuys wrote:

“Only on condition of definitions will it be possible for art and activities related to art to provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power”¹.

Today, following Beuys, artists, art critics, and theorists consider art as a tool of political and social change².

The concept of activism³ – a combination of activist and artistic practices – is becoming increasingly popular. The Cuban artist Tanya Bruguera transformed the idea of artistry into *arte útil*, or “useful art” – artistic activities

that go beyond their own boundaries, break into spheres seemingly distant from art, turning into tools for creating prototypes and new, non-obvious solutions. It is an art that does not shy away from politics. On the contrary, its goal is to produce an immediate political result.

Useful art becomes art that “serves” people; its aim is to have a real impact on society. The understanding of the artist’s position is changing. According to this concept, the artist departs from the central role of “the genius”, which he or she had played in the era of various “-isms” of the last century – even those who were no strangers to the idea of politicizing art, such as Dadaism or Surrealism. The artist becomes the initiator and the organizer of collective processes. The main emphasis is on collective awareness and collective action. The website of the Arte Útil Museum (Museum of Useful Art), created by Tanya Bruguera, has published postulates that well illustrate the idea behind such projects:

- “The criteria of Arte Útil state that any such initiative should:
1. Propose new uses for art within society;
 2. Challenge the field within which it operates (civic, legislative, pedagogical, scientific, economic, etc.);
 3. Respond to current needs;
 4. Operate on a 1:1 scale (be implemented and function in real situations);
 5. Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users;
 6. Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users;
 7. Pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions;
 8. Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation.”⁴

The vision presented on the website of the Museum of Useful Art changes the essence of art, emphasizing the need for egalitarian practices. These ideas made a tremendous impact on me, and on many artists of the younger generation. While studying at the Pedagogical University in Kraków, and then at the Academy of Fine Arts

1 J. Beuys, Statement from 1973, first published in English [in:] Caroline Tisdall: *Art into Society, Society into Art*, ICA. - L., 1974, p. 48

2 In Poland, this idea was largely disseminated by the artist Artur Żmijewski by publishing his manifesto “Applied Social Arts”, [in:] “Krytyka Polityczna”, 2007, No. 11–12

3 More: S. Nossel, *Introduction: On “Activism” or Art’s Utility in Activism*, [in:] “Social Research: An International Quarterly”, 2016, vol. 83, No. 1

4 See: <https://museumarteutil.net/about>. Accessed: 27.08.2022



Establishment of the Domestic Workers' Committee, Osiedle Jazdów, September 2021, from the artist's archive.



2021, from the artist's archive.

in Szczecin, I learned about the methods used by Krzysztof Wodiczko, Paweł Althamer, Joanna Rajkowska and other Polish and foreign artists. I applied similar practices in my own work – and it was from these practices that the project “You Can Count on Me” was born.

“You Can Count on Me.” Art as a social process

I started working on the project “You Can Count on Me” in April 2021 as part of my residency at the Education Department of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Our main goal was to create a space for meetings and spending time together for migrant women who work as carers and domestic workers in and around Warsaw. One of the most important impulses to take up the topic was the report by Benjamin Cope, Mirosława Keryk and Ivanna Kylyushyk on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Ukrainian immigrant women in Poland, in particular the part devoted to persons employed in the domestic work sector⁵. The publication revealed that people employed as domestic help, and especially as carers, are probably the least protected group – socially and systemically – and that they are also a group that is practically invisible.

In Poland, the home care profession is dominated by female migrants from Ukraine. Most of them work without a contract, in private apartments – and therefore in isolation, which may often lead to abuse on the part of their employers. As permanent care, migrant women most often work and live in the home of the person who employs them. They often agree to such an arrangement, because it allows them to save the costs of renting independent accommodation. As a result, they become completely dependent on their employer. The women are often expected to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

5 B. Cope, M. Keryk and I. Kyliushyk. *Вплив COVID-19 на українських мігранток у Польщі* [Impact of COVID-19 on Ukrainian immigrants in Poland], pp. 21-23



2021, from the artist's archive.

Because they do not have a circle of friends or a support system, and also because they do not speak the language, these domestic workers are left alone with their problems.

The project “You can count on me” was a response to specific needs – the need to rest, and the need to meet, to talk to someone outside of work. The first live meeting of the group of care workers that we managed to bring together via social media took place on May 3, 2021, on the day of Greek Catholic and Orthodox Easter. For many women this was the first opportunity to meet other people, to converse in Ukrainian, share their problems, to give each other support, and simply to be among “their own people”.

Rest as a form of art, and as a form of resistance

For the next six months, my role mainly consisted in organising and moderating the meetings. It was important for me to create a horizontal and non-hierarchical structure in which everyone had an equal voice. Therefore, I wanted



The first meeting as part of the "You Can Count on Me" initiative, Osiedle Jazdów, May 2021, from the artist's archive.

to avoid the dominant role; instead, I aspired to become one of the participants.

Our artistic project has become a process of creating space for imagination, for developing new ideas, and actually improving the lives of the participants. We focused on the key ideas: of rest, and of dreams. Free time – spent outdoors – played an important role here; it took the form of joint cultivation of a vegetable garden and a viburnum ("cranberry bush") planted and cared for by the participants. The viburnum welcomes guests to the "Open Jazdów" settlement of wooden Finnish houses in Warsaw, where you can meet the participants of the project. A plaque next to the viburnum reads: "The tree was planted by carers from Ukraine to honour their work in Poland."

Following the concept of rest and free time, in September we organized a picnic in the Sculpture Park in Królikarnia, a branch of the National Museum in Warsaw. Video documentation of this event was presented at an

exhibition held in October at the Theatre Pedagogues' Association and was a summary of our joint activities.

The reality of hired workers is primarily hard work and extended working hours, which is especially characteristic of the work of domestic care workers. That is why we wanted to create a situation that would be the opposite of this complex and harrowing reality – especially because finding your own ways to relax and spend time outside of work is a highly important part of the integration process. For many participants it was the idea of rest that was the key, and at the same time it became the first form of resistance they have ever undertaken. The necessity to come to the meeting was an impulse to take the first step in their negotiations with the employers – and to agree on free time provisions. The space of dreams has been translated into real plans and ideas.

Perhaps the most important of these was the idea of creating an organization that could protect the rights of those working as home carers. We organized meetings with experts, as well as discussions on difficult topics: the rights of home carers, employment rights in general,



Still from the movie *Breakfast on the Grass*, The Xawery Dunikowski Sculpture Park at the Sculpture Museum in Królikarnia, September 2021, from the artist's archive.

legalization, visas, as well as the opportunities that a trade union can provide.

From an art project to the first trade union of Ukrainian domestic workers

On September 19, 2021, for the first time in the history of Polish labour movements, a group of immigrant women decided to assert their rights and create a trade union – the Domestic Workers’ Committee. The organization became a part of the nationwide trade union “Inicjatywa Pracownicza” (Workers’ Initiative). Domestic workers created a manifesto that contained 10 points – main demands addressed to the authorities and the employers:

- We, the carers, postulate that our important and hard work should be noticed and appreciated. We demand changes!
1. We demand the right for our work be recognised as a significant part of Poland’s health and elderly care system, and to be supported by the state.
 2. We demand the right to have access to legal and psychological assistance.
 3. We demand the right to a clear definition of work conditions and duties in advance.
 4. We demand the right to decent social and living conditions.
 5. We demand the right to simpler procedures for legal work and residence.
 6. We demand the right to a decent wage for all the actions and hours required of our work.
 7. We demand the right to free time.
 8. We demand the right to forms of legal employment appropriate to the specifics of domestic care work.
 9. We demand the right to be free from sexual harassment (and other forms of bullying from employers).
 10. We demand the right to work in an environment in which we feel safe, and in which our care for our clients is valued.

The situation we have managed to create would probably never have arisen in a different, non-artistic context. It is worth noting that even in May there was as yet no question of protecting the rights of female workers, and

the idea of a trade union in conditions where many of them did not have employment contracts seemed utopian. The implementation of this idea was successful thanks to imagination, which is the most important component of art. Over time, we began to realize that we can and we must influence our own situation – and then, real changes have followed. Within a few months, we managed to create a strong and active group, which today functions independently, without my help. As Myroslava Keryk, head of the Our Choice foundation noted, before it was only organizations and activists who spoke up about the problems of the welfare sector, and it is only now that domestic workers are beginning to speak with their own voice.



WESPRZYJ
PRACOWNICE
DOMOWE

ZAPISZ SIĘ
DO ZWIĄZKU!





Yulia Kostereva is a Kharkiv-born Ukrainian artist and curator. In 1989–1992 she studied at the department of theatre scenography of the Kharkiv State Art School; in 1992–1998 – at the department of graphic arts of the Kharkiv Artistic and Industrial Institute; and in 1998–2001 – at the department of graphic arts of the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture. Since 1999, together with the artist Yuri Kruchak, she created the Open Place art platform, where she works until today. She lives and works in Kiev. Currently she is the Coordinator of Emergency Residencies for artists from Ukraine and their families, organized by the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Arts, the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art and the Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko.

Yulia Kostereva

Self-reflection

As a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, more than 8 million people have left Ukraine (as of July 2022), with about 2 million of them taking refuge in Poland. Many artists have left Ukraine most of them women. Many of them have one or more children, or care for elderly parents, or both, or are almost children themselves, or are elderly themselves.



Exhibition 8 and 128. Photos by Iren Moroz.

Due to the situation of war and forced flight from their country, people face life and professional challenges, emotional, economic and physical difficulties; they fall into apathy and depressive states, experience ethical problems and fear of uncertainty generated by so many questions to which we do not have the answers.

I came to Poland on March 6 with my mother. Before that, we spent a week in the basement of our house opposite another building that was hit by a

missile. Then we took an evacuation train to Lviv before spending 3 days in Lviv with our friends, friends of our friends, and total strangers. This experience once again gave me an understanding of the importance of the connections we create and the importance of a sense of community, a cultural community made of friends, like-minded people, people you can rely on, and also the importance of feeling safe and protected, when you can think about something else besides preserving one's own life and the lives of one's family members.

While staying in Warsaw, I am helping to coordinate emergency residencies at the invitation of the residencies department of the Ujazdowski Castle, and this is also very much about connections and attitudes. The feeling that you are among friends is incredibly empowering. Therefore, I see my principal task as a coordinator of the emergency residencies to be broadcasting this atmosphere of a friendly environment, creating opportunities for meetings and communication, and, if demanded, for fruitful work.

The programme of emergency residencies is designed to last until the end of 2022; it was developed in response to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and aims to support artists seeking refuge from the war. One-month residencies are held at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, and the Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko. The programme aims to provide artists with an opportunity to continue their artistic practice.

Self-reflection group meetings are among the activities proposed by me as part of the emergency residency programme. The self-reflection group is a continuation of Open Place's work on researching practices of collective coexistence, building horizontal structures, and peer-to-peer learning. Open Place is



Exhibition *8 and 128*. Photos by Iren Moroz.

an organisation that grew out of the initiative of artists and has gone through much searching, experimenting, and transformations. A significant part of Open Place's activities is aimed at building connections between different social and professional groups, different contexts, and different types of knowledge. Since 2015, Open Place has been developing the format of nomadic residencies, which occur when a residency does not have a permanent venue or location but instead takes place in different locations in different cities. This form is special since it brings about a change in the understanding of the guest-host relationship, and a rethinking of the hierarchical structure of residency organisation. The main task is to develop communication and interaction practices that occur at different levels, both within

the group itself and with the outside world. During the development of nomadic residencies, we came to the conclusion that regular meetings are very important both for solving immediate, pressing issues and for maintaining the connection between participants and nurturing team spirit. During emergency residencies, in addition to these tasks, meetings of self-reflection groups also perform a therapeutic function, and are also intended for discussion and formulation of answers to topical issues of decolonisation and the public presence of art and culture in difficult times.

Many of us have found ourselves in a completely new situation; some are for the first time out of their context, without their usual social circle, separated from their community. There are new contexts, new situations, and new people. Then again, the challenges we face are both internal and external. And these are not only the obvious challenges such as the need to find a place for yourself in a new environment, make arrangements for your life and that of your family. We also face the unexpected attention to Ukrainian artists and Ukrainian art, and expectations related to this offer a challenge and produce a certain kind of pressure.

One needs to determine the position from which one speaks, to whom one speaks, and what one speaks about. Not only female artists, but female artists first of all have found themselves playing the part of political figures. What messages need to be conveyed, who should be addressed?

The idea of meetings arose from the need to have a place for a discussion, for pondering and self-reflection in a narrow circle, in a safe environment. The self-reflection group serves those who are interested in joint reading, explanation, and conversation. The group aims to support its members in better understanding of our cultural practices. The group was co-organised

by the Social Projects Department of the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art. The reading club format that we proposed at the beginning has transformed into a place of being together and performing various activities – workshops, readings and discussions, debates on proposed topics. We also proposed a rotational model of meetings' organisation – it involves a different participant proposing an article for discussion, a topic for debate, or an activity within the framework of the workshop for each meeting.

The following issues have been discussed during the meetings of the self-reflection group: What and how should we, as artists, say during the war? What guides artists when they speak about the war? How long is the world's attention to Ukraine going to last, and what will we be able to offer later? What shall we do with the psychological impact of the war? As part of the group's work, we held a series of workshops on collage making.



Self-reflection group meeting. Photo by Iren Moroz.



1.



2.



3.



4.

Collages from the workshop "Precarious Pieces". Photos by Cayla Lockwood

- [1] Collage by Iren Moroz
- [2] Collage by Anna Panchenko
- [3] Collage by Anna Panchenko
- [4] Kolaż Olga Tkachenko

There was also a discussion on precariousness. Our collective experience, joint work, discussions and reflections resulted in «8 and 128» – an exhibition of works by the participants of emergency residencies, held at the Ukrainian House in Warsaw between July 2 and August 1, 2022.

We attempt to rethink the situation of forced emigration and thus the mixing of different “bubbles” for the benefit of the participants. We are trying to see the positive aspects of the new experience, when different people from different contexts with different experiences are included in the creative process, and the knowledge of one can become an opportunity for another.

SISTERHOOD IS:
INCLUSIVENESS,
COMMUNITY
BEYOND DIVISIONS,
ALWAYS REMEM-
BERING ABOUT
THOSE WHO ARE
DISADVANTAGED

WMI

Agata Zbylut – artist, academic, feminist, vegan, occasionally curator and activist. President of the Stowarzyszenie Zachęta Sztuki Współczesnej [Contemporary Art Incentive Association], which has built the largest collection of contemporary art in north-west Poland and led to the establishment of Trafostacja Sztuki in Szczecin. The originator and curator of the “Przeciąg” Young Arts Festival (2007, 2009, 2011). Since 2010, she has been working at the Academy of Art in Szczecin (currently as an associate professor), where she runs the Studio of Photography and Post-Artistic Activities; since 2018 she has also been the Head of the Department of Photography. Her achievements include over 100 individual and collective exhibitions in Poland and abroad.

Agata Zbylut

Champagne Sisterhood

I crafted two “football scarf” dresses: the first in 2015, and the second in 2020. While presenting both works, I have repeatedly heard the question of where the word “champagne” in the title came from – and the answer is: because of sisterhood. A few years ago, I read that a Polish (male) MP called another MP (female, his senior), a “champagne feminist.” The woman parliamentarian won the committee position he had been seeking. Annoyed, wanting to discredit her in the eyes of other women, he classified her as a member of the privileged “champagne” group. He used his own failure to divide us – at least symbolically – to set some women against others. Often enough patriarchy resorts to similar methods, pitting women against each other, and making them compete with each other instead of fighting for a real improvement in their situation and trying to shatter the proverbial glass ceiling. And although in both of these works (which are 5 years apart) this trace of sisterhood is present, since then both the language, and my own beliefs on what sisterhood is have changed.

The first dress was designed with the view to including women in the football fan culture. It was a time when I was – indeed we all were – still fighting for feminine nouns, for the place of women in academies and in public space. Feeling excluded from great “patriotic” events such as the Polish Independence Day, celebrated in Warsaw with lighting flares and throwing cobblestones, or the stadium revels full of aggression and violence, I thought about an object that would include women in the sphere of these events. I thought of an outfit that would make the woman wearing it the focus and the centre of the ceremony. I also wanted that object to be unquestionably and simply beautiful. Therefore, I looked for visual inspiration in the images displayed on the computer screen after searching for the keywords “the most beautiful dress in the world”. The dress did the job. Each time the work was displayed in social media, I found photos with the dress in which



Champagne patriot, dress made from football scarves of the Polish national team fans. View of the *Polki, Patriotki, Rebeliantki* [Polish Women, Patriots, Rebels...] exhibition, Arsenal Gallery, Poznań 2017. The work has been included in the NOMUS Collection of the National Museum in Gdańsk. Photo by Agata Zbylut.

the viewers photographed themselves as if they were wearing it. On the one hand, the dress aspired to expand the fan culture to include women, and on the other hand, its conservative form suggested that this presence has enjoyed a long-standing and undisputed tradition.

Perhaps it was because I made the dress to fit my size, or perhaps because the object was modelled on “the most beautiful dress in the world”, it unwittingly duplicated the patriarchal idea of what a woman should look like. Slender proportions, a corset that tightens around the waist, and flirtatiously exposed shoulders alluded to the wedding rituals, courtly conventions, and cartoon princesses. By creating it and thus demanding attention and making room for women in the events that had been appropriated by nationalists, at the same time I failed to take into account those for whom the reality of exclusion is equally or perhaps even more severe. And this was the truth of the time. In 2015, my feminism primarily concerned women like me, not because I excluded other people identifying as women – but because the language I was using at the time did not yet include other female stances or attitudes.

I realized how much this dress encompassed the narrow definition of sisterhood after the publication of an article by Janusz Noniewicz in 2020 in VOGUE¹, in which he described the football scarf dress. After the article was printed, Charlotte Drag Queer wrote to me, saying that she had been dreaming of such an outfit – and by then I already had the tools to realize that I had visualized exclusion as if it concerned only those women who are defined and desired within the strictest patriarchal standards. I realised that I failed to account for those about whom Roxane Gay wrote in her book *Hunger*, referring to herself and her own

1 Janusz Noniewicz, *Historia mody w sztuce. Agata Zbylut “Kawiorowa patriotka”*, <https://www.vogue.pl/a/historia-mody-w-sztuce-kawiorowa-patriotka>, accessed 24.08.2022

overweight body: “I hate the fact that I am exceptionally visible, and invisible at the same time.”² I also failed to make room for those who are not cisgender women.

This is why it was with such pleasure that I agreed to make a second dress, similar in character, but adapted to the body of Charlotte Drag Queer.³ The dress was created in 2020 during the “Enklawa” Covid pandemic residence in Warsaw’s Propaganda. We designed it together with Charlotte. It could not be an exact copy of the 2015 dress – as we intended it to be a utility item, one of the dresses Charlotte would have in her queer wardrobe. The dress had to be lighter and more practical – and yet still dazzling. When designing it, we symbolically turned the word “Polska” [Poland] inside out. The residence ended with a meeting during which a wave of people passed through the gallery, enjoying their meeting with a queer “football scarf celebrity”. It was the middle of a hot summer, and Charlotte wore a wig and black tights and posed for photos with fans against a specially prepared backdrop. I watched the beads of sweat break through the carefully applied thick layer of makeup, and thought about the use that queer makes of “femininity”. To quote Joanna Krakowska:

“After all, ‘femininity’ is a key category of homo-revolution: combating heteronormativity, establishing aesthetics, performing the Other’s identity and pseudonymisation of the Other’s condition.”⁴

Further, Joanna Krakowska wrote that it was about:

- 2 Roxane Gay, *Głód. Pamiętnik (mojego) ciała*, Wydawnictwo Cyranka 2021, p. 162
- 3 Encyklopedia LGBT, <https://www.encyklopedia.edu.pl/wiki/Charlotte>, accessed 24.08.2022
- 4 Joanna Krakowska *Odmieńczyca rewolucja. Performance na cudzej ziemi*, Wydawnictwo Karakter and Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie, 2020, pp. 42–43



BIRLO POLSKA TYLKO POLSKA

POLSKA TYLKO POLSKA CZERWONYM TYLKO POLSKA

BIRLO POLSKA TYLKO POLSKA

BIRLO POLSKA TYLKO POLSKA

BIRLO POLSKA TYLKO POLSKA

POLSKA TYLKO POLSKA

BIRLO POLSKA TYLKO POLSKA

up of pleasure

HUNGKI



“Femininity’ rather than ‘women’, because the latter were required by the male homosexual avant-garde only when dead or fictional – as legends and role models, as an extract and an aura, as a costume and a mask. Artificiality was everything. Homosexuals aestheticized femininity, drag queens embodied, flaunted, and celebrated femininity, so it was only later that lesbians and feminists politicized the female body as such and gave the category of ‘queer’ a new meaning.”

Queer incarnations are primarily divas – music and cinema stars. Drag queens reach for those patterns and models of femininity that escape patriarchal oversight, in which women are recognized as the “fair sex” and must be pleasing to the male eye, but are also obliged to be

practical, thrifty, resourceful and caring, for the service of their family. They reject the kind of femininity that is represented by the guardians of tradition and patriarchy, which clearly cannot contribute to the revolution that has fought and continues to fight against these values. By exaggerating femininity, queer escapes the evaluation of the female appearance, which in patriarchy should not only strive for unrealistic ideals, but which also conditions and dilutes what is the ideal in a given situation or a given community.” As Renee Engeln notes in *The Obsession of Beauty*, women “are desperately trying to keep a shaky balance, to look attractive enough to be accepted, but not as attractive as to attract an unwanted, dangerous kind of attention.”⁵ Queer sets us free from this control.

“Sisterhood” – the word which, as Eliza Proszczuk noticed, still gets underlined in red as incorrect by the online spell check dictionary, is not a new phenomenon, although I cannot shake the impression that it is a phenomenon that has been judiciously marginalized by culture. Contrary to what the patriarchy tells us by escalating examples of female rivalry, women have always cared for each other. Furthermore, “sisterhood” is not an exact equivalent of “brotherhood”; instead, it connects all those persons who are ignored by the patriarchy, it makes us look at reality from a different perspective, to advocate for the values and positions that so far have not been allowed a voice. “Sisterhood” is an increasingly inclusive area of care.

5 Renee Engeln, *Obsesja piękna. Jak kultura popularna krzywdzi dziewczynki i kobiety*, Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal sp. z o.o., Warszawa 2018, p. 65



Elwira Sztetner – artist and activist associated with the ecofeminism movement. She creates objects and installations on the borderline of sculpture and textile art. In her work, she critically analyses the anthropocentric model of the world. She questions the moral system justifying the breeding and killing of animals. She uses typically “feminine” techniques – sewing, embroidering, crocheting, and weaving.

Elwira Sztetner

Beyond the Divides

Sisterhood is a constantly expanding circle of community based on collaboration, empathy, teamwork, and a sense of unity, regardless of the degree of kinship. It means acting for the good of the community and all those who make up that community – also, the way of acting that is open to others, ready to support those who need supporting. Sisterhood is equally a way of being in the world, and a way of thinking about it. It is equality in diversity; and it is active opposition to the hierarchical, patriarchal structure of power. It is a community beyond the divides. It is also the ability to give and receive without the need to balance the accounts.

The sisterly community is inclusive. Its boundaries are never defined once and for all, because sisterhood practices are constantly developing and evolving.

The history of sisterhood is long. Although the term itself – “sisterhood”, or Polish “*siostrzeństwo*” in the meaning similar to the way we understand it today – gained popularity in feminist circles only a few decades ago, specifically, in the 1960s, yet from the beginning it referred to the old, universal practices of establishing relationships between women based on mutual support, empathy, trust, sharing secrets, mutual protection and care in difficult moments of life, the need to be together and, above all, the feeling of shared female fate in the patriarchal world.

In the latter aspect – that of a shared fate – feminism found great potential, giving the sisterhood a more universal significance, and making it the main strategy and focus of its activities. Sisterhood has crossed the boundaries of families and local communities. It began to signify the solidarity of women in the fight against the dominant patriarchy. Since then, the idea and the practices of sisterhood have been co-evolving with the feminist movement. The first definition of sisterhood very soon turned out to be incomplete. This is because it ignored non-white women, transsexual women, women

who did not belong to the privileged middle class. Clearly, it was necessary to expand the definition. This resulted in the development (already in the 1970s) of the concept of sisterhood, which then began to be explained as “practices of cooperation beyond the divides”. The emphasis, therefore, was on inclusiveness. The first years in the history of sisterhood as we understand it today indicate the process of gradual discovery of subsequent spheres of exclusion, and the resulting expansion of the circle of community. Sisterhood has become the path towards a more just society based on horizontal, equal, non-hierarchical relationships. Currently, the essence of sisterhood is not only the cooperation between women towards achieving common goals and interests, but it also encompasses support and help for all those who need it. This means acting not only for one’s own benefit, but also for the benefit of other groups that are experiencing discrimination.

Sisterhood is a model of relationship that we should learn, one that we need to practice. It is the ability to see in others – someone like me. It is constantly attempting to adopt the perspective of another being. Such practices allow crossing the boundaries of the circles that mark the community we define as “ourselves”. They show that any such boundaries are fluid, arbitrary and they result from misunderstanding; sometimes, they may also result from fear and prejudice. By practicing sisterhood, we learn to recognize injustice, even if it is not us who suffer that injustice; and even – and this is much more challenging – if we benefit from that injustice. Therefore, we should critically reflect on our own daily actions and correct them as soon as we perceive that they contribute to the harm or maltreatment of others. Sisterhood precludes taking advantage of privileges obtained at someone else’s expense. It is an obligation to refuse to participate in systemic violence.

All too often we forget that animal husbandry is one form of such systemic violence. We refuse to think of the livestock industry as a mass-scale slavery system. We are outraged by any comparisons of violence against animals to violence against humans, although the scale of crimes against animals is incomparable to anything that humans have ever experienced. We tend to disagree with such comparisons because of our deep-seated speciesism that prevents us from thinking of animals as equals. Together, across all divisions, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, skin colour, ethnic and national affiliation, and economic status – we unite in this form of discrimination and benefit from it. Or rather, it should be said: “because we benefit from it.” The more useful animals are to us, the more readily we forget about their personhood. The more we exploit them, the more we forget how similar to us they actually are. We bolster and support each other in this attitude. Since we all participate in this, no one tries to convince us that we are acting unethically. Therefore, questioning the system of animal exploitation is difficult. Besides, it requires effort, and calls for changing habits. And why should we make the effort, when no one expects us to do so?

Even if we agree that all forms of discrimination stem from a hierarchical, patriarchal power structure, and even if we understand that from an interspecies perspective, patriarchy is basically the same as anthropopatriarchy, we do not feel compelled to take steps towards refusing participation in this systemic violence.

While criticizing chauvinism, we fail to see our own speciesism. At least we fail to see it for now. We remain conformistically at peace, and we reinforce each other in that. Sooner or later, however, we will have to admit that the idea of sisterhood finds its logical, inevitable development in interspecies sisterhood. This is because animals, especially the so-called “farm animals”, are at the very bottom of the hierarchical system that we are criticizing.

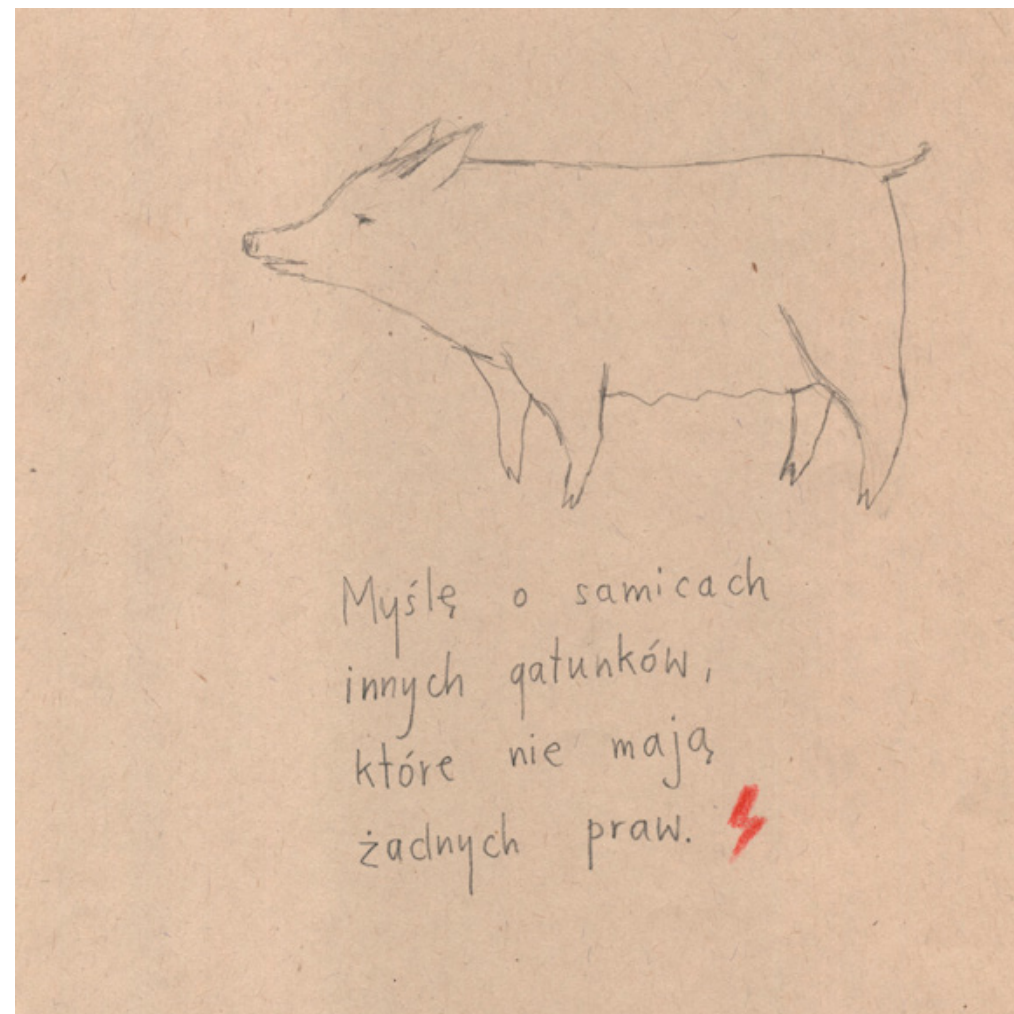
We use repression mechanisms in order not to see the inconvenient truth. We justify violence by claiming that it is natural, inevitable, and that it serves a higher purpose (meaning that it is serving for our own – human – benefit). Nevertheless, it is getting increasingly harder for us to pretend that the problem does not exist.

No wonder some of us give up eating meat. We are converting to vegetarianism. We think that this is enough. We believe we are doing much good this way. Enough good. We do not imagine that we need to be more radical. When someone asks: “Are you vegan?” we answer, “No, but I am a vegetarian”, and we feel ourselves justified. We do not eat meat – therefore: we do not contribute to the killing of animals.

Meanwhile, we seem to completely overlook the enormity of the violence that we support with our vegetarian diet. We proclaim sisterhood thinking that our conscience is clear – seemingly unaware that eggs and milk are the products of the metabolic work by females of other species, and that the exploitation of “dairy” cows and “laying” hens means converting their reproductive functions into our commodities. Violence against these females is more difficult to recognize, because milk and eggs are something quite different than pieces of a dead animal’s body, called “meat”. When buying these products, on the one hand, we ignore the fact that we still support the abuse and extreme exploitation of other females, and on the other hand, we forget that as soon as they become less productive (in conditions of intensive exploitation, this happens very quickly), they will become – in the language of breeders – “scrapped” for slaughter, turned into meat or feed, or simply “disposed of.” It seems even easier to forget that male calves are also victims of the dairy industry, because veal is a by-product of that industry; incidentally, a by-product that generates additional profits. In turn, male chickens of “egg-producing” chicken breeds are

unprofitable in breeding “for meat”, and therefore they are shredded (i.e. “macerated”) right after hatching. Of course, all this is no secret. We all know it, and we all try to ignore it. We also do not see the facts that are glaring, at every step. In every grocery store we are faced with a seemingly endless choice of yoghurts, all kinds of cheese, milk drinks, ice cream, products containing eggs and other substances of animal origin. Billions of tons of goods from billions of animals that, hidden from our eyes, spend their short lives, filled with suffering, behind the walls of industrial farms.

Let us remind ourselves that sisterhood is a joint struggle against violence and against a culture of rape. It means opposing the appropriation of women’s bodies, their objectification, fertility control, denial of rights, and profiting from forced and unpaid labour. Let us behold those “breeding” females – those “laying” hens, “dairy” cows, sows and other female domesticated species – with sisterly care. It is their female physiology that determines the way they are exploited. Let us listen to their voice – despite the language differences. Let us do it beyond the species divide. Let us listen to their voice from a feminist perspective. Perhaps they, like many of us, would like to say “me too.” Let us hear them, and let us refuse to participate in the violence. Let us stop eating the foods made from their milk. Let us stop eating their eggs. Let us do this for our sisters who are raped, and forced to bear children who are then taken away from them. Let us do it for our sisters whose bodies are exploited to the breaking point. They are not that different from us, although they speak different languages, and they look a bit different. Let us not set the boundary of our sisterhood along the line of species divisions, because on the other side of that boundary there are creatures similar to us. Let us expand the boundaries of our empathy and let us practice compassion, because if we believe in sisterhood beyond divisions, we can also build it beyond species divisions.



Drawing by Edyta Bystron on the occasion of Women’s Strike, January 2021
 “I am thinking about the females of other species, who have no rights whatsoever.”

Traces of Sisterhood edited by:

Eliza Proszczuk – visual artist, animator, educator, author of fabrics, spatial objects and collages. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw at the Faculty of Painting, and from the Post St. Joost in Breda at the Faculty of Visual Arts. In 2015 she defended her doctoral dissertation at her alma mater. She is a two-time holder of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and ZAiKS scholarship. She is currently working at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, at the Faculty of Interior Design, Textiles in Architecture Studio. Eliza Proszczuk creates socially engaged art, touching upon issues related to feminism and womanhood; she works with women in prison, patients of drug rehabilitation centres, refugees and displaced persons. She often finds inspiration in the traditional arts and crafts of north-east Poland.

Ewa Chomicka – cultural anthropologist, Polish philologist, museologist, and curator of contemporary art. She manages the Museum Practices Laboratory at POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, where she develops cooperation between the museum and contemporary artists, as well as interdisciplinary initiatives that combine contemporary art, research, and activism. She develops long-term participatory activities and expands the field of art with the community. Member of the Culture for Climate collective, co-founder of the folk-punk feminist band Pochwalone, performer with the Women's Choir.

TRACTS