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/ TRAPS OF REPRESENTATION

The Mystery Is Looking

Alicja Żebrowska's Art and Poland's Political Transition

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The text was written in response to Alicja Żebrowska's exhibition *The Mystery Is Looking: Works from the Transition Period* (*Tajemnica patrzy. Prace z czasu transformacji*) curated by Jakub Banasiak at the Gdansk City Gallery in 2024. The artist's early works were presented as 'the art of the new spirituality'. Her classic works belonging to the canon of feminist and critical art have been almost completely omitted. Thus, the experience of systemic transformation recorded in Żebrowska's art was presented as a mystical mystery. By recalling interpretations of the artist's works from the 1990s and 2000s, tracing how the feminist discourse was constituted in Polish art after 1989, as well as the changing views of the artist herself, the author tries to see what the mystery understood in this way actually hides. With the help of the non-representational theory, she proposes a reading of Żebrowska's art that opens up the possibility of grasping transformation as an experience, and not only as images and meanings superimposed on it one by one.

Keywords: feminist art; feminism; transition; representation; obscenity

'The Mystery Is Looking: Works from the Transition Period',[1] an exhibition of work by Alicja Żebrowska curated by Jakub Banasiak, opened in March 2024 at the Gdańsk City Gallery, Poland. The show brought together a selection of little-known works of an artist considered one of the foremost exponents of

Polish critical and feminist art. In his curator's statement, Jakub Banasiak notes,

> The Transition tends to be discussed in social, political and economic terms. The title of this exhibition signals a different view: approaching the Transition as a period of the great unknown, an in-between state, an interregnum when the old order no longer exists but a new one hasn't yet emerged (Banasiak, 2024).

Banasiak contends that taking this view of Poland's Transition entails acknowledging new aspects of the context of Żebrowska's work. By excluding the artist's most famous works, such as *Original Sin* (1994) or *When the Other Becomes One's Own* (1999), and highlighting early work that is virtually never seen (with the exception of the eponymous video *The Mystery Is Looking* and a photograph from the series 'Onone'), the curator states he wants to '[…] place her body of work in a broader context: the art of the new spirituality from the Transition era' (Banasiak, 2024). He explains,

> At the core of the exhibition are works from the shows in Kraków (1986), Vienna (1992) and Orońsko (1992) in addition to videos made between 1992 and 1995. Most of these works were never exhibited again and eventually forgotten, as only a scattering of videos from the artist's extensive output were selected for public display, and they were read as 'feminist' and 'critical' in keeping with the hegemonic discourses of the history of the Transition-period art. Without nullifying these readings, this exhibition seeks to restore Żebrowska's early work to its historical context and bring

it in line with the artist's intentions (ibid.).

Strikingly, in the curator's view, it is not Żebrowska's art that necessities a new perspective on Poland's Transition, but it is a new perspective on the Transition experience that demands a restoration of a historical rather than feminist and critical context of the artist's work. Surprisingly, however, in order to present the Transition as a period of 'the great unknown' in which the 'art of the new spirituality' flourished, the curator does not offer a new reading of Żebrowska's most familiar works – he just leaves them out from his selection.

Intrigued by this ommission and its implications for thinking about the history of the period, I propose to revisit Żebrowska's 1990s work and its readings to examine what in fact lies behind the 'hegemonic discourses of the transitionist history of art' imposing 'feminist' and 'critical' readings (Banasiak, 2024). At the same time, by reflecting on Żebrowska's artistic practice, the evolution of her own understanding of her art and the historical and social context in which she worked, I want, as Banasiak proposes, to put forth a different perspective on Poland's political transition. This is because, in my opinion, Żebrowska's works (not) included in the exhibition are not another representation of the period experience but rather they work against unproblematized looking and the logic of representation and attribution of – even completely new or the original – meanings to images. Thus, they compel us to rethink watching in and of itself. I believe this practice of the artist, which I will seek to illuminate by drawing attention to the body and by drawing on non-representational theory, reveals the obscene secret of Żebrowska's art. Hidden behind a curtain and accessible only to visitors above eighteen years of age, 'The Mystery Is Looking' with a false eye in a living, pulsating, made-up vagina. I could structure this text

around the following question: what do we see when we reciprocate its gaze?

Polish feminist art

When discussing body representation in the art of contemporary Polish woman artists in her 2003 article ‘Feminin polylangue’, published in the English- and German-language journal *Praesens: Central European Contemporary Art Review* in an issue dedicated to Polish art, Agata Jakubowska cites Alicja Żebrowska as one of the foremost artists in this field. Explicating the meaning of Żebrowska’s art to foreign readers in her necessarily concise piece, the author discusses the feminist dimension of the bringing of female sexuality into visibility in the famous 1994 installation and video work *Original Sin*. Offering her interpretation of the close-up video footage of a vagina with a button between its labia making it look like a ‘blind’ eye, later penetrated by a vibrator before being subjected to mud treatment and, finally, ‘giving birth’ to a Barbie doll, Jakubowska notes,

> Initially, this work was recognized as transgressing boundaries and showing female experiences of the body that are absent from the dominant visual culture. However, it is clear that the artist did not look for an alternative to phallocentric manifestations of feminine sexuality; her strategy, rather, was to play with existing convictions, negative notions of feminine sexuality – not simply to reject or criticise, but in a way to deconstruct by magnifying (2003, p. 13).

Jakubowska explains Żebrowska’s use of a Barbie doll as signalling a shift of

interest away from feeling and experiencing the female body towards seeking to understand the cultural construct of corporeality and gender.

By doing this, Jakubowska places the artist's work in the context of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and the transgression of the binary division into feminine and masculine associated with Butler's notion of gender performativity. This is also how she interprets Żebrowska's 1995 'Onone: A World after the World', which features imagined human/non-human beings with vague, confused or exaggerated sexual traits. Populating large-format colour photographs, these half-mythical-half-cyborg creatures gaze in the mirror or lie on the grass or in an abstract space lined with aluminium foil, assuming poses commonly associated with femininity, which, for Jakubowska, signifies that we are both able and unable to liberate ourselves from the bounds of culturally constructed gender. Another work Jakubowska discusses, *When the Other Becomes One's Own* (1999), also reveals the paradox of pleasure linked with enacting femininity and reproducing a phallocentrically constructed sexuality. In it, Żebrowska records the transition of trans woman Sara. 'Onone and Sara seem to feel comfortable in that position, exposed by feminist art historians as subordinate' (Jakubowska, 2003, p. 15). Jakubowska holds that Żebrowska's work, premised not so much on a feminist understanding of gender difference but on its cultural and fluid nature as described by Butler, are typical of a broader strand of the work of Polish women artists. By showing gender as a role as oppressive as it is constructed, they open up a space for a takeover of the signs of subordination while affirming femininity.

I do not consider Jakubowska's text, written for an audience unfamiliar with the Polish art and context, as a new or debatable reading of Żebrowska's work. Rather, I regard it as an encapsulation of the readings of Żebrowska's

practice in the period of the political transition that dominated Polish art history at the time. Jakubowska follows in the footsteps of the likes of Izabela Kowalczyk, who, in her 2002 book *Ciało i władza* (Body and Power), in which she lays down the canon of the so-called critical art, notes,

> In her art, Alicja Żebrowska collapses the boundaries between visible and invisible, art and pornography, feminine passivity and masculine activity. Not so much does she represent that which has been hidden, repressed, as she shows the constructs of female sexuality that have brought about the subordination of women and their needs to male desires, plunging them into silence and invisibility (2002, p. 234).

In proposing this, the researcher predominantly refers to two versions of *Original Sin*, which she has reconstructed drawing on Marek Goździewski's piece from the catalogue accompanying 'Original Sin: A Presumed Virtual Reality Project', an exhibition of Żebrowska's work, staged at the Zderzak Gallery in Kraków in 1994. Goździewski describes the first version as an installation foregrounding a green apple.

> The video […] opened with a scene showing a girl who starts eating a green apple. In a space enclosed by two concentric cylinders built from semi-transparent green film, a small green lamp was lit and the smell of synthetic green apple lingered in the air. The third constitutive element of the work, green apples, sat on a wooden table. White slips of paper inscribed with text, reminiscent of newborns' name tags, were attached to the apples' tails. A few apple-eating scenes were followed by blurred scenes of a sexual

> act, featuring a penis (artificial or ‘natural’) and a woman’s crotch, which continued to the end of the video. A loudspeaker mounted inside a ‘tree’ played distorted sounds of ‘sexual pleasure’, some of which, inevitably, resembled closely the sounds of eating the apple (1994).

The second version of *Original Sin*, the one described by Jakubowska and included in the 1995 ‘Antybodies’ exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, where it caused a scandal even before the show opened, had little in common with the first. Gone were the apple, paradise and tree, replaced by the button (the tool of sexual pleasure first experienced with a childhood girl-friend), masturbation with a vibrator, mud treatments and the birth of a Barbie doll. Goździewski maintains that while the first version of the work showed ‘religious entanglements of sex and human sexuality (1994), particularly female sexuality, ‘in Western culture’, the second, in almost every frame of the video, takes issue with the words God speaks to women in the Bible: ‘I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you’ (after Goździewski, 1994). As the author concludes, Żebrowska wants a different world and a different role of women.

Kowalczyk, in contrast, notes that what changed in the second version mainly concerned the female elements, which became dominant. For her, the exclusion of men by a reference to erotic experiences with a childhood girlfriend, the use of a vibrator and hand, and the birth of a doll – which requires no fertilization – is tantamount to the liberation of the female body and female sexuality from male power and, at the same time, manifests rebellious shamelessness. When examining another of Żebrowska’s works, *The Mystery Is Looking* – in which a vagina, which enfolds a false eye, winks

with its labia lips, made up and fitted with false eyelashes, Kowalczyk probes the boundary between art and pornography. She believes that Żebrowska's images of the female body are not pornographic, because they at once arouse desire and provoke repulsion. As Hartmut Böhme, quoted by Kowalczyk, notes about his reaction to *Original Sin*: 'This process is so extreme that the male (and female?) observer feels an almost physical pain in [their] eyeballs as well as disgust, amplified by their own fears and hideous images. I must admit that this is an experience like no other' (1997, p. 75). The vagina appears as a 'carnivorous plant', arousing fear and disgust.

For Monika Bakke, it is disgust, or rather the abject as described by Julia Kristeva, that is the central interpretative key here. Bakke, following Hal Foster, in her well-known 2000 book *Ciało otwarte* (The Open Body), describes the 1990s art as abject art, and considers Żebrowska's art to be the most engaged in 'direct contact with the abject' (Bakke, 2000, p. 50).

> Her artistic creations actually directly reference the three types of *abjection* [oral, anal and genital – DS] described by Kristeva. They seem to be driven by a desire to reveal the regressive or archaic domain of our existence, and are also attempts to capture a traumatic experience. This artist's works are often no less than shocking, and many viewers find it virtually impossible to engage with them' (ibid., p. 50).

Bakke approaches a photograph from the 1993 series 'Gender' as exemplifying oral abjection. It shows a close-up of a boy in a white shirt, with a chunk of raw meat hanging from his mouth. The anal abject is present in

Żebrowska's *With Mother* (1993). Bakke describes it as depicting the naked artist squatting with her back to the viewer and defecating in front of a photograph of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. In fact, however, the photograph is not of Botticelli's painting but of Żebrowska's mother. For Bakke, *Original Sin* is a representation of genital abjection.

Kowalczyk follows Bakke by referring to Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject and discussing *With Mother* from a perspective explicitly defined as feminist,

> Żebrowska's defecating body represents the abject – that which is rejected from our subjectivity upon transition from the realm of the semiotic to that of the symbolic. Perhaps it is an attempt to regain the lost unity with her mother, which is attained here through defiling (2002, pp. 236-237).

Kowalczyk argues that, in the spirit of Luce Irigaray's theory, Żebrowska reveals femininity, the female body and female sexual organs as collapsing the boundaries underlying the disgust impulse: between inside and outside, object and subject, self and other, living and dead (defecated). The sex act or childbirth, just like the defecation, become a radical opening up of the body, erasing its subjectivity-forming boundaries.

Kowalczyk reconstructs the political significance of this transgression, which is fundamental to recognizing Żebrowska's art as feminist, by following Paweł Leszkowicz, who in his 1997 text 'Grzechy Alicji Żebrowskiej: Sztuka a aborcja' (Alicja Żebrowska's Sins: Art and Abortion), published in 2001 in *Artmix*, notes,

> In 1994, at Kraków's Zderzak Gallery, Alicja Żebrowska presented

> her video installation *Original Sin*, which remains to this day a rather peculiar but significant work on the Polish artistic and socio-political scene. Exploring female sexuality, childbearing and religion, *Original Sin* was a strongly feminist and engaged statement. This came less than a year after the introduction of a new anti-abortion law in March 1993, which made abortion illegal in a country travelling a bumpy road to decommunization and democratization. A testament to the halting and reversal of the process of progressive change, this law sparked political discussion and a moral crusade that stirred the Polish public for about four years (2001).

Leszkowicz links the anti-abortion law with the activities and political interests of the Catholic Church in Poland. Like Poland's Concordat with Vatican and the introduction of religious instruction in schools or the law enshrining respect for Christian values in the media, the abortion ban is a tool for exercising power. Żebrowska's work, which presents sex and childbirth in the context of the rhetoric of sin, demonstrates, for Leszkowicz, how Catholic doctrine works: how the criminalization of non-reproductive sexuality and abortion is inalienably associated with an imagination infected by the images of paradise, the forbidden fruit and the subordinate role of women. The anti-abortion law, treated as a pretext to reduce the awareness of contraception and human sexuality in general, is actually used as a tool to organize citizens into heterosexual marriages whose primary role is to conceive, bear and raise children. Leszkowicz notes,

> The AIDS problem and the role of condoms give way to the rhetoric of marital fidelity and true love, undoubtedly noble ideals but out of

> step with the complex reality of our lives. The efforts of non-governmental educational movements are obstructed by cutting off financial support (ibid.).

Crucial to Leszkowicz's analysis is the recognition that this stance, this 'restrictive, moralistic, antisexual rhetoric' (ibid.), has become coterminous in Poland with decommunization and the triumph of traditional values, and a symptom of the Transition, which included the emergence of a political dimension of sexual identity and gender difference. The only political difference in communist Poland, argues Leszkowicz, was the one between society and the authorities. Gender difference and gender conflict only became political with the advent of democracy, competition, the labour market and civil rights.

What used to be private and personal began to matter in public life. Leszkowicz concludes,

> Alicja Żebrowska's feminist work represents a tendency in Polish art – one that has been present in Western art since the 1960s – grounded in the recognition and critical analysis of the fact, typical of contemporary life, that the intimate is political. The artist also explores contemporary feminism's staple theme of female corporeality and sexuality and the forms of their representation, which constitutes the most subversive part of her work (ibid.).

At the cost of 'desublimating' the image of the body and exposing the 'lurid nature of physiology', Żebrowska 'cuts through the language of ideology, stripping femininity of the body' (ibid.). The author states,

> There is a method it this visceral literalism. It has been repeatedly pointed out that women's voice is disregarded in discussions about abortion. Women have become an absent, disembodied object of contention. Their protagonist was the unborn child, 'suspended' in an ontological vacuum. The perverse imitation of childbirth gets to the crux of the problem, to the place where a true miracle happens, the miracle of fertility and motherhood but also of sexual pleasure and desire (ibid.).

Leszkowicz points out (and Kowalczyk echoes his point) that Żebrowska's feminist politics are closely linked to the historical moment of Poland's political transition when sexuality and gender, both due to pressure from the Catholic Church and under the influence of Western emancipation movements, became political. In this context, works like *Onone* and *When the Other Becomes One's Own*, read through the lens of Judith Butler's theory, seem to continue the strategy of 'visceral literalism', revealing an ignored, denied, forbidden corporeality of otherness oppressed by the state and the Church.

It thus becomes apparent that the reading of Żebrowska's art as feminist art, which emerged as early as the 1990s and became entrenched in the early 21st century, related to the lived experience of the social shifts and conflicts of the era of Poland's political transition. As Marcin Kościelniak points out, in the light of Żebrowska's work one can challenge, to a large extent, the popular contention about the reluctance of artists of the so-called critical art of the early 1990s to offer direct socio-political commentary. He notes,

> The absence of current-commentary emphasis is compensated for

> by openly militant and polemical forays into the space of the Christian sacrum and the associated rules of social life and subject constructs (2018, p. 53).

Therefore, Żebrowska's art, particularly *Original Sin*, 'zooms in on knowledge coupled with symbolic power, which are crucial to Polish patriarchal culture' (ibid., p. 54), reifying Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, pivotal for the definition of critical art and later utilized by Piotr Piotrowski and Izabela Kowalczyk. I believe that the artist's works played a similar role for feminist theory in Polish art. As Goździewski argued in 1994, not only did they open up the possibility of a 'different definition […] of the role of the woman' (1994) in relation to power and social norms and establish a field of desire that the author defines along the lines of Rachel Kaplan's desire for another way (ibid.) but also, in later readings, they became vital for a cultural translation of Western feminist thought. This need to assimilate, or rather develop, a feminist discourse in Poland, reflected in the cited readings of Żebrowska's work, can hardly be understood in terms of hegemony, especially if one recalls what Jolanta Brach-Czaina, an acclaimed philosopher and author of *Szczeliny istnienia* (The Cracks of Existence), writes about the situation of Polish women after 1989. In *Progi polskiego feminizmu* (Thresholds of Polish Feminism; 1995), she emphatically states,

> When the communist system collapsed in 1989, it came to light that there were women in Poland […] The discovery of women was made by the Catholic Church, which tabled a restrictive anti-abortion bill (signed by many MPs from the Polish United Workers' Party) in the Sejm in liaison with the communist authorities. The freshly

> discovered femininity was defined by the reproductive function (2023, p. 114).

Żebrowska's body, with its obscene, abject and shameless practices, as well as other non-normative bodies in her art, beholden as not conforming with the reproductive femininity imposed by the law and the Church, have also become, in the readings cited above, bodies from the theories of Irigaray, Kristeva and Butler, 'reborn' in a different socio-political context. In Żebrowska's work, as in the 1990s realities described by Brach-Czaina, 'the body of the Polish woman is the site of fierce political struggle' (2023, p. 114), as best evidenced by the contemporaneous press reviews of the shows featuring the artist's work, in which it was often described as norm-defying or even criminal and unworthy of being exhibited in institutional venues, i.e. faecal, repulsive, gynaecological, pornographic and trite. The feminist and critical discourse assimilated from the West was to serve as a tool enabling oppressed bodies to gain agency, especially in the face of deep resistance against the proposed recognition of women's (reproductive) rights and the rights of sexual minorities in a new, capitalist, democratic Poland, which manifested itself, for example, in the contemptuous use of the word 'feminist' in public discourse (Graff, 2021, pp. 193-215).

But let's come back to the questions raised by the Gdańsk exhibition 'The Mystery Is Looking'. Can it really be said that the feminism that was taking shape in Poland at the time was not the original context of the creation of Żebrowska's art but an interpretation imposed on it? What does it mean to restore to the artist's work the dimension of the 'new spirituality' or, as a matter of fact, to replace the extensively described works with unknown ones?

Leftist hegemony

In 1998, in a conversation with Łukasz Guzek published in *Żywa Galeria*, Alicja Żebrowska said,

> If we accept that the vagina seems to be the most personal thing for a woman, and childbirth the most intimate experience a woman can have, why does the state impose a series of restrictions on the vagina. I am referring here to the abortion right, where the most intimate concerns of a woman are subject to manipulation and cynical political games. The most personal place becomes the most public. The state, which should serve to protect my privacy, brutally interferes with it. I don't want my body to serve the state (after Kowalczyk, 2002, pp. 242-243).

Żebrowska thus positioned her art, as Marcin Kościelniak notes, as a voice in public debate. In 1999, in the feminist magazine *Ośka* (Axis), Żebrowska stressed, 'The video *The Mystery Is Looking* was a deliberately planned feminist action […] The Divine Eye, present in the Christian tradition, watches people and judges them. In particular, it stigmatizes women's sexuality. It views the female body as an impure, forbidden, sinful site. I consciously reversed this principle' (Żebrowska, 1999, p. 43). When discussing her participation in the 3rd Feminist Group Meeting in Poznań, themed around 'Constructing Women's Identities', Żebrowska said,

> I first came here three years ago. Now I decided to come again aware I've been labelled a feminist. The works viewed as feminist are only a part of my output. Their feminist message does not stem

> from my ideological statements. My works are read in the context of feminism, because they are linked with my individual liberation, with my search for my own identity as a woman caught up in a number of conflicts. I've experienced Polish Catholicism first-hand. My father was a bastard son of a priest, I was sexually harassed by a priest. Later, I tried to process it all intellectually, I read a lot about it, tried to make some sense of it (Żebrowska, 1999, p. 44).

While confirming the paramount importance of the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' for the impact of her work and its firm rooting in the experience of the female body, Żebrowska distanced herself from the idea that feminism defined her political identity and the objectives of her practice. The comments she made in the years that followed attested to the artist's increasing dissociation from feminism. In a 2001 conversation with Piotr Niemier, she said, 'If critics describe me as a feminist artist, it is based on one work, which proves their ignorance of my whole body of work' (Żebrowska, 2001, p. 24). In a 2002 interview with Izabela Kowalczyk, prompted by the exhibition 'The Dangerous Liaisons between Art and Body', she said, 'my work *Original Sin* has been appropriated. It has become a feminist work and I have to accept this. I don't entirely agree with this reading, my explanation of it is different. By the way, I don't shy away from feminism. But I don't think I'm a feminist artist, because feminism is a social movement you need to engage in. […] But I don't need to take on the mantle of feminism to express my identity!' (Kowalczyk, 2002a, pp. 60-61). She thus sought to stress her autonomy with regard to the discourses applied to her art. In 2007, Żebrowska was asked by curators Magdalena Ujma and Joanna Zielińska (exgirls collective) to create a work for an exhibition of feminist and politically engaged art, 'The Struggle Goes On!'. The artist said she

responded with a proposal for a 'pro-PiS'[2] work, explaining 'that the policy of the incumbent government was the best solution in Poland's situation' (Ujma, Zielińska, 2007). Commenting on this four years later in a conversation with Łukasz Białkowski, Żebrowska said that she was being contrary and wanted to undermine the ideological unequivocality of the curators' proposal, who expected her to produce an anti-Catholic work. She commented that since she had been a feminist artist for so many years, she could now be regarded as a leading right-wing artist, before adding, 'We have to remember that there's a certain dominance of the left. Art is seen through the lens of an artist's ideological affiliation. I strongly believe that if a right-wing artist produced a great work of art, his or her views would impinge on the reception of the work. We live in a time of left-wing hegemony' (Żebrowska, 2011, p. 33).

Żebrowska distanced herself from feminism in the most emphatic way in a 2008 conversation with Roman Bromboszcz. Asked about the various readings of her work, she said,

> It was my big mistake to permit Paweł Leszkowicz to use the work *Original Sin: A Presumed Virtual Reality Project* in his abortion essay. A false interpretative path was also paved by Marek Goździewski, who narrowed down the message to feminist and religious concerns. This was picked up by others and they forced the work and me, its author, into a bag labelled 'feminism'. The pivotal point in this process was the exhibition 'Antibodies', at which Robert Rumas, in my absence, presented only the video and photographs instead of the installation he had received straight from the Berlin exhibition (Żebrowska, 2008).

She goes on to say that *Original Sin* was never intended to be critical of religion or politics. Instead, it was meant to touch on the pitfalls of social life in which it is crucially important which ideologies – that is, virtual realities – we embrace. Adopting this perspective, she said of her Transition-period work, 'Indeed, in the 1990s, a search for 'oneness' […], harmony, a kind of consensus, was a very important thing for me' (Żebrowska, 2008).

This spirit of a mystical search for 'oneness' and a desire to 'reach the objective truth' pervaded Jakub Banasiak's presentation of Żebrowska's work in 'The Mystery Is Looking: Works from the Transition Period'.

Art of the new spirituality

Importantly, the exhibition was in fact Banasiak's second curatorial vision of Poland's political transition. The first, 'Tectonic Shifts: On the Artistic Symptoms of Poland's Transition'[3], shown at the turn of 2023 at the Łódź Museum of Art, was premised on a belief that the Transition should be viewed as a process rather than a watershed moment – as

> two systems persistently colliding and interpenetrating, the old order fading away and a new one emerging. In the 1980s and 1990s, the tectonic plates of East and West pressed against each other until they produced a new rock formation – a periphery of global capitalism. Before this could happen, however, things were in a state of flux, ambiguous, delirious, sometimes abrupt, always fraught with subcutaneous tensions (Banasiak, 2022).

In the introduction to his book *Proteuszowe czasy. Rozpad państwowego*

systemu sztuki 1982–1993 (A Protean Time: The Collapse of the State Art System 1982–1993), published in 2020 and offering the intellectual undergirding for both exhibitions, Banasiak explains that his account of the Transition as a process is premised on the titular timeframe, which does away with the impact of 1989 as the start of the contemporary period, and on abandoning what he refers to as 'Transition narrative', or transitology. He notes,

> As important as recognizing the temporal nature of the Transition is seeing that Western and then Polish 'transitology' developed, as Boris Buden brilliantly demonstrated, an ideology of post-communist transition, one holding that the process of exiting communism has a definite and inevitable destination – the neoliberal form of capitalism and the liberal version of democracy. The transition-era discourse naturalizes this development model while creating the image of an 'evil' communism and, more broadly, of a backward East. This model is underpinned by the fantasy of a 'new beginning', completely rejecting the pre-1989 order (2023, p. 50).

Banasiak argues that recognizing 1989 as marking the start of our contemporary period requires significant interventions into social memory. For a start, the Round Table narrative becomes a contested field. In Banasiak's view, its two different versions – the first, in which the communists were willing to cooperate and the principle of sealing off the past with a 'thick line' was adopted, and the second, presenting the event as a political conspiracy behind the back of the Polish people – will generate two competing models of memory. Even if there's tension between the two,

they concur on the direction of the changes that had to take place, so both can be considered as transitologic. Similarly, the memory of Polish 1980s art has come to be read through the same transitologic lens. The author contends that the recognition of 1989 as a triumph of the underground circles of political activists is closely tied to the emergence of what he terms a 'totalitarian model of art history', in which the communist era artists are judged not by the quality of their work and their efforts within the art community but by their stance towards the regime, which results in nullifying all institutional, social and aesthetic achievements of the period. Since the People's Republic of Poland is regarded within this framework as unequivocally evil, and democracy and capitalism as victorious, Banasiak sees the totalitarian narrative as transitologic too, as it naturalizes the Transition and the neoliberal model. When discussing the Transition archive, Banasiak provides a key argument that makes it possible to link these diagnoses with his curatorial choices in both exhibitions. He contends that we urgently need to revisit the archive to conduct basic research, as all studies of the social and institutional history of the People's Republic of Poland are afflicted by a transitologic bias. The responsibility for this state of affairs lies not only with the conservative historiography founded on the heroic struggle against communism but also – the author claims – with post-structuralism and the New Art History (NAH), which have contributed to entrenching the Transition ideology. Banasiak argues,

> […] after 1989, there was a common desire among humanists to transcend the materialist understanding of the relation between society and power. Ewa Domańska notes that this desire was driven by a vision of a 'new beginning' in scholarship, also through the proposition to link it up with the Western, particularly American,

> system. In other words, it was a transitologic project *par excellence* (Banasiak, 2023, p. 56).

This means that also the notion of power/knowledge, which, for Banasiak, is 'central to the domestic applications of the NAH' (2023, p. 56), became, in his opinion, another factor contributing to the entrenchment of both the totalitarian art history and transitology by totalizing the concept of power.

The consequences of this insight, as evidenced by the Banasiak's curatorial choices, are far-reaching. His rejection of the criticized notion of power/knowledge and the model of art history rooted in post-structuralism entail a rejection of the visions of the art of the People's Republic of Poland and the 1990s art developed within its framework and, most importantly, a discarding of the category of critical art, described by Izabela Kowalczyk as resistance acting bodies to generalized power and knowledge. Further, as Banasiak argues in his text accompanying Żebrowska's exhibition, he considers this discourse, along with feminism inspired by Western theories (including poststructuralism) – just like Żebrowska herself – as hegemonic, one that suppresses the original – non-transitologic, as I understand it – context of the Protean time. So instead, he proposes a different perspective on the art of Poland's Transition.

A key aspect of Banasiak's narrative is doubling or splitting. He argues that the multiplied bodies, dualisms, binary categories, twin figures and mirror images of the art of the late 1980s and 1990s are manifestations of a clash between matter and spirit, or of a split into an awareness of political, ideological and economic changes and a desire for a spiritual search. Invoking the artist' interest in Gnosticism, New Age aesthetics, alchemy, cultural anthropology and ritual, Banasiak traces the emergence of a

spirituality alternative to Catholicism and even of a ‘new sacral art’. In ‘Tectonic Shifts’, the curator included, in the ‘New Spirituality’ and ‘Primal Energies’ sections, Alicja Żebrowska’s little-known works from the 1980s and early 1990s: sculptures, drawings, and footage of the artist’s performative actions staged in her native region, the Tatra Mountains – a testament to her interest in ritual, her mystical imagination and explorations at the interface of nature and culture. These same works, brought from the margins to the centre of the artist's oeuvre, set the tone for the narrative of ‘The Mystery Is Looking’.

The following works are presented to viewers as coming from the Transition period: *Hypermistic* (1992), a form made of bronze embedded in epoxy resin, reminiscent of both a body and a temple; a recreation of an Orońsko installation entitled *Physical Phenomenon* (1992) featuring neon elements emerging from sand; a 1982 woodcut entitled *Cogito ergo sum: Distincto* showing two figures, one with male and one with female characteristics, with their backs turned to each other, each holding a red heart in one hand, as if about to tear it apart; and a photograph from the ‘Onone: A World after The World’ series (1995) entitled *Synchronization*, which, in the curator’s statement, is interpreted as follows: ‘In the photograph on view, the artist and Onone are recumbent against a sheet of silver foil, conflating the grey of Saturn with the silvery glow of the Moon. Saturn is the god of time and of agriculture, a set of practices aligned with the cycles of the calendar. The Moon symbolizes the feminine principle and circular time – the eternal return of the same’ (Banasiak, 2024). Inspired by a dream, the series features Onone, an androgynous figure with uncanny, exaggerated sexual characteristics, capable of sexual self-gratification, and seeks to show ‘an infinite transition, a mythical being preceding the human race – the whole

before the division' (Banasiak, 2024). The interpretative key is alchemy and the transmutation (conversion of base metals into gold) it describes (Banasiak, 2024). The next room contains three 1992 black-resin sculptures, *Reconstruction of The Libido*, *Portico* and *The Worldseer*, featuring organic and architectural motifs, and a set of 1987 charcoal drawings combining bodies and architectural items. These works, described as mystical explorations inspired by freemasonry, are presented as unprecedented in Polish art. 'The male and female intermingle in the different figures, forming an inseparable whole: a hybrid of reason and instinct, body and spirit. The frame is architecture: a testament to the perfection of creation' (Banasiak, 2024). In contrast, the early 1980s woodcuts and linocuts, *Outer Space*, *Kaleidoscopic Nebula*, *Mummy*, *The Extreme*[4] and *Universes*; *Self-Portrait (with a Rumen)*, featuring the artist's face combined with the face of a figure resembling the figures in the woodcut *Cogito ergo sum*; and a documentation of the artist's projects staged in the Tatra Mountains, *Identified Artistic Phenomenon* (1993), *Identified Object of Art* (1993) and *Trans-Fero* (1993) have been described as inspired by the mountains, which symbolize 'the eternal order of nature, the reality before time and history began', fragments of an 'outer space landscape' (Banasiak, 2024). *Onone* and *The Mystery Is Looking* (1995) are the only works from what Banasiak refers to as '"feminist" canon' included in the show. The leaving out of *Original Sin*, with its reference to childbirth, a work that directly inspired *The Mystery Is Looking* and remains closely tied up with it,[5] enables the curator to see the made-up vagina that winks with an artificial eye as a representation of the experience of a transition of consciousness that fits his vision from 'A Protean Time' and 'Tectonic Shifts' rather than a representation of the politicized, female body.

> The dominant reading is that the video's central motif – the eye in the vagina – represents opposition to patriarchy. Thus, the vagina, a kind of *pars pro toto* for the woman, is presumed to gain subjectivity rather than be the object of an appropriating gaze. This restores the original meaning of Żebrowska's video. In the 1980s and 1990s, the artist, like many of her contemporaries, developed an interest in mysticism and esotericism. A transition of consciousness is at the core of most mystical traditions. *The Mystery Is Looking* is an original interpretation of this motif. In her video, Żebrowska brings together the motif of Gaia – the first mother – and the third eye – a symbol of mystic awakening. The birth of a new consciousness is thus depicted as humanity becoming one with the universe. In this way, the validation of femininity that is undoubtedly present in this work goes beyond the immediate political dimension to gain a transcendent aspect (Banasiak, 2024).

Intended as an alternative to the feminist reading of Żebrowska's work, the mystical, esoteric reading, for Banasiak, is an account of Poland's Transition that goes beyond the transitologic ideology. Interestingly, however, as he himself admits, this renders the Transition a 'mystery', 'a time beyond time, the eternal now' that, surprisingly as it might seem, loses its historical and experiential character. Most importantly, however, this selection of Żebrowska's works and this reading of them rid her art of the body that acts, as I will try to demonstrate, primarily through its obscene irreducibility to representation. Significantly, it is the undermining of the power of representation – both in an aesthetic and political sense – that seems to be a key aspect of Żebrowska's art, which I believe is in evidence in the video

work *The End of My Century* included in both exhibitions curated by Banasiak.

The End of My Century

Installed on a small-screen, *The End of My Century 92/93* is a video chronicle composed of low-quality footage. Let's take a close look at it, as the work, which has not previously been shown and is otherwise unavailable to the public, offers an interesting perspective on Poland's political transition and, I believe, is key to understanding Żebrowska's artistic strategy.

The camera moves through the streets of Kraków, recording departing buses, passers-by, an open-air market, a bus station. The unsettling purples, reds and yellows of the adverts and clothes creep into the grey landscape of the winter-shrouded city. This string of unspectacular images is seemingly random. Long-distance buses pull away from their stop on a slush-covered street. A large mural advertizing Miraculum cosmetics looms in the background. Two women, one wearing a bright purple winter jacket, the other a blue jacket, make their way through a market. The younger one carries a doll. Now and again, she pulls the older one close to her, grabs her hand, leans into her ear and speaks. It is clear that the older one is looking after her. They embrace as they walk away from a cart selling Pepsi, Sprite and other items. The artist makes us look closely – the video stutters and a few frames are repeated three times in a row. We see an arm of the girl in a blue jacket embrace purple arms, and a purple arm embrace the girl's blue waist. The video stutters again as we see a man in a fur cap and sheepskin coat gently kicking a concrete lamp post while waiting for a bus. We are made to look closely again. Next, we see a young woman sitting by a dirty

windowpane and asking for charity. A female voice from behind the camera asks,

> ‘Can’t you go to Monar?[6] Can’t they help?’
> ‘I’ve been there, I’ve already been to Monar, I met Kotański twice.’
> ‘When?’
> ‘In the spring.’
> ‘Any luck? Can’t Monar help you?’
> ‘They were having money trouble, why should I go to the rehab if I’m not a drug addict?’
> ‘They didn’t find another way?’
> ‘No. Nobody was interested, I just stayed for a few years and then didn’t stay.’
> ‘An AIDS conference is on in Kraków.’
> ‘I know, I heard.’
> ‘These people are helping with it. Is there no shelter that can help? Do you have to … like this until the spring?’

The young woman goes on to say that she prefers to live alone and has no other option (no job or benefits) than to sit and ask for money.

Cut to two men in white shirts, black ties and visors cleaning a tiled floor. The space they are cleaning is decorated with green plants: potted palms and conifers. People sit at tables, eating, and drinking from large paper cups through straws. There’s a glass door in the background. People stop and wait until they can pass through the section where the cleaners are at work. The camera is at floor level, showing their legs. Cut to the bus station. Departure announcements are heard in the background. We see a bench

with two huddled-up people wrapped in multiple layers of clothes, surrounded by bundles. One of the people leans forward, barely keeping its balance. The person remains in this position as if they're asleep. A third person, covered with a sleeping bag, lies with its head on the bundles at the foot of the bench. The three are accompanied by a black dog curled up close by. The camera circles the group, watching them as if they were a sculpture, a wrapped object leading us to redefine the space it occupies.

Cut to the street. An elderly man in a black coat and flat cap stands still. The picture is rotated by ninety degrees, causing or perhaps showing confusion, and the viewers have to tilt their heads to the side. The video slows down, showing that the flow of time has also been disrupted.

Back to the normal view. The camera picks two nuns out of the crowd before focusing on the face of an elderly man with a shopping cart on a packed tram, looking straight into the camera. The picture jerks back and we see the man's gaze again. He turns to the window and flinches with a nervous tic or reflex. The next thing we see is the tram's empty interior. Cut to a coffee shop with three grey-haired suit-wearing men sitting at a table. A waitress in a red apron brings them glasses of steaming tea and vodka. They sweeten the tea. One tries to pour some of his vodka into the glass of another, but the offer is rebuffed. After making a toast, they lean towards each other and talk. The word 'Coca-Cola' is emblazoned in red on a glass pane in the background.

Two young girls – one dressed in blue, the other in red – sit on a line-18 tram, facing each other. One has got a tube in her hand, perhaps a rolled-up poster. They notice the camera, start giggling, lean towards each other.

The camera turns round and captures the face of a woman and the blurred

lights of the night city and the cars going in the opposite direction.

We’re back indoors. In the crowded coffee shop. We see the faces of a young man and a woman. They sit opposite each other. At one point the man reaches for a hand of another woman. She also faces him but remains out of view. The one whose face we see turns to the camera.

The man kisses the hand, which seems independent of the rest of the body before pressing it gently against his face. The hand retreats and then reaches back towards the man’s face but does not touch it. After hanging helplessly for a moment, the hand is withdrawn again. Żebrowska gives prominence to this sequence of hand movements – the slowed-down picture jumps back and forward, the face and hand meet and miss each other twice. There’s another cut and we see the artist’s face and the line ‘Alicja Żebrowska, 8 December 1993’.

In *The End of My Century*, Żebrowska lingers on nervous tics, facial expressions, surprising colours and cuts of clothes, on strange reflexes producing a rift or rupture, also apparent in the stark contrast between the space of the bus station and the space of the restaurant, and defining the bodies in these spaces as normal or disruptive. She observes the dynamic of the abnormal appearing and disappearing in urban spaces. An embrace, an act of kicking the lamp post, a flinch, a clumsy movement, an oddly moving hand are sudden ruptures in the picture of reality, all of them disclosing its underpinning, which is fully revealed in the condition of the bodies of the three people roughing it at the bus station.

It is clear that *The End of My Century* is a chronicle of Poland’s political transition.

What anchors the video it in a particular moment of collective and individual biography is not only the title but also the medium: the VHS tape with its colours. The footage recorded by the artist in the streets of Kraków in early 1992 and late 1993 documents a state of transition, the co-presence of colours, signs, clothes and bodies defined as belonging to the old, communist reality and to the new, capitalist one.

However, Żebrowska's work is not only about the realities of the turn of 1993 but also about what defines our understanding of the images produced by these realities and the bodies captured in these images. This is particularly in evidence in the part of the video in which the picture is tilted, underscoring the confusing traits of visual representation. The disruptions in the form of multiple repetitions of gestures emphasize the moments when the work of the gaze is unsettling. The video reveals how the reading of images is enmeshed with the process of attributing meaning to bodies moving in time and space. This dimension of the work of the gaze becomes apparent in the bus station scene and in the conversation with the HIV-positive girl who asks for charity.

This is when a body defined by its appearance, movement and behaviour in relation to other bodies emerges as a person with an individual history. By holding a piece of cardboard saying that she is HIV-positive, the girl defines her body and social position through a health condition. By constituting herself as excluded and talking to the artist, she reveals for a moment the rich life of the urban background, an existence that eludes the everyday gaze and is not included in representation: neither political nor that which conditions the memory of the political transition.

Beyond representation

Non-representational theory draws on performance studies and investigates that which tends to elude the gaze. Developed primarily by cultural geographer Nigel Thrift in the 1990s and early 2000s, non-representational theory assumes that a linguistic and visual model of culture based on the interpretation of the meaning of phenomena, that is, on representation, is inadequate for neither the scholarly nor the political objectives set for cultural studies at the dawn of the 21st century. Turning to everyday practices, atmosphere, bodily habits, and affects hitherto considered as cultural background, Thrift argues for extending the existing concept of knowledge to include the non-discursive and for redefining the subject, which, in his view, includes a complex constellation of bodies, things, affects, natural and unnatural processes, gestures and tools, habits and mistakes. As Thrift proves, the space beyond the realm of representation is inhabited by actors that elude discourse, have no assigned identity or individual biography, and practise space, the city and culture, permanently suspended between subject and object.

The Thrift method, described by him as ‘the art of producing a permanent supplement to the ordinary, a sacrament for the everyday, a hymn to the superfluous’ (Thrift, 2008, p. 2), like *The End of My Century*, turns its gaze to the street, to surprising gestures, spatial divisions, circulating and circulation-disrupting bodies, it identifies tensions, emotions and affects, it reconstructs movement. Considering Żebrowska’s video from this perspective, it becomes clear that the jumps, the rotated picture and the conversation with the HIV-positive person all serve to stress the fact that the constructed image of reality eludes the logic of representation, that it is based on the disruption rather than the construction of clear meanings. The

image neither replaces the real nor interprets it. When walking about the streets of Kraków, Żebrowska herself becomes part of the ‘unmarked’. And it is the unmarked that she seeks to record.

Invoking the notion of ‘the unmarked’ advanced by Peggy Phelan, one of the foremothers of non-representational theory, I want to signal a close link between undermining the power of representation and attempts to liberate the body from the construct of gender, or rather femininity, because there is only one gender according to the psychoanalytic underpinning of the unmarked. As Phelan argues in her 1993 book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, the female body is marked and functions as a representation constructed by the male gaze. The male body is unmarked, and therefore universal. Some of its political power derives from the fact that its gender is invisible, disappearing under social identity. Femininity does not share the same privilege. To be marked means to be visible as gender. This is the reason why Phelan attributes immense power to invisibility, transparency and to evasion of representation, which, in her understanding, can be referred to as performance. As Żebrowska has repeatedly stressed, what interested her in the 1990s was the reversal or undermining of the meanings attributed to the female body. She treated these meanings, which included the female body’s sinfulness, impurity, status as a source of evil and clear link between gender and identity, as constituting a ‘virtual reality’, i.e. an ideology that imposes meanings on directly experienced materiality. For Thrift, who frequently refers to the notion of virtuality, this is a description of the impact of representation. Tilting, disrupting the production of meaning and practising rather than representing female corporeality, Żebrowska employs irony to create a rupture between the ‘virtual reality’ and the body – the alive and pulsating body that becomes obscene when captured beyond representation. If one adopts this perspective, Żebrowska,

by walking about with a video camera and disrupting rather than recording the images of Kraków's urban life – in the same way as she recorded herself with a false eye in a vagina or filmed the birth of a Barbie doll – performs, practises her body and its societal position, creates images which, as Dorota Sajewska proposes in her definition of obscenities, are non-representations and thus conceal no secrets:

> Obscenities […] are the radical otherness needed for our identity to constitute itself, but they are intrinsically unrepresentable in the realm of representation. Moreover, obscenities are always outside the frame of representation. They are not, therefore, what was hidden but is now revealed. They are not a secret to be revealed. Obscenities exist here and now, they are ever present but […] in a blind spot (2012, p. 169).

In a conversation with Barbara Limanowska, Alicja Żebrowska says of *Original Sin*:

> I wanted to use a specific example like this to show that, regardless of their origin, all kinds of ideologies, myths and cultural norms are merely virtual realities that a community embodies at different times in history. Some people see *Original Sin* as rebellion and negation, but what I tend to do is contest visions rather than negate them (Żebrowska, 1999, p. 45).

It seems, then, that for Żebrowska obscenity is a tool for contesting meanings rather than producing them, for rejecting representation rather than constructing it. Likewise, when she creates the obscene *Onone*,

defecates in front of a photograph of her mother, photographs a boy with a bloody chunk of meat in his mouth, chronicles Sarah's transition process and walks about the streets of Kraków with her camera on, she keeps on undermining the power of representation, capturing bodies, matter, practices, movement, activity, change, atmosphere, affects, the unmarked.

This perspective on Żebrowska's art remains anchored in feminism, which has always been interested in representation and its failings, as Agata Jakubowska reminds us (2004, pp. 32-33). At the same time, it allows a different framing of the political dimension of her art than the 1990s and early 2000s interpretations I have examined. By shifting the focus from images of the female body, even transgressive or abject ones, to a constant disruption of the relationship between body and image, gaze and perception, it reveals a new perspective on the experience of the Transition.

Perhaps at odds with Żebrowska's contemporary position but in line with the history of the reception of her art, I do not see in it a mystery, oneness and the new spirituality, which, as Jakub Banasiak argues, would define the Transition as the eternal now, a moment of suspension between two orders, a kind of liminal phase in an extended process of metamorphosis. Following Żebrowska's gaze – turned to the street or to her own body, taking in the invisible and the obscene – I see that the very notion of transition works as a 'virtual reality', treating the life in the street and in the body as a backdrop to changes defined by the language of economics and politics. Further, as Croatian researcher Boris Buden argues, the post-communist transition is a symbolic representation that hides the emptiness of the event itself (2012, p. 17). The transition is only a representation. Turning to non-representation, to that which eludes discourse, the unwatchable, insignificant, obscene, corporeal – like the Eastern European experience of HIV/AIDS, giving birth

to a plastic doll, or defecating in front of a photograph of one's mother – is thoroughly non-transitologic, whereas attributing meanings to these practices, explaining them through symbols, images and discourses, even if these do not come from critical art, remains, surprisingly as it might seem and contrary to what Banasiak argued, part of a transitologic narrative. The notion of critical art may be due for a rethinking but replacing it with another term, such as 'the art of the new spirituality', does not seem to avoid the transitology trap as defined by Banasiak. This is because, as Thrift points out, a growing interest in ritual, mysticism, Eastern religions or New Age ideas was also a distinctive part of the Westen experience of the 1990s and early 2000s (Thrift, 2008, p. 66). Thus, a clear-cut line between eastern and western proves elusive, and any attempt to draw it would reveal itself as part of the transition discourse, just as the eastern/western division is part of a transitionist mindset. Further, it makes one realize that substituting meanings, or even restoring the original senses and discovering unknown artworks, will not be enough to avoid the logic of the transition, as it is impossible to escape representation while remaining within its realm. As 'empty meaning and its symbolic representation' (Buden, 2012, p. 17), the transition structures our thinking, absorbing every image and text to ultimately render it – like capitalism as theorized by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello does (2005) – part of its meaning, naturalizing it as an element legitimizing a neoliberal conservative order.

By following the non-representational path and choosing to refuse to read Żebrowska's work and, instead, recognizing it as a constellation of body practices will reveal something that the discourse of the transition conceals and that, as Boris Buden has demonstrated, goes against its logic.

A wave of throat-gripping, stomach-churning revulsion that washes over the

viewer of *Original Sin*,*With Mother* or *Gender* can be seen as a reaction to a scene of violence. Felt as ‘physical pain in [one’s] eyeballs’ (Böhme, 1997, p. 75), the harrowing nature of Żebrowska’s images makes one realize how strongly the condition of the body subjected to the pressures of meaning, social norms and political identity is tied up with the experience of violence – not only symbolic but also, often, physical, such as the violence mentioned by the artist, who admitted she had been sexually harassed by a priest. The Transition was experienced as violence against their own bodies by many groups of people, including the HIV-positive individuals thrown out of Monar-run shelters and attacked by local communities, the women denied the right to abortion by a 1993 law, the sick homeless people sleeping at train and bus stations, the gay and trans individuals attacked in public, as well as the farmers protesting against the government’s financial policies or the workers of factories that were being shut down. The installation of capitalism and democracy did not just mark the end of communist oppression and the advent of freedom and emancipation but involved a certain brutality shaping the bodies and the atmosphere of the 1990s. This experience of violence, in my view, is the mystery of the Transition in Żebrowska’s art, peaking from the obscene body and looking into the viewer’s eye. In this sense, then, there is no mystery at all, only a blind spot and the experiencing female body that constantly challenges the regime of representation in all its forms, even those that reject critical art or feminism itself.

Translated by Mirosław Rusek

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Footnotes

1. ‘The Mystery Is Looking: Works from the Time of Transition’ was the English-language title used by the show organizers.
2. PiS (Law and Justice) is a Polish right-wing nationalist, conservative party, often described as populist.
3. ‘Tectonic Movements: On the artistic symptoms of the Transition’ was the English-language title the organizers opted for.
4. Also known as *Extremum*.
5. The artist talks about this explicitly in an interview with Barbara Limanowska published in *Ośka*: ‘This video [*The Mystery Is Watching*] is a consequence of an earlier work, *Original Sin: A Presumed Virtual Reality Project*, which includes a video that opens with a button in a woman’s vagina’ (Żebrowska, 1999, p. 43).
6. Initially a social movement, later an NGO dedicated to treating addictions and promoting drug addiction awareness, Monar was founded by Marek Kotański in the 1980s. When the HIV/AIDS epidemic hit Poland in the late 1980s, Monar and Marek Kotański set up Poland’s first residential homes for HIV-positive individuals. Monar and Kotański became an emblem

of care for seropositive people, especially in the Polish media.

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