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Choreography for Families

Herstory

Research-Artistic Practices

Table of contents

CHOREOGRAPHY FOR FAMILIES

The Politicality of Choreography for Families from the Perspective of Performance as Research

Hanna Bylka-Kanecka

[peer-reviewed]

Soft Choreographies

Alicja Müller Karolina Wycisk

[peer-reviewed]

RESEARCH-ARTISTIC PRACTICES

Riots in Performing Arts Research: a Close-up of Dance, Movement and Choreography

Tercet ¿ Czy badania artystyczne ? (The trio ¿Artistic Research?) Paulina Brelińska-Garszka Zofia Małkowicz-Daszkowska Zofia Reznik

[peer-reviewed]

Provocateurs of Experiences, Practitioners of Traps

Dorota Ogrodzka

[peer-reviewed]

LOCAL CULTURES

From Servitude to Cognitive Sovereignty

Ewa Bal

[peer-reviewed]

INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

Work Is Always Elsewhere: Institut Practices and

the International Performing Arts Field

Marta Keil

[peer-reviewed]

Ms Ula and Ms President

Witold Mrozek

[peer-reviewed]

HERSTORY

‘They were devouring her with their eyes’

Agnieszka Wanicka

[peer-reviewed]

CHOREOGRAPHY FOR FAMILIES

The Politicality of Choreography for Families from the Perspective of Performance as Research

Hanna Bylka-Kanecka

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to provide a reflection on the choreographic practice in the field of dance performance for families in the context of related fields of politicalness, from the perspective of performance as research. The author describes some important moments in the global and Polish cultural policy concerning dance for children and presents an understanding of politicalness after Ana Vujanović and Mark Franko. The text undertakes reflection on the usefulness of the language of posthumanism (Chikako Takeshita, Karen Barad and Donna Haraway) in research into choreography intended for families. The author gives an insight into the creative practice by analysing the dimensions of politicalness in three performances by the Holobiont collective which she co-founded.

Keywords: performance as research; choreography; the political; TYA; posthuman

Dance and choreography for children are currently undergoing intensive development (Bylka-Kanecka, 2020). Both Poland and the world are host to more and more dance performances addressed to young audiences.

Influential international TYA (Theater for Young Audience) festivals offer increasingly more events in the field of dance and choreography for children, including those addressed to the youngest audiences. Perhaps the most vivid

example of this tendency is the International Dance Festival for Young Audience, held in Germany¹.

I believe that the moment when the field of choreography for children and families has emerged as a prominent fixture on Polish and international stages is the right time to devise a language for their description and critical reflection on the subject. This would enable one to define the specificity of dance and choreography for children (along with drawing an everdenser map of its key questions), facilitate communication with people from other disciplines, help highlight the potential behind this type of choreographic work, and take a step towards adequate intellectual, institutional and financial conditions for its development. I consider the advancement of critical thought in the field of choreography for children and families to be particularly important also because of the intertwining of public and private dimensions that are characteristic of this context. With the evolution (if not an outright boom) in research on childhood, it is impossible to ignore the need to revise the forms and content of artistic events intended for children. Today, it seems necessary for artists to consider audience agency, and in this context the democratization of artistic experience carries considerable weight: after all, the history of children's emancipation only dates back about a century, and their dependence on adults remains indisputable. Thus, when thinking about children, it seems worthwhile to take a broader look at the entire system (first that of the family, then that of society), and at the ways of creating performances that are also systems in their own right.

My choreographic practice within the Holobiont collective, which I co-create with Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, has revealed to me a series of difficult and important questions about the balance of power, the ways in which power is produced and used (by the artist, the parent, the child), the means

of communication with the audience, and the methods of caring for oneself and for event participants. The interlocked systems of relations, stagnant and temporarily produced structures, expectations, alliances, misunderstandings, ruptures, refusals and engagements that we witness during our performances, lead me to reconsider not only the political aspect of our work, but also the critical potential inherent in choreography for families. The aim of this paper is to reflect on the choreographic practice of dance performances for families in the context of politicality from the perspective of performance as research². To this end, I will list the most important developments in the cultural politics of the recent years towards dance for children; furthermore, I will articulate an understanding of politicality that is especially dear to me, sharing the ideological vantage point of my thinking about choreography for families and analyzing four performances of the Holobiont collective developed between 2016 and 2019: *DOoKOŁA* (roundABOUT)³, *Księżycowo* (Moonland)⁴, *_on_line_*⁵ and *Gdzie kształty mają szyje* (Where Shapes Have Necks)⁶. This article deliberately does not offer reflection on our latest performance, *Mój ogon i ja* (My Tail and I), since it constitutes Holobiont's first piece focused entirely on somatic practices; as such, I plan to cover it in a separate article in the near future.

Cultural politics

The past few years saw two groundbreaking events that illustrate the powerful dynamics of change in choreography for children: one of them took place in Poland, the other had an international character. On the domestic scene, the event in question was *Mała Platforma Tańca* (the Little Dance Platform), held for the first time in the history of Polish dance. Organized as part of the biennial *Polska Platforma Tańca* (Polish Dance Platform; est. 2008), the event took place in Gdańsk on August 30-31, 2019. Organized by

Instytut Muzyki i Tańca (the Institute of Music and Dance) in Warsaw, Miejski Teatr Miniatura in Gdańsk, and Fundacja Polka (the Polka Foundation), the event featured performances addressed to children and families, a panel discussion on dance for children, and outdoor movement workshops. Mała Platforma Tańca was initiated by Ula Zerek and Katarzyna Ustowska, associated with the aforementioned Fundacja Polka. The appetite for an event of this type had also been articulated during Polska Platforma Tańca in 2017 by Alicja Morawska-Rubczak, an expert in theater for the youngest audiences, during the panel *What's the matter with dance... for children?* Mała Platforma Tańca enabled the consolidation of the Polish community centered around dance and choreography for children and families, and was an institutional signal testifying to the recognition of the development of this trend in Poland. Although the 'family' platform took place a few days before the 'adult' platform, which did not help their integration (Lemańska, 2019), the bilingual catalog published on the occasion was a link between the two events and an invaluable archival and promotional material⁷.

On the international arena, the watershed event in the recent evolution of dance for families with children was the establishment of the Young Dance Network (YDN) in 2021⁸. The organization was created and will operate under the umbrella of ASSITEJ International⁹, the world's largest organization facilitating the development of performing arts for children, which currently runs its centers in eighty-five countries around the world. The YDN is one of six networks operating within the association, alongside those focused on the development of young professionals in the areas of TYA (Next Generation), screenwriting (Write Local Play Global), performing arts for children under five (Small Size), academic researchers (International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network), and theater for children

towards inclusivity (International Inclusive Arts Network). The context of the establishment of the Young Dance Network is important because of the decision-making and opinion-making capacity of ASSITEJ International, which contributes global and continental guidelines and reports. The association's involvement has a tangible impact on the cultural policies of many countries while also fostering the promotion and distribution of financial resources facilitating long-term artistic activities. The establishment of a separate network dedicated solely to dance for children thus offers hope for the advancement of the field and its increased visibility. The latter is a value articulated in the YDN objectives, along with (among others) building awareness of the potential of dance in educational contexts, creating a platform for the exchange of experiences, creating joint projects, building knowledge, or defining and promoting the specificity of dance. The YDN's symbol is a circle that illustrates inclusiveness, and the lack of hierarchy and assessment. The network's definition of dance is broad: 'Everybody can dance and join the dancing community,' reads one of the first sentences of the YDN activity description. Though seemingly vague, this statement carries a fundamental meaning as a strong ideological statement in the spirit of democratization of dance.

The aforementioned events prove the existence of a critical mass of people involved in dance and choreography for children, and the need to popularize this field. Such a need has also been recognized by Instytut Muzyki i Tańca, which seeks to promote Polish dance pieces internationally, under the umbrella of the recently established PolandDances program. I personally associate the current moment in the history of dance for children with the slow yet persistent hatching of something that has been present, in varying degrees of intensity, all over the world for many years now. It is my belief that asking questions about what, how and for whom we create is of

particular importance at this moment.

At this point, I should mention the issue of production methods. I think it warrants a separate study. It is still a mystery to me how to produce a dance piece so as to cater not only for the audience but also myself. How to ensure appropriate financial, space and time conditions for the people who create movement performances for children? In particular, how does one achieve this goal as a parent of small children, dividing one's time between working in the studio and communing with one's family (which is also the case with me). While every venue that has hosted our performances has been supportive and open, I still believe that creating a performance is a process similar to caring for a newborn, one that requires attention, time and strength. To make a living solely from making dance performances for children, this symbolic birth would have to occur several times a year; my creative processes, however, take much longer, as does my recovery after premieres. How to produce a dance piece in close relation to oneself and with respect for others? How many open rehearsals should one organize? To what extent should one involve families in the process of performance creation? How to take care of the life of a dance spectacle that is produced outside of a repertory institution? Some of these problems concern the entire Polish dance community, yet my focus lies with the forms of institutional support for artists who are also parents and for those who create performances for children and families. I hope that the existence of Mała Platforma Tańca, along with the global trend of developing choreographies for children will spearhead the emergence of systemic (Polish and global) solutions in this area.

Politicality

In this text, I propose to frame politicality in the broad sense of a filter (by which I mean a lighting filter rather than a straining mesh), which reveals the emerging and dissolving meanings, subjects, their collective definitions, and their mutual dynamic arrangements and relations. Such an approach is close to the notion of politicality proposed by Ana Vujanović, who also conceived of politicality as ways of acting and intervening in the public sphere (Vujanović, 2018)¹⁰. At the same time, I assume that choreography is always political, whether one likes it or not. Therefore, I am not interested in the judgment of politicality or non-politicality (and, even less so, in the competition for being deemed the most and least political). What I am invested in, on the other hand, is how politicality manifests itself in dance events intended for children and families. In other words, I am preoccupied with the politicality of the events in question (in terms of their structure, color, quality, terrain, rather than 'size'). How are the elements resulting from conscious reflection structured, and (oftentimes more interestingly) where are the unconscious artistic assumptions (and the performance itself) revealed? Sticking to this psychoanalytic metaphor, I understand reflection on politicality as an analysis of what is on the surface combined with an insight into what is hidden but manifests itself in various ways. In this respect, then, I am close to the reflections offered by choreographer and researcher Mark Franko, who in one of his seminal texts on the politicality of dance argues that, 'In fact, to speak [...] of dance as not political means nothing. Research around dance should therefore continuously revisit the complex interactions between dance and politics defined in different ways' (Franko, 2018, p. 39).

In attempting to analyze and provide insight into the work I have co-

authored, I am, on the one hand, stepping onto the slippery ground of a never-quite-objective perspective and the attendant competence anxiety (Berendt, Guzy, Majewska, Ruszkiewicz, Wawryk, 2021). However, seeing that the number of critical texts on choreography for families is still scarce, I think that any contribution to the expansion of discourse is potentially valuable. Writing from the position of a person actively shaping the Polish dance scene allows me to explore topics from the dual perspective of practical experience and theoretical reflection. I hope the text will inspire readers toward further in-depth and serious reflection on the political load embedded in the oft-inconspicuous performances for the young and youngest audiences while also encouraging creators to build and scrutinize their own subjective ideological networks in the context of constructing events for children and families.

The first step in this journey is to unveil the part of the ideological grid that underpins the work of the Holobiont collective. One strand that I find particularly useful in reflecting on dance and choreography for children – a strand that is still rarely associated with performing arts for children – is posthumanism¹¹. The themes explored by posthumanist authors have been my starting point in creating the majority of performance concepts and applied texts for the subsequent works of the Holobiont collective. These references are most often not to be found in the synopses of the performances written for the audience, where marketing communicativeness comes into play, but they are instead part of processual work on the performances. And even if I do not trace each of our performances directly to posthumanist texts, I can nonetheless see *ex post* that our work continues to revolve around specific posthumanist premises.

The post-human

The name of the collective I co-founded was coined in 2018¹²; it was inspired by Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016). The term 'holobiont' (Gr. *hólos* - all, whole; *bíos* - life), created by the biologist Lynn Margulis in 1991 and invoked by Haraway, refers to a complex organism coexisting in symbiosis with various other organisms. And while the researcher uses the term to describe the relationship of humans to non-humans, the 'holobiont' seemed to me an apt metaphor for the family, which amounts to a diverse and complex whole; not only as a (mostly) genetically related jigsaw puzzle, but also as a certain system with a realm of shared experiences (emotions experienced together, a common place to live, meals eaten together, etc.) that shape their family microbiota. This whole is immersed in a larger network of relationships that are society, culture, ecosystem, matter, cosmos.

I find the metaphor of family as a holobiont particularly interesting because of its ontological aspect in the context of contemplating subjects and objects (and subjectivity and objectivity) of all participants of our family art events. Posthumanism takes away our confidence in holistic and stable categories, pointing to their often unexpected dynamics, in which aspects, persons, subjects, objects, threads other than the most audible ones come to the fore, and the hierarchies and power arrangements between them are in constant motion and can be viewed from many subjective perspectives. I find this ontological fluidity or vulnerability particularly inspiring precisely in the context of thinking about children, childhood, and the reciprocal relationships (including power) between adults and children. I treat the terms themselves and the fields of association tied to the words 'child,' 'childhood,' and 'adult' as permeable, incomplete, changeable, and sensitive

to cultural processes.

Contesting Early Childhood is a series of publications that explores the constructs and practices of childhood in an insightful, interdisciplinary and bold way, combining practical and theoretical perspectives¹³. Its authors focus primarily on preschool education, analyzing (from the perspectives of philosophy, pedagogy, neuroscience, political science) how preschool care can shape ethically conscious democratic structures. The series is also invaluable for the visibility of research on pre-school children. It places them at the center of serious and critically sound reflection on the impact of adult-made structures on children and their development.

In my research and artistic practice, however, I am particularly interested in policies related to an even earlier stage than those associated with preschool settings. The question that recurs in our work concerns the moments and origins of the construction of meanings and structures. In this context, I would like to invoke the fascinating text *From Mother/Fetus to Holobiont(s): A Material Feminist Ontology of the Pregnant Body* by the feminist scholar Chikako Takeshita (2017). Taking her cue from agential realism creator Karen Barad's reflections on pregnant people, Takeshita introduces the non-dichotomous and non-individualized term 'mother-fetus' to describe the holobiont that is the pregnant person. Takeshita juxtaposes the feminist narrative about the fetus's autonomy from the mother (which for years has been construed in the context of an important struggle for female autonomy and reproductive rights) with Barad's thought and recent research in biology indicating a number of symbiotic bacteria that divide the fetus (as a holobiont-guest) and the mother (as a holobiont-host). From this perspective, in keeping with New Materialist thought, it is difficult to speak of the separation of mother and fetus, and the term 'holobiont' accurately captures

the relationality and complexity of this symbiotic, multi-organism entity. As Takeshita puts it:

The participation of bacteria compels us to reconceptualize pregnancy not so much as a collaborative process between the Mother and Fetus, but as the integration of the fertilized egg into a holobiont. A holobiont by definition defies the self/other binary: the understanding that many of our 'personal' traits are defined by microbial activities interacting with the host genome has weakened the notion of a totally independent organism around which the 'self' is built (pp. 14-15).

I would like to juxtapose Takeshita's reflection with that concerning the Aristotelian categories describing life, i.e. *bios* and *zoe*, proposed by the posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti. According to classical philologist Karl Kerényi, *zoe* denotes all existing life, while *bios* outlines the distinct, characteristic contours of life that help distinguish one existence from another and express lives that possess particular qualities (Kerenyi, 1997, p. 16). Aristotle considered *bios* as

the only one worthy of consideration and special protection [...] while this biological aspect of life – *zoe* associated with the banality of day-to-day satisfaction of physiological needs – has been relegated to the undervalued sphere of everyday life [...], confined to the domain of women and slaves (Bakke, 2012, p. 38).

In her own materialist concept (rooted in the Spinozian tradition), Braidotti argues that a contemporary change of the humanistic subject has occurred,

in which *bios* has been seen as *zoe*. In the words of Monika Bakke,

The return of *zoe*, a force superseded by the humanist tradition, now calls for a serious consideration in humanities and arouses hope for seeing the recognition of the need for an urgent reformulation of the relation between the human and non-human. This, in turn, would make it possible to overcome the anthropocentric and androcentric ontology and ethics, consequently enabling the emergence of a different subjectivity, constituted with the full acceptance of *zoe* (p. 40).

Artistically, the most interesting question arising from the reflections of the aforementioned posthumanist scholars is (in my case) the one concerning the moments of emergence and distinction (as well as concealment and dissolution) of entities and meanings, particularly in the context of parental and caring relations. The history of childhood is replete with extremely anthropocentric visions of the child; perhaps the most dramatic example was the medieval habit of portraying children in paintings as minute adults. Seeing the child as an unfinished adult (a conviction that is unfortunately very much alive and still practiced today) assumes that young children's being in the world is a process of their 'humanization.' The posthumanist perspective, on the other hand, allows us to regard young children as full-fledged creatures, living in and maintaining a specific relationship with a particular environment. Such an understanding of relationality – subtly pronounced on the outside and at the same time radically experienced and constitutive on the inside – holistically connects the material and physical with the cognitive and emotional, recognizing the flows between various human and non-human agents and their influence on the way we experience

ourselves and the world at any given moment, is particularly close to me and resonates (I hope) in our performances. Equally important in this context is the aspect of parental relation, given that I only started to create pieces for children and families and initiate artistic meetings with Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska after giving birth to my first child. It was a very transformational experience for me, and accompanying my children in everyday life gave me a strong impulse to reflect on the origins of structures, meanings and politicality.

One particularly interesting and useful aspect of posthumanism in the context of creating dance performances for families is its interdisciplinary language, which incorporates terms biological and physical terminology into philosophical considerations. In the context of reflecting on movement and choreography, this language is a treasure trove of inspiring images and metaphors. Of particular artistic and analytical interest for me are the moments of recognition, acknowledgement and experience of mutual autonomy among family members, as well as the constellations of family relations and interdependencies. When does *bios* emerge from *zoe*? And how does (and what does) the holobiont that I am, and in which I am, function? Or, to borrow from Barad, 'When does matter come to matter?' I ask myself these questions and try to make them resonate in our performances when questioning the traditional hierarchical performance structure that consists of artists, adult audience, and child participants.

Post-dance

In October 2015, Stockholm hosted a major conference on experimental dance, which brought together world-renowned theorists, artists, teachers as well as curators. The objective of the Post-Dance Conference was to

provide ‘an opportunity to really find time and space to reflect on the developments and forces that have shaped choreographic imagination from the 1960s up to today.’ One of the outcomes of this three-day meeting was the publication of the subsequent proceedings. In one of the papers, Mårten Spångberg, a Swedish artist working in the field of choreography in its broadest sense, attempts to outline his understanding of the relationship between choreography, contending that, ‘Dance in its initial state is not organized, it is pure expression, but in order to be located it needs organization [...]. There is no causality between choreography and dance nor is there between dance and choreography’ (Spångberg, 2017, p. 371). Spångberg presents dance as something primordial and vital, which we nevertheless need to recognize using specific structures. The theme of emergence and conscious renunciation of subjectivity also recurs later in his conference paper:

Dance is not first of all a matter of subjectivity. Dance is a subject performing form. It is subjects or identities performing but their responsibility is not to issue subjectivity but instead to, so to say, become vehicles for the dance, to become anonymous (pp. 374-375).

The way Spångberg ennobles the anonymous, dissolute, consciously withdrawn subjectivity and identity of a vital being reminds me of the discourse on dance improvisation that flourished with the American avant-garde of the 1960s, one whose historical roots go much deeper, to ‘the cultural practices of African Americans and Native Americans’ (Ciesielski, 2020, p. 28). I understand the practices that allow us to disengage from the identity schema in favor of seeking the energetic, spontaneous, direct

presence to be what Spångberg calls dance. One choreographically relevant thread for me is to track my own attention and observe the dynamics and moments in which I am able to extract different perceptions, judgments, thoughts, associations, as well as those moments in which I allow myself to remain in a state of vivid non-extraction, 'not yet named,' suspension (which is also enabled by movement practices and choreographic tools). I find the moments of transition between one state and another to be the most interesting. The ability to recognize them, to distinguish them, and to play with them allows us to observe in ourselves the subjective and deep policies that guide us, and this is precisely what I would like to share and experience together with the people who come to our performances and co-create them through different kinds of participation. In this sense, I am interested in the personal politics (or perhaps better the micro- and nanopolitics) of families. Drawing once more on Braidotti and her interpretation of Aristotle, I wonder which areas of the family are established as *zoe* (seen as diffuse, vital, and customarily deemed irrelevant to the inner history of a given family), and which are situated in the realm of *bios* (felt as named, stable identity-wise, and resulting from traditionally bestowed superiority)? And how are these ideological beliefs or life habits practiced in the family context? Who determines them and in what ways? Are they immutable or negotiable? These are the questions that accompanied me during the creation of each of our performances.

Content, form, modes of production

Speaking of the politicality of dance and choreography, and drawing on the work of Ana Vujanović and Joanna Szymajda, I would like to focus on its three modalities (Vujanović) or dimensions¹⁴ – content, form, and modes of production – and examine the first two in the context of the aforementioned

works of the Holobiont collective.

Our performances are based on assuming the significance of physical and emotional involvement in the child-parent relationship and the potential of dance art and choreography in deepening family relationships. When, after some time, I went back to the concept I had written for our first 'foundational' performance *DOoKOŁA* (which at the same time constituted a competition entry), I was reminded that the original working title of the piece was *Progres przez regres* (Progress Through Regress). Although we later changed it due to its limited marketing appeal, it nonetheless reflects the very beginning of the ideological field of our activity and the assumption that it is through access to a valuable, regressive state of mind of an adult parent or a caregiver that it is possible for a family to grow and accompany the child in its development. I understand this regressive state of mind as the ability to dissolve an identity that has been constructed over many years, and to be holistically open to the diversity of influences and experiences that occur during our interaction with our cares.

Our collective has consistently and consciously publicized all of our pieces as family events (intended for children and parents/caregivers alike). Our performances have been addressed to families with children of various ages – *DOoKOŁA*: 1.5-3-year-olds; *Księżycowo*: 2-year-olds and younger; *_on_line_*: 5-7-year-olds; *Gdzie kształty mają szyje*: 6-7-year-olds. Pre-school development seems to us to be especially valuable in terms of building family ties, which form the matrix of the child's subsequent social ties. When building movement material for performances, we use mainly somatic practices (especially Body-Mind Centering, the Feldenkrais Method, and Authentic Movement, often creatively interpreting them, e.g. our work in *Księżycowo* was based on translating the BMC logic into cacti), task

improvisation, and dreamwork¹⁵. All of these methods allow us to build bridges with children's experience in different ways while also providing means for sustaining children's memory and the open and attentive state of mind required to engage in open play during performances.

The most important substantive factor of our events involves building their content around abstract images and scenographic-sensory objects. There are twelve identical foam pink mattresses in *DOoKOŁA*. They are successively rolled up and hung up, molded into various shapes, and in the final scene laid flat on the ground. The set design of *Księżycowo*, vividly fleshed out, consists of a curtain of rock-like material and felt and metal objects of various sizes, whose shapes are inspired by various species of cacti. The third performance, *_on_line_*, takes place on a huge sheet of paper (roughly six by seven meters, depending on the type of venue), on which a large-scale, abstract image is created using pastels that capture the movement of performers and families. The title of the last performance, *Gdzie kształty mają szyje*, refers directly to playing with the abstraction. The scenography designed by visual artist Alicja Bielawska consists of colorful, mobile curtains, string arches and round, wooden objects that can be moved around the floor, opening a multitude of meanings. Each of these stage sets is designed and employable in such a way as to trigger the imagination of both young and adult audiences. In the conversations that follow each performance, we have heard a variety of stories triggered in children and adults alike. Adults frequently try to ascertain whether their perceptions and imaginations coincide with those we used to make the show, which is something children never ask us about. The foam shape we create is dubbed a flower, a fire extinguisher, a snake, and a pillow. The overhanging forms from *Księżycowo* are referred to as worms, jellyfish, aliens or shower snakes.

During the final *_on_line_* scene, in which a giant drawing is hoisted up, accompanied by a sequence of color-changing floodlights (each bringing out different colors and elements of the drawing), we listen to the emerging stories of moons, rainbows, dinosaurs, and maps. The objects featured in *Gdzie kształty mają szyje* tend to be seen as curtains, fire, clouds (fabrics), portals, braids, gates (string arches), pebbles, caterpillars, and little human figures (wooden items). It is only in this performance that a poetic text appears, which came to life during movement improvisations. Its content and syntax do not exhaust the possible storylines and meanings. On the contrary, they encourage the audience to make their own associations and reassure the conviction that any personal logic is welcome. For example, the text uttered alternately by the performers in the first scene of *Gdzie kształty mają szyje*, reads:

Welcome to our place. Once upon a time here it will be the same, although a few things would be different if it weren't for the fact that, over the hills and far away, there once lived someone who, much like red, always sought to be at the forefront, eager to succumb to the revolutions of blue and orange spheres, while purple messed around in the green gummy fern, not knowing that rain sometimes falls sideways, too.

In our performances, successive scenes do not form a single story (although in *Księżycowo* the narrative is present). Instead, they comprise a set of different actions taken by the performers in relation to each other, to the objects, and to the families involved in the performance. The objects and performers change their shapes, contexts, and meanings. They enable associations to hook onto something, to grow from and dissolve into

something, making room for more. Working with abstract forms and images that trigger the imagination of both children and adults allows us to emotionally and cognitively engage the family as a whole. This is a particularly important aspect for us, since we assume that a child does not exist in a social vacuum (no children's performance is possible without the participation of a parent or caregivers, such as, at the very least, a school teacher), and that parents, too, have aesthetic needs that can be satisfied by a family outing to a dance performance.

Another important and consistent element of our work to date is the inclusion of family fun in the performances. All our performances involve active participation of families (more on that later in the text). We have rejected the classic division of a play for young children: thirty minutes of performance plus ten minutes of play (usually without the performers). We believe that playing together is the most important facet of our work. If the families start to be active only once the show is over (and there are interactive parts in all of our performances), the show will not work as intended. This signals to us that the interactive parts are too short or too rigidly structured and do not allow for free and satisfying expression by the participants. Adult audiences, however, are often all too immersed in the classic convention of children's shows, and it is not always easy to get them to renounce that habit. One of our tried-and-true ways is to leave ample space for families during the common parts of each show. The performers tone their activity down for a while, sometimes to a provocative minimum¹⁶, while letting the audience know that, without the parents' activity, the show will continue in a kind of suspension. By including the interplay of families in our performances, we want to appreciate the everyday interaction between children and adults, thus showing that it is precisely there where the greatest cultural value lies.

Including families in on-stage actions also concerns the second of the aforementioned modalities of politicality, i.e. form. All of our performances consist of parts intended for watching, those conceived as joint movement activities, and those in which the boundary between the first and second type of scenes is intentionally blurred. *DOoKOŁA* begins with a viewing sequence lasting a couple of minutes, followed by a scene of shared play that begins with the gradual transfer of foam mattresses to the audience. The families stay on stage until the end of the show, with the performers acting with or parallel to them. In *Księżycowo*, which is addressed to families with children up to two years of age, the dramaturgy alternates (although the children can move freely throughout the performance). In the opening scene, which takes several minutes and unfolds in front of a breathing stone curtain, the children usually sit in their caregivers' laps (although there have been times when they have crawled towards the performer and wanted her to take them in her arms). Conversely, the part of the performance that takes place behind the curtain (i.e. in the actual performance space) is divided into sequences in which the dancers employ expansive movement, fragments in which they remain almost motionless and with their eyes closed, moments in which they themselves intensively interact with objects, scenes in which the object assists them in interacting with the participants of the performance, and sequences in which objects are handed over to the audience. In the final scene, the performers gather the available objects in one place and incorporate them into a movement sequence. The remaining two performances were intended for older children, aged between five and seven, and the creation of the interactive form took place within a structure that was explicitly communicated to the participants. *_on_line_* employs the convention of a game in which the performers' entry into the audience is a cue for joint action, while the subsequent 'watchable' scenes are signaled by

the pre-determined sound signal (gong chime) and a place marked out by a rectangle of light from which the audience will watch the performers' actions (each time situated along a different edge of the huge sheet of paper). Elements of surprise and challenge enable us to render this shredded structure playful and engaging both children and adults. In *Gdzie kształty mają szyje*, we proposed yet another structure. At the beginning, the audience is divided into two teams (purple and red), led by two performers. The first two scenes are structured in a three-phase rhythm: both teams watch the actions of the two performers before one of them takes one team to the stage while the other watches; then, the performers and groups switch. The last scene also begins with the actions of the performers being watched by both teams, but this time both teams join in, so that at the end they sit together in the middle of the circle made of wooden set pieces, taking a moment to watch the movement of the fabrics (set in motion by the windmills) together.

Depending on the performance and the target group, we plan different joint activities, always leaving room for individual reactions (to the highest degree in *Księżycowo*, and to the lowest in *Gdzie kształty mają szyje*). However, the transitions from the 'watchable' to the 'doable' parts invariably stress the fact that each of the people present in the audience may have a different sensitivity, expression, temperament, and sense of humor. And because it is paramount to us to leave room for diversity, we try to ensure that the invitation to act does not require an immediate response. We aim to ensure that joining us should be internally motivated, e.g. by curiosity or a desire to have fun, rather than a sense of obligation or embarrassment (which would be contradictory to our understanding of art for families).

All of our performances begin with verbal instructions. Almost invariably

(except for *Księżycowo*), the instructions are delivered by the performer(s). They include straight-forward and concise information about the structure of the performance, an introduction of the performers, and an invitation to joint family activities. The instructions preceding *Gdzie kształty mają szyje* are the most elaborate: not only do the performers narrate the complex structure of the performance by presenting the cues for entering and leaving the stage (the sound signal, the light, and the object in concrete movement), but they also blur the line between the technical instruction and the beginning of the performance by introducing the ‘performing’ objects with poetic names (*gryzdole*, *kuszynony*, and *mitasze owotne*) and dividing the audience into two groups, which is done somewhat in passing and in a playful manner, rendering the invitation to play unforced (according to our sincere hopes and feedback to date). In the course of our work on the four performances, we have come to appreciate the importance of the specific phrases used in the instructions, their power to make families more confident in entering the experimental performance, and the sense of humor that helps us connect with families. However, I am currently thinking about structuring the performances in such a way that they retain the interactive nature without requiring prior instructions. How to replace what has been spoken so far with stage action? We have been working towards this model in our latest production *Mój ogon i ja*¹⁷, which premiered last December at Teatr Polski in Poznań thanks to the aforementioned PolandDances program supported by the Instytut Muzyki i Tańca.

Conclusion

Dance and choreography for children and families are particularly interesting in the context of politicality. During family events (in the broad sense of the word ‘families’), we can observe how the structure (or a part of

it in the form of a parent/caregiver and a child) that forms a matrix of subsequent social relations functions in a public setting in relation to the structure of a performance that grows out of beliefs about children, parenting, care, and different philosophies of childhood professed by the artists who create choreographies with family audiences in mind. Choreography and dance for families also constitute an interesting crossroads where the human meets the non-human. Young children, with their uncompromisingly (in comparison to adults) expressive physiology and emotionality, remind us of our animalistic origins; placing their everyday movement (far from that practiced by most adults every day and from what dance is associated with) and play at the center of dance events is close to the postulates of dance democratization, which have resonated in theoretical discourse with great intensity since the American avant-garde of the 1960s. Looking back at the four performances of the Holobiont collective I have co-created, they can be seen as a certain intellectual whole, focused on the emergence and blurring of meanings and attempting to redefine the classical form of performances for children.

It is my sincere hope that expanding the scope of critical ruminations on choreography to include the broadly defined field of family will further the reflections of dance practitioners and theorists working in the dance and performing arts for children.

Translated by Józef Jaskulski

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Footnotes

1. See the official website of the festival, <https://purple-tanzfestival.de/> [accessed: 1.12.2021].
2. In using the term 'performance as research,' I consistently refer to the methodology for describing and disseminating knowledge that originates in creative practices. See Arlander

et al., 2017.

3. Authors: concept: Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, choreography: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, creation and performance: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, Natalia Oniśk, artistic supervision: Dalija Aćin Thelander, music: Patryk Lichota, lighting design: Joanna Leśnierowska, Łukasz Kędzierski, costumes: Aneta Chudzicka Szycie na Miare, produced by: Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk, co-produced by: Malta Festival Poznań, partner: Społeczne Przedszkole Lipowa Alejka w Poznaniu.

4. Authors: concept: Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, choreography: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, creation and performance: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Bożena Wydrowska/ Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, music: Michał Jacaszek, stage design consultant: Alicja Bielawska, lighting design consultant: Aleksandr Prowaliński, costumes and stage design: Lazy Studio, lighting directors: Zofia Krystman, Witold Juralewicz, sound directors: Piotr Trojanowski, Maciej Witkowski, produced by: Teatr Ochoty, co-produced by: Art Fraction Foundation.

5. Authors: concept: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, choreography: Holobiont collective (Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska and Hanna Bylka-Kanecka), creation and performance: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Dana Chmielewska, Paweł Gła, music/collage: Józef Buchnajzer, technical director: Łukasz Kędzierski, lighting design consultant: Joanna Leśnierowska, produced by: Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk, partner: Społeczne Przedszkole Lipowa Alejka.

6. Authors: concept and choreography: Holobiont collective, installation: Alicja Bielawska, creation and performance: Dana Chmielewska, Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, music: Patryk Lichota, technical director: Łukasz Kędzierski, produced by: Centrum Sztuki Dziecka, co-produced by: Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk.

7. At this point one should also mention two other landmark events in Polish dance for children. March 2022 saw the first International Academic Conference 'Dance in Education and Human Development,' organized by the Polish National Institute of Music and Dance. The conference was a prelude to the introduction of dance as a school subject in public comprehensive schools. The second event was the first edition of Matter and Sand Toy. Festival of Dance Art for Children, organized by Materia in Łódź within the framework of the Spaces of Art program, which took place in the second half of 2022.

8. The idea of the network first emerged in 2017, see www.youngdancenetwork.com [accessed: 1.12.2021].

9. See the official ASSITEJ website, <https://www.assitej-international.org/en/> [accessed: 1.12.2021].

10. For other intriguing takes on the politicality of dance and choreography, see *Dance, Politics and Co-immunity*, 2013; *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, 2017, A. Lepecki, 2006.

11. Artists working in the field of choreography for children whose oeuvres have been inspired by posthumanism include: Dalija Aćin Thelander, Isabelle Schäd, Jared Gradinger and Angela Schubot, Janine Harrington.

12. Our first production, *DOOKOŁA*, which premiered in early 2017, was signed with our names, without the stamp of the collective.

13. For more information on the series, visit the publisher's website: <https://www.routledge.com/Contesting-Early-Childhood/book-series/SE0623> [accessed: 1.12.2021].

14. J. Szymajda, *polityka tańca* [entry], *Słownik tańca XX i XXI wieku*, <http://slowniktanca.uni.lodz.pl/polityka-tanca/> [accessed: 1.12.2021].
15. Anna Nowicka taught me to work with dreams in the context of choreography, while Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska learned it from Anna Godowska and Sławomir Krawczyński.
16. This aspect was also addressed by M. Maczuga, *DOOKOŁA - ruch do kwadratu*, <https://e-teatr.pl/dookoLa-ruch-do-kwadratu-a230244> [accessed: 1.12.2021].
17. Authors: concept: Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, choreography: Holobiont collective in collaboration with Heike Kuhlmann, Adalisą Menghini and Ka Rustler, creation and performance: Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska, Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, Dana Chmielewska, stage design cooperation: Mr.Tail, music: Józef Buchnajzer, production: Fundacja Performat, coproduction: Teatr Polski in Poznań, partner: Somatische Akademie in Berlin, distribution: Performat Production – Karolina Wycisk.

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CHOREOGRAPHY FOR FAMILIES

Soft Choreographies

On Experimental Dance Performances for Families

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Karolina Wycisk

Abstract

The article discusses characteristic dramaturgical and ethical strategies that appear in the field of experimental dance for families. It describes selected works of Anna Wańtuch (*Contact Families Show*) and the Holobiont collective (*_on_line_*) in which children and their guardians are invited to participate in a creative process. Moreover, kids do not imitate adults, but are encouraged to act and perform according to their own wishes and conditions. Both projects practise care and affectionate relations, value the process as an element of production, and are inspired by change. The article argues that these interactive performances can be described as examples of what Mette Ingvarsten calls 'soft choreography', i.e. a choreography that produces a safe space for a dialogical meeting and particularly stresses the importance of being attentive and responsive to the different needs of others. It proves that dance works that embody non-hierarchical social systems and do not objectify young audiences have enormous emancipatory potential and can be treated as speculations about possible, more inclusive futures.

Keywords: experimental dance; multigenerational projects; affirmative ethics; Holobiont collective; Anna Wańtuch; soft choreography

Tender coexistence

The article unpacks selected choreographic strategies present on the dance for families scene on the examples from the oeuvres of Anna Wańtuch and the Holobiont collective (co-formed by Hanna Bylka-Kanecka and Aleksandra Bożek-Muszyńska). One of the perspectives adopted in the text is the position of viewers who are not mothers and thus interpret the watched performances outside the context of family participation in a performative event. We combine this problem-based approach with the one focused on organization and production, since the synthesis of these two approaches¹ allows us to better understand the specificity of experimental choreographies for families in Poland, which lack stable support and are produced from the bottom up thanks to the active work of artists². The non-institutional working environment in which these choreographers create their work provides them with a degree of autonomy while at the same time significantly limiting their production capacity and, importantly in the context of improving sustainability³ of new dance, the utilization of emerging presentation formats.

Holobiont's family performances and Anna Wańtuch's *Contact Families Show (CFS)* are examples of contemporary dance practices addressed to children and their close adults. At their ethical and political foundation sits the philosophy of attachment parenting. The Holobiont collective structures its pieces around the assumption that 'every participant of the performance – regardless of age and experience – is a fully competent recipient of art[istic practices]'⁴. Wańtuch, on the other hand, seeks to 'create the kind of format that would allow for a utopia of family choreographies where democracy and equality reign supreme' (Czarnota, Wańtuch, 2021). Both approaches share an interest in the family experience: they are not exclusively performances

for children, but rather multi-generational projects that establish a field of shared practice and knowledge beyond the realm of valuing and (aesthetically, as well as affectively) evaluating the results of collaboration between adult and non-adult artists, spectators and viewers.

CFS was planned as a live meeting with the families invited to the project before the pandemic impeded its development, moving the already started rehearsals to the Zoom app⁵. The premiere featuring the Kraków 'pioneers' as well as the subsequent shows took place on a virtual stage. This improvised stage experiment can be repeated with and adapted to other families and different contexts. In turn, *_on_line_* by the Holobiont collective⁶ is performed mainly at dance and art festivals for children⁷; during the pandemic, the piece was transferred online and became an interactive event⁸.

The projects discussed in this article are based on the tender relations within a group of artists; on valuing the process as an element of production; on drawing inspiration from the change that each successive course of performance-play signifies, regardless of whether it occurs live or online. Using the terminology proposed by Mette Ingvartsen, Holobiont's and Wańtuch's activities can be conceived as a type of 'soft choreography,'⁹ based on 'arrange[ing] conditions for encounters to occur' (Ingvartsen, 2013, p. 68). In *CFS* and *_on_line_*, the encounters occur within the limits of a preplanned time and format (preplanned primarily in terms of the age and concentration capabilities of the youngest participants). Their framework is determined by specific scenarios (including improvised elements), as well as verbal instructions for participants or agreements between performers and participants. We perceive this clarification of rules that, though sometimes meticulous, are not completely rigid and allow for free play (in accordance

with the accepted rules), as an affirmative strategy of softening the dramaturgy of a dance performance. As Ingvartsen notes, 'The softness of choreography applies not only to human physical movement, but also to the organisation of space, the organisation of a group in space and of its behaviour. The softness carries a persuasive quality. It has a seductive but not sexual undertone, the seduction of being part of a collective, sharing a certain time and space, in order to construct something together. [...] Soft choreography brings a group of people together, for a short, but precious moment in time' (Ingvartsen, 2013, p. 68). The final scene of *_on_line_* (discussed in detail later in this article), in which everyone comes together to collectively describe the 'piece' created together, seems to be the fullest realization of Ingvartsen's artistic manifesto.

The utopia of family choreographies

In her dance pieces, Wańtuch strengthens the awareness of hierarchy inherent in functioning within a family, critically examining the position of an adult in a relationship with a child¹⁰, valorizing errors and shortcomings in the course of developing a piece (and in upbringing itself), and empathetically approaching the expectations of both sides; most of all, however, she creates new ways of being together in and outside of artistic situations.

Contact Families Show produces and shows appreciation for a relationship based on the sense of attachment between adult and non-adult participants. Wańtuch encourages them to take an active stance and co-create relationships not only in the course of the process, but at two levels. Firstly, it was about developing an active and democratic mode of work in the workshop, engaging and developing each member of the family and creating

a show where everyone would feel comfortable and at ease. Secondly, the family audience attending the final show was also to feel involved and encouraged to engage in the work; ideally, after some time it would be difficult to recognize who was part of the original group' (Czarnota, 2021).

The choreographic performance for families with children involves six performing groups which, in preparation for the final show, take part in a creative process lasting several months and comprised of theoretical and practical classes. The participants perform choreographic tasks together as well as individually at home. They also learn about certain phenomena in the history of contemporary dance, selected somatic practices, as well as Wańtuch's other projects. The Kraków version featured children aged from two to nine, who grew up alongside the project and its subsequent implementation¹¹. In the final presentations, each family performs under a name given to them jointly, and the audience is similarly encouraged to come up with a creative name for their avatar. The musical layer is created by Franciszek Araszkiwicz, who uses electronics controlled by his own brainwaves of different intensity, processed into sounds in real time. At specific moments in the performance, viewers can trigger the camera and join in on the fun.

The final score¹² consists of two parts: in the first part, the family-performers draw lots for exercises (mainly physical); in the second, the lots are drawn for tasks (improvisational) that have been developed in the course of the shared creative process. The audience is encouraged to participate in the latter part. However, the audience is not given precise instructions, but instead receive mere catchwords and their interpretations from the performers (in the form of frames visible in Zoom windows). Each task/catchword, represented by a drawn lot, stands for a specific activity: for

example, 'microadjacencies' refer to touching one's partner with the smallest body surface, while 'choreobjects' trigger the use of objects in an improvised movement. In some activities, words are choreographed (e.g., when everyone describes selected elements of the environment solely with the epithets 'soft,' 'cold,' 'red'), while in others it is the objects that appear on the screen that program the gaze of the beholders. Task-based improvisation here allows for dynamic reactions from both children and adults, which – again, this is part of an intra-project 'contract' – are devoid of judgment and evaluation¹³. Children-performers are not forced to learn repetitive circuits or to perform a set of exercises precisely; instead, on the basis of trust and jointly acquired knowledge, they formulate methods of cooperation with their close adults.

By organizing a family show which transgresses traditional family and artistic hierarchies, and by treating the creative process above all as a meeting in which non-normative ways of being together are practiced, based not so much on identification with the group as on a tender cherishing of differences, Wańtuch participates in the process of democratizing what Jacques Rancière calls the 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière, 2007a) or, to put the philosopher's thought in shorthand, the drawing of the common social field by rendering some subjects within that field visible (audible, perceptible) and others invisible (inaudible, imperceptible). In the hegemonic systems of knowledge and power, what is excluded (and thus deprived of agency) from the communal space is above all the Other: alien, not human, queer, and non-adult. The changes of the existing configurations of the perceptible are effected not only by politics but also aesthetics; hence their immanent interconnection in Rancière's thought.

The subversiveness of the activities proposed by Wańtuch consists, among

other things, in rendering all the participants of *CFS* equal. However, what seems particularly important is that children not only act on the same terms as adults but they can also decide for themselves whether they want to be seen and co-create successive choreographies. Sensitivity towards difference, which retains the right to individuality and escapes the mechanisms of unification, marks the ethical horizon of Wańtuch's participatory project. Such actions can be discussed in the context of Rosi Braidotti's (2012) affirmative ethics. The author of *Nomadic Subjects* points to the necessity of moving beyond the postmodern logic of negativity and designing new, more inclusive communities based on the idea of a multi-species collective, reinforcing the agency of all its contributors: human, non-human and post-human subjects, open to and constantly undergoing new transformations. It is a project focused on the possible futures emerging on the horizon of experimental practices that expand the collective sensorium by including new actors in its space and explore their potentialities. Examining *CFS* from this perspective, one sees that the deconstruction of traditional hierarchies also has an affirmative dimension. By departing from the normative divisions of the common field in her soft choreographies of attachment, Wańtuch and the participants imagine and embody a heterogeneous alternative to the family model in which children primarily replicate adult behavior and do what their parents expect them to do.

From the perspective of the entire event, whose democratic structures are based on the foundation of the relational ethics of care, the choreographing of objects that concludes the performance appears not only as a dramaturgically impressive finale but above all as another stage in the process of introducing new causal subjects into the field of sensuality. It should be emphasized that the objects that appear in the windows – T-shirts¹⁴, teddy bears, kitchen utensils, more or less eccentric ornaments,

textiles, souvenirs, or bizarre finds of uncertain ontological status – are not treated here as puppets in a fictional play (for children), and thus do not mediate human stories but activate the kinesthetic imagination of the participants. Thus, the objects seem not so much animated as recognized by the performers. They become partners and triggers of movement. Their textures and specific materialities affect the bodies of children and adults, eliciting specific actions. Female and male performers enable non-human beings to be creatively present. Recognizing things as equal actor-networks, to recall Bruno Latour's terminology, enables one to connect the closing images of *CFS* with the emancipatory aspirations of the entire project. Thus, acting on their own terms, the empowered children are joined by subsequent Others in the anthropocentric and privileging perspective of Goffman's 'normals,' i.e. the white middle-class adult men (males).

The encounters with broadly defined otherness initiated by Wańtuch – including technological otherness (after all, not everyone is accustomed to the online world, not to mention digital exclusion) – are not based on domination and do not seek to erase or nullify difference. On the contrary, difference is nurtured and strengthened, which can already be seen at the basic level of *CFS*'s dramaturgical structure. Female and male performers do not strive to synchronize their actions, and the objects dancing in one window do not resemble their neighbors. Conducted in a posthumanist spirit, this celebration of the strange, unusual and non-normative is one possible realization of an affirmative ethics. In this collective choreography, the youngest viewers are not reduced to little adults (or 'little ones' or 'munchkins'). Human motor skills are not imposed on objects, so the subsequent tasks proposed by the choreographer can be seen as exercises in opening up to the human and non-human Others. Treated as partners whose 'incalculable choreographies'¹⁵, soften the common sensorium, introducing

an element of queer revolt into its territory¹⁶, children participate in the process of democratizing the ossified structures of the rationally and patriarchally conceived public sphere.

To give up a ‘nice experience’

Since 2016, Wańtuch has been exploring the ContaKids method developed by the Israeli choreographer Itay Yatuva, of which she is a certified teacher. ContaKids is a practice of improvisation and play with a child aged between two and four, derived from selected elements of contact improvisation, such as democratic interaction, developing bodily awareness, non-verbal communication, attentiveness becoming more important than virtuosity, willingness to accept the risks inherent in a dialogical and non-hierarchical encounter with the Other, mutual support and acting on impulse¹⁷. When working with a child, it is important to restore the younger partner's agency, to let him or her experience movement in its fullness: different levels and pace, dynamics and distance, joint and individual action. Rolling, flipping, ‘sliding’ and ‘rocking,’ running and jumping, belly and back work, acrobatic exercises: all of these constitute elements of Yatuva's workshop practice (Duda, Wańtuch, 2016). According to Yatuva, during the classes adults change the way of being with the child to one that is less restrictive of their freedom. The tasks performed boost the younger practitioners' confidence and increase their motoric skills when, for example, they are no longer constantly protected from falling¹⁸. Therefore, by practicing how to give up the nice experience that adults want children to have (Yatuva, 2016), parents work with their own expectations towards the experience of non-adult participants in the process.

As is the case in Yatuva's method¹⁹, *CFS* allows for ‘chaotic’ play, falls,

changes in the improvisation scenario²⁰; it is the close encounter between adults and children that is considered to be of utmost importance²¹. The dramaturgy of the project is defined by change and unpredictability, including the reactions of the spectators invited to join in on the fun. The authors' attempt at the (unforced) activation of the Zoom meeting participants is not always successful. Nevertheless, from the perspective of this project, such a market-economic category of performance assessment does not apply. No performance is deemed a failure. In Wańtuch's project, the softening of choreography implies an attitude of openness and affirmation towards the surprises that occur in the course of the show, an openness towards the way the pre-selected material resonates in a given moment: whether it evokes a desire to play or rather a rejection of the camera lens, both among the audience and the performing families²². The individualized approach in the guardian-child relationship (and the already existing relationships between adult and non-adult performers and performers) carries over to the level of collective relationship, in which 'any activity (or lack thereof) is accepted' (Wańtuch, 2021).

Ingvartsen's notion of 'soft choreography,' cited at the beginning of the article, refers to a performance that takes place soft choreography is one that is 'carried out in relation to the specific desires of a specific group of people at a certain time' and 'cannot exist without an audience.' While it is true that *CFS* can take place with a tacit (hence invisible if the camera remains switched off) participation of the audience, the line between an encounter and a planned event is blurred here (Ingvartsen, 2013, p. 68). The natural reactions of the male and female performers to the tasks drawn reinforce the impression of a friendly atmosphere in which one can express one's own needs, even if they are resistance and rebellion, or the child's unwillingness to continue playing (or a sense of boredom that may occur as a

result of playing). These moments of interruption or twist – which result in a person disappearing from the screen or refusing to draw lots in a successive exercise – are integrated into the open structure of the performance, sensitive to refractions and imperfections. Family performance does not have to be productive. On the contrary, the methodology of the project focuses on failures or misunderstandings in the relationship between the adult and the child, and more difficult situations are discussed on the forum, ‘softened’ so that their performative potential is also perceived (the child’s rebellion can be an inspiration for the next improvisation only if he/she is treated as a subject, and his/her feedback on a given task is taken seriously). As Ingvartsen summarizes, soft choreography ‘is a risky performance that might as well not happen. It is a fragile situation that asks the audience to share the responsibility for it’ (2013, p. 68).

Contact Families Show, which addresses micro-community politics and familial interdependence, also does not shift responsibility (for some assumed effect) to non-adult performers. The show is a family event, undoubtedly a ‘fragile situation’ because it is based on the changing, communal, human-to-human relationship dynamic.

Democratic collectives

In biology and medicine, the holobiont refers to a collective in which a multicellular organism (host) symbiotically associates with microorganisms (microbes). An example of such an association is a coral, but also a human being. The human body is a vessel for the flow of a pluralistic microcosm of interdependent entities, a vessel that could not live outside of this open, changing ecosystem. In her essay ‘Ognozja’ [Ognosia] from the volume *Czuły*

Narrator [The Tender Narrator], Olga Tokarczuk draws on the concept of Lynn Margulis, who sees the acts of interspecies symbiosis the driving force of evolution, and creates an affirmative metaphor of the world as a democratic republic of different beings. The opposite of this heterogeneous alliance is a hierarchical monarchy with its homeostatic, normative order, overseen by homo sapiens: a white male in a suit, separated from the flora and fauna. By departing from anthropocentric obsessions and unsealing human monoliths, we can see ourselves as part of a plurality, replacing the dialectics of power and subordination with a relation of reciprocity. 'We are,' contends the Polish Nobel Prize winner, 'no longer a biont but a holobiont, that is, a set of different organisms living in symbiosis. Complexity, multiplicity, diversity, mutual interaction, metasymbiosis: these are the new perspectives from which we perceive the world' (Tokarczuk, 2020, p. 17).

Tokarczuk's monarchy-republic opposition can be transferred to the family space. It will involve the traditional family model whose foundation is marked by adult authority, on the one hand, and the non-hierarchical, attentive and empathetic parenting of closeness, on the other. In the latter paradigm, which is in many ways revolutionary but not necessarily anarchic, the child is empowered from the start: at the level of wants or needs, he or she does not have to 'grow up' to be autonomous. Supporting the child's development, argues Bylka-Kanecka, borrowing from Agnieszka Stein, 'does not consist [...] in teaching specific content, but in providing such forms of coexistence in the family that would allow the needs of all its members to be respected' (Bylka-Kanecka, 2020, p. 139)²³. The Holobiont collective²⁴ takes these postulates into the realm of experimental dance. The choreographies of proximity co-created and co-practiced by the collective's founders embody the idea of democratic alliances between different bodies, sensitivities and imaginations, moving each other within the leaky framework of a dialogical

encounter.

In *_on_line_*, this leakiness or capacity of borders – both one's own and those of others – somehow gains a material shape. Within the uncertain, blurred edges of *_on_line_*, dance is combined with something that could be described as collective action painting, except that instead of paints the participants use pastel crayons on stage²⁵. The abstract drawings are not created entirely spontaneously; they follow the on-stage movements of Bożek-Muszyńska/Bylka-Kanecka, Dana Chmielewska and Paweł Grala, as well as those of the participants, whose movement trajectories – though uninhibited – result from specific movement tasks. Thus, steps and lines intersect on paper. The latter become a dynamic record of an ephemeral meeting. At the meta-level, the image created 'here and now' appears as a material allegory of the relationality of existence, the processuality of individual and collective subjectivities, and the openness or fluctuations of the human holobiont.

In Bylka-Kanecka's and Bożek-Muszyńska's practice, the blurring of boundaries is a constant element of their political strategy of choreographing alternative (i.e. non-hierarchical) ways of being together and dismantling or 'softening' (Bylka-Kanecka, 2020, p. 143) conventional structures of cultural events for children. The curator of *Roztańczone Rodziny* (the Dancing Families) program²⁶ details the dramaturgy of this process on the example of the *DOoKOŁA* (roundABOUT) performance (Bylka-Kanecka, 2020, pp. 140-142). Since similar mechanisms are also activated in other Holobiont productions²⁷, it is worth reconstructing them here. Firstly, free play is embedded in the dramaturgical fabric of the performance (it is not a separate, post-presentation part thereof), and thus the audience members participate in the creation of the on-stage worlds. Secondly, the

identities of everyone on stage are fluid and nomadic, meaning that the audience alternately acts and observes, while the performers (and Paweł Grala in the case of *_on_line_*) initiate movement or follow the suggestions of the guests and hosts; after the finale, as Bylka-Kanecka points out, 'they [the performers] change their status from the hosts of the event who give instructions at the beginning of the show to the recipients of the participants' feedback, before finally returning to the former capacity when they bid farewell to the successive families leaving the room after the performance' (p. 142). Thirdly, the end of the performance does not necessitate a prompt departure from the stage, or an immediate return to reality. On the contrary, the soft framework of the performance remains hospitable in this respect, too.

For example, the finale of *_on_line_* features the ceremonial lifting of a collectively created image and its exposition on the wall, in the light of colored floodlights. The audience gazes at this collective, holobiont-like creations, amidst abstract flourishes, identifying familiar shapes (traces of reflected hands and feet, outlined contours of small and large bodies, uninterrupted lines, colorful spots of movement) and interpreting them individually. One can name the work, take photos against the background of the drawing, talk to the artists and the creator. Thus, the inner world of the show dissolves, as it were, into the everyday, which also (so we think) carries political significance. The practice of closeness, which the collective encourages, becomes both an embodiment and a projection of alternative ways of being together, including, if not primarily, outside the theater. The softening of the individual parts of the performance and the boundaries between art and life thus completes the process, initiated by the unsealing of the creator/observer divide, one that involves the deconstruction of traditional hierarchies, both in the field of art and within the family

structure. In the tender spaces of attentiveness created by Holobiont, adults and children occupy equal positions and engage in acts of creation on identical terms.

Bylka-Kanecka's and Bożek-Muszyńska's successive performances activate similar political and dramaturgical strategies. The structure of the events is also repetitive: they all start with a concise, clear and direct instruction (Bylka-Kanecka, 2020, p. 143), followed by the presentation of the choreographic material, and a non-invasive invitation extended to the children and their guardians, who may enter the common space and participate in the performance. On the other hand, sequences of presentation and casual, non-violent interaction are configured differently in each production. *_on_line_* is divided into three two-element segments. What unites them is the challenge of inventing new ways of using pastel crayons (broken into smaller and smaller pieces in the successive parts of the show, from large crayons to pastel cuttings)²⁸.

Innocent play, however, has a subversive potential here because, unlike at school, the crayons are not set in motion to create the most beautiful and realistic drawings possible, to be compared with one another, but to stimulate kinesthetic imagination, unfettered by expectations. Abstract doodles thus become both an affirmation and a manifestation of the potential for being together in a social holobiont, for casual creativity, and for existing outside the neoliberal imperative of productivity. Children who are encouraged to create spontaneously, without judgment and independent of adult approval, enjoying the process itself, experience the pleasure of action instead of the necessity of production. After all, the most important thing at play is the nurturing of relationships²⁹ rather than products.

Laboratories of alternatives

From this perspective, the non-normative ways of drawing presented by the performers in the subsequent parts of the event (painting with the entire body that rolls over the paper trying maintain contact with the crayon; outlining bodies in motion; crushing the crayons or moving them with one's foot, etc.) may seem an affirmation of strangeness and difference, an attempt to tame the non-canonical and thus – given the presence of families – an encouragement to abandon conservative educational methods, to test new arrangements and configurations. The choreographic material that Bylka-Kanecka and Bożek-Muszyńska work with and that is expanded by the children and their guardians also evades the traps of normativism, in this case identified with Logos, meaning and representation³⁰. Thus, experimental dance turns out to be an ally of new attachment (Gałkowski, Morawska-Rubczak, 2020), on the one hand, and of the revolutionary practice of teaching by building experience and embodied (albeit not necessarily rational) knowledge, on the other (Bylka-Kanecka, Zerek, 2020, pp. 87-88)³¹. It produces a field in which alternative social networks are designed and tested, based primarily on attentiveness, empathy, and affective communication. Importantly, the Holobiont collective seeks to sensitize one not only to the Others but also to oneself. For this reason, the performers make sure that everyone feels safe and open to engaging in somatic dialogues on their own terms, allowing the choreographies of other bodies to permeate or extend their own autonomous movements.

Establishing a safe space and caring community in *_on_line_* begins even before entering the theater hall, namely in the foyer. It is there that the participants are provided with instructions, repeated (in whole or in part) by the performers and the performer to make sure everyone understands the

rules of entering and leaving the stage, the division between viewing time and action time. This kind of contract, a social agreement that adults enter into with children, strengthens the latter's agency and sensitizes them to needs other than their own. The concern for the subjective treatment of the youngest participants, inherent in Holobiont's productions, is an integral part of the collective's emancipatory and democratic strategies. In Bylka-Kanecka's own words, '[children] who know themselves, trust their needs and respect diversity – corporeal or otherwise – will have more resources for building a civil society in the future, one that is responsible and capable of dialogue and mutual respect' (Bylka-Kanecka, Zerek, 2020, p. 88)³².

This unique space of safeness and co-responsibility would likely not have come to be if it were not for the physical, involved presence of the guardians with whom the children came to the performance³³. Holobiont does not divide the audience into participants and beholders, and thus its youngest members remain close to familiar territories while discovering new ones. In the worlds created by Bylka-Kanecka and Bożek-Muszyńska, the horizons of the familiar and the foreign overlap. In *_on_line_*, a temporary collective of small and large bodies that set one another in motion (not necessarily by means of touch!) to transform a shared pastel image, works symbiotically while nurturing the individualities embedded within the group.

Scenes in which guests and visitors join the performers, becoming artists and performers themselves, set in motion a dialectic of structure and anti-structure. Choreography transforms into improvisation as the ready-made movement material softens, expanded to include new images and identities. Participants unwittingly learn to dance in contact, to study freedom limited only by the Other. Although contact improvisation is only one among the somatic techniques activated by Holobiont (or activated spontaneously),

virtually all of the scenes in *_on_line_* embody the ethical as well as political and social assumptions of this practice. Susan Leigh Foster notes that postmodern improvisation adopts a vision of democracy as an egalitarian collective effort that results in the accentuation of difference (2013, p. 33). In the performances of the Holobiont collective, concepts such as inclusivity, equality, and heterogeneity gain material shape. They are immanent elements of communication and participation, of choreographing and designing new forms of intimacy, not only intimate but also, or above all, public. Sensitive dialogues, which employ movement to initiate and develop all the people present on stage, embody an alternative to the normative divisions of the perceptible and, consequently, to hierarchical power (including parental power).

Holobiont's performative projects can be described as laboratories of change-in-process. This view is supported by both the structure of these events and their open and soft-framed environment. Bylka-Kanecka refers to the collective's pieces as interactive performances that 'retain a clear "traces of an installation"' (2020, p. 140). These traces are also an archival imprint of Bylka-Kanecka's meeting with the Serbian choreographer Dalija Aćin Thelander, who popularized performative installations for families. What I have in mind here are radically (if not completely) softened forms³⁴. It is in these spaces, despite the constant presence of female and male performers, that families can move and act freely, and thus, in accordance with Holobiont's co-founder, expand their agency 'in co-creating the event and building their experience' (Bylka-Kanecka, 2020, p. 139). Nevertheless, the unpredictability of this format, along with its assumed chaotic nature, as emphasized by the theater educator Justyna Czarnota, runs the risk of objectifying it. 'I perceive in myself a trembling anticipation of whether the audience will still perceive this proposal as an artistic event or an outright

playground [laughter]' (Bylka-Kanecka, Czarnota, Lewandowska, 2021). The difference between Thelander's practice and its creative transformation and development proposed by Holobiont could be compared in this context to the difference between anarchy and radical democracy. The political dimension of performances such as *_on_line_* is revealed not so much in the mere negation of established orders and hierarchies, but in the imagining of what is still impossible to embody in other environments and what may in the future transform into a new civic (dis)order.

By inviting families with children to practice soft choreographies, Wańtuch and the Holobiont collective propose new ways of sharing time and space that are alternative to hierarchical structures, and thus in a way equate the political positions of large and small bodies. Although *Contact Family Show* and *_on_line_* are dramaturgically or formally quite different from each other and realize the emancipatory potential of proximity in different ways, they seem to move along a similar heterological³⁵ ethical horizon. In both pieces, the universal ethics of rules is replaced by the relational ethics of sensitivity³⁶; the boundary between the self and the Other (or, more broadly, the world) is shown as osmotic, which also means that the body, like space, is open (or learns to be open) and dialogical; projected experiences of tender coexistence in repeated acts of spontaneous creation become forms of affirmative resistance to traditional family hierarchies in which children are ascribed the role of the subordinated Other; developing empathy and co-responsibility is more important than producing ready-made meanings, scenes and images; difference is more valuable than the universal, the identical and the normative. We are aware of the fact that this provisional enumeration needs to be expanded, therefore we would like it to be treated

as an invitation to further research around the experimental dance scene for families.

Translated by Józef Jaskulski

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Footnotes

1. Dance scholar Alicja Müller was the co-curator of the workshop for female critics 'Jumping Words' (with Justyna Czarnota), which took place on March 8, 2020 as part of the 10th edition of the Dancing Families program under the curatorial care of Hanna Bylka-Kanecka. Karolina Wycisk collaborates with the Holobiont collective as an independent producer and manager. In addition, digital versions of performances *_on_line_* by the Holobiont collective and Anna Wańtuch's *Contact Families Show* were presented as part of *Online'owa scena dla rodzinnego tańca* (the Online Stage for Family Dance) project of the Performat Foundation, of which Wycisk is president.
2. See a synthesis of recent years of Polish dance scene for children and families in the conversation *Miejsce na różnorodność*, 2021.
3. The Polish translations of the term 'sustainability' (*zrównoważoność* or *zrównoważony charakter*) fail to convey its original capacity, which in the context of performance refers to the need to reformulate work strategies to account for economic (permanent employment of freelance artists), ecological (e.g. rethinking foreign collaborations and dissemination of performances), and creative and stabilizing processes (creating and maintaining production conditions while repeatedly utilizing the existing projects).
4. See the official website of the Holobiont collective at <https://www.holobiont.pl/o-nas> [accessed: 29.11.2021].
5. *Contact Families Show* was created thanks to Anna Wańtuch's scholarship; it was only later on that the piece landed partnership deals with festivals and foundations. The work on the performance was made possible thanks to the Creative Fellowship of the City of Kraków. Featuring families with young children, the piece premiered on December 12, 2020 on Zoom. The Kraków-based 'pioneer' group was comprised of: Magdalena Kopeć, Alicja Kaczmarczyk, Tomasz Kaczmarczyk, Anna Grabara, Julian Mizerski, Monika Zamojska-Świątek, Marcin Świątek, Szymon Świątek, Rafał Świątek, Marta Mielenska-Topór, Tomasz Topór, Rita Topór, Liwia Topór, Tomasz Sułowski, Zosia Sułowska, Wincenty Wańtuch, Felicja Wańtuch, Ludmiła Wańtuch, Anna Wańtuch, and Filip Wańtuch. The process was supported by Justyna Czarnota and Sandra Lewandowska. The format was repeated as part of 23. Biennale Sztuki dla Dziecka (23rd Art Biennale for Children) organized by Centrum Sztuki Dziecka (the Children's Art Centre) in Poznań. Poznanian families participated in the performance whose premiere took place in May 2021. The list of performers included

Adelka Górecka, Ulka Górecka, Basia Górecka, Michał Górecki, Miriam Matuszek-Serafin, Nadia Matuszek-Serafin, Sara Matuszek-Serafin, Monika Serafin, Łukasz Matuszek, Ania Sobczyk, Martyna Sobczyk, Julia Sobczyk, Felicja Wańtuch, Ludmiła Wańtuch, Wincenty Wańtuch, Anna Wańtuch, Filip Wańtuch, Maria (Misia) Zwolińska, Zofia Zwolińska, Anna Maria Brandys, Szymon Zwoliński.

6. The performance was produced by the Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk, with the support of the City of Poznań. It premiered in December 2018 at Stary Browar in Poznań.

7. The piece was selected for presentation at the 2019 Mała Platforma Tańca (Little Dance Platform), with Justyna Czarnota naming it the 'Best Performance for Children' as part of the 'Najlepszy, najlepsza, najlepsi' (Best of the best) summary of the 2018/2019 season published by the *Teatr* monthly.

8. In cooperation with the Performat Foundation, *on_line* was presented as part of the Teatr Polska 2020 project held by Instytut Teatralny (Theatre Institute) in Warsaw; thanks to the grant, we were able to arrange a professional audiovisual recording of the performance. The Zoom platform is used for digital presentations. Participating families then receive individual packages (sheets of paper and pastel crayons), which they use in creative interplay with the team hosting the successive parts of online meetings, interspersed with short screenings of the film.

9. In her artistic manifesto, the choreographer/researcher contrasts soft choreography with hard choreography. The latter term 'means: a choreography written down to the smallest detail without much space for deviance' (Ingvartsen, 2013, p. 68).

10. For almost ten years, Wańtuch has been exploring the parent/guardian-child relationship in her work. She first performed with her son Wincenty in 2012, and three years later she and her family participated in the Warsaw version of Zimmer-Frei's *Family Affair*. She also staged a series of video-performances *Mother K/C*, based on the corporeal experience of pregnancy. Her most recent performance, which she worked on under the auspices of the choreographic program Atlas at ImPulsTanz Festival 2021 in Vienna – *Mothersuckers: Production about Reproduction* – is a solo manifesto of a mother artist (the stage is covered with a pile of clothes and toys), dramaturgically intertwined with pop cultural quotes, pseudo-facts, personal(?) experiences of the artist, images of pregnancy (one of the recordings from the *Mother K/C* series is projected on the screen), and a brilliantly conducted interaction with the audience.

11. The target audience for the performance is families with children aged between 1.5 and 5, but on account of various family configurations, older siblings are also involved. Audience-wise, the piece is addressed to guardians with children from two years of age.

12. Score is understood as a kind choreographic notation, in this context based on tasks and improvisation, i.e. the notation in this case take the form of tasks for performers. In her work on the project, Wańtuch refers to Meg Stuart's notion of pandemic score (Wańtuch, 2021).

13. Among other things, Wańtuch invokes the notion of 'Authentic Movement,' developed by Mary Starks Whitehouse (a student of Martha Graham and Mary Wigman), founded on the absence of intentionality (movement derives from associations and imaginative work) and critical evaluation of the beholder, who becomes an active participant in the shared creative process (Wańtuch, 2021). This somatic practice originated in the 1950s and is still used today in many therapeutic contexts. See two collections of essays edited by Patrizia Pallaro, *Authentic movement: Essays by Mary Starks Whitehouse, Janet Adler, and Joan Chodorow*,

Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London 1999 and *Authentic Movement: Moving the Body, Moving the Self, Being Moved: A Collection of Essays Volume II*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, Philadelphia 2007.

14. The T-shirt exercise was inspired by Jérôme Bel's performance *Shirtology* (1997), one of the founding works of the Western European conceptual dance scene. In ironically using the symbolism of logos and fashionable inscriptions of T-shirts, Bel commented both on the simplification and commercialization of cultural codes and on the function of choreography as a critical cognitive tool. In *Contact Families Show*, the participants stand in front of screens, displaying T-shirts with inscriptions that are in mutual dialogue and images that are funny or unobtrusively 'childish' (we are thinking here of the clothing industry, which creates an artificial division into pink clothes for girls and darker ones for boys, and the tendency for children to dress up as fairy tale characters).

15. Jacques Derrida uses the category of 'incalculable choreography' to describe dance improvisation. According to the French philosopher, incalculability above all denotes the readiness for change, processuality, affirmative acceptance of the risk connected with what is different, unknown, unrecognized. Derridian incalculable choreographies are thus similar to the soft choreographies we pursue (Derrida, 1995).

16. On the queer potential of children's sensitivity, see: Stępnia, 2017.

17. The confines of this text do not allow a discussion of the history and assumptions of improvisation in dance, let alone its limitations. Nevertheless, we would also like to outline the historical contexts in whose perspective one can look at the experiments conducted by Wańtuch and Holobiont, which is why we mention this technique.

18. As Wańtuch comments, 'In ContaKids, falling is very valuable. A lot of practice results in falling, which happens for two reasons. First of all, falling is great fun. Kids have an incredible amount of fun falling. It's not fun to just climb on your back. It's fun to climb and fall off. That's part of the fun. Second, falling causes everyone to learn. If a mother provokes a fall and shakes her back, the little one figures out how (s)he can grab onto her tighter. The child is sometimes passive because (s)he is used to being carried. When (s)he finds that no one is holding him/her, (s)he begins to think: 'I have to catch myself, I have to take care of myself.' Falling is a great way to learn motoric skills and self-reliance, but moms are afraid of it' (Duda, Wańtuch, 2016, p. 74).

19. In the show, some exercises visualize the premises of ContaKids. For example: bridges, a tree, and a rodeo successively involve passing under a 'bridge' made of a large or small body, a small body climbing over a large body, and a parent tossing a child on his/her back to let him/her try to find a balance on a dynamic surface. The physical activities are designed to increase the participants' awareness of their own bodies in space, but also the mutual trust and care between the parent/guardian and the child.

20. One of the ContaKids rules stipulates that the child can do whatever (s)he wants and the parent must follow the instructions (Czarnota, Wańtuch, 2021).

21. The need to search for new meeting formulas in virtual reality and transferring performances to the online stage is discussed by Paweł Gałkowski and Alicja Morawska-Rubczak (2020). For Wańtuch, Zoom fulfilled 'the need for equity and democracy,' since it offered both children and adults the opportunity to share time together and individually, with varying degrees of involvement (Czarnota, 2021).

22. Turning on the camera can become an act of self-exposure for the viewers: it reveals family configurations, private dwellings, the level of involvement and the very relationships with the children transferred to the proposed tasks. At the same time, the performers, who

are visible almost all the time, manipulate the image, covering it with objects, filling the frame with close-ups of body parts, and sometimes even getting the children to disappear from the 'stage' as they leave for another room.

23. See: Stein, 2012.

24. Translating the collective's name, Bylka-Kanecka also cites a biological definition of holobiont: 'Holobiont is a biological and philosophical term for an organism composed of many other organisms. A bit like a family and society. This is why the theme of relationships is so important to us, and we consider successful performances to be those that tighten/explore family ties' (Bylka-Kanecka, Czarnota, Lewandowska, 2021).

25. Among their inspirations, the artists list the creative method of the Segni Mossi collective as well as Arno Stern's book *Odkrywanie śladu. Czym jest zabawa malarska*, Wydawnictwo Element, Gliwice 2016.

26. The project is a continuation of the Stary Browar Nowy Taniec dla Dzieci – Roztańczone Rodziny (Dancing Families) program, implemented by the Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk. The first curator of the program was Alicja Morawska-Rubczak, followed by Sandra Lewandowska and Hanna Bylka-Kanecka, who has been in charge of the program for the past four years. In 2021, the project – co-financed by the City of Poznań and held at Teatr Polski in Poznań – was organized by the Performat Foundation and the Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk. Last year's anniversary program consisted of ten workshops for families with children of all ages, performances by the Holobiont collective, a workshop for female critics 'Leaping Words,' and an online Media-Library containing audiovisual footage from specific workshops. See the program website:

<http://www.roztańczoneRodziny.pl> and *Ruchome dialogi wydane z okazji 10. urodzin programu Roztańczone Rodziny (Stary Browar Nowy Taniec dla Dzieci)*, eds. H. Bylka-Kanecka, M. Rewerenda,

<https://www.artstationsfoundation5050.com/taniec/wydarzenie/ruchome-dia...> [accessed: 25.11.2021].

27. The collective's first performance was *DOoKOŁA* (roundABOUT), addressed for children between 1.5 and 3 years of age and their significant adults (2017, Art Stations Foundation, Poznań); Holobiont's subsequent projects include *Księżycowo* (Moonlight), created for children aged six to eighteen months and their parents (2018, Ochota Theater, Warsaw), *_on_line_* for audiences aged five to seven and their parents (2018, Art Stations Foundation, Poznań), and *Gdzie kształty mają szyje* (Where Shapes Have Necks), written for children aged five to six and their guardians (2019, Children's Art Centre, Poznań).

Currently, the artists are working on a new production at the Polski Theater in Poznań, titled *Mój ogon i ja* (My Tail and I), intended for families with children aged three to six [co-organized by the National Institute of Music and Dance as part of the PolandDances / Rezydencje choreograficzne (PolandDances / Choreographic Residencies) project].

28. The change of music (composed by Jozef Buchnajzer) and lighting design (participants are supposed to follow a luminous rectangle on the floor and occupy the places it assigns to them) also constitutes a signal of transition from one part to another.

29. As the performers and performer announce before entering the auditorium, 'the performance is a family event,' so both children and adults are encouraged to take off their shoes and play together, 'using pastel crayons in an unusual way.' As per the performance synopsis, participants are advised to wear non-restrictive clothes that can get dirty during the play (before the introduction of the pandemic restrictions, the spectators could use the clothes prepared by the collective in order not to destroy their own garments).

30. In the context of producing a family event, it should be added that *on_line* does not create a hierarchy of experience in which adults would explain to children what they have experienced or what the final drawing represents.
31. For more on the potential benefits of incorporating experimental dance into a school curricula, see *Taniec dla dzieci*, 2020, pp. 87-88.
32. It is worth adding that the statement quoted above is complemented by the words of Ula Zerek, who admits that, 'when thinking about building a civil society, i.e. how we come to know ourselves, how our sensitivity evolves, is an important part of the reality we create. How I mark out my space, the space of my body and its boundaries, will have a huge impact on how I relate to the space, bodies and boundaries of others.' (Bylka-Kanecka, Zerek, 2020, p. 88).
33. Moreover, Bylka-Kanecka emphasizes that the presence of guardians is fundamental to Holobiont's productions. 'Children do not live in a social vacuum. Until they are about 12 years old, they almost always participate in performance events accompanied by adults. They may be more (for example, parents) or less (for example, teachers) significant adults, but they nonetheless fulfill a caring function. This aspect is crucial for me because it is related to relationality. It opens up a space for reconsidering the politicality of performative events addressed 'to the young ones.' It unveils an entire network of questions related to, among others, care, power, hierarchy, trust, fascination, involvement, expectations, projections and subjectivity, while also motivating us to use these lenses to inspect what and how I offer to them.' (Bylka-Kanecka, Czarnota, Lewandowska, 2021).
34. One of the items included in Thelander's manifesto reads, 'Create extraordinary environments,' on which she elaborates by noting that a 'curious and safe setting will enable babies to freely follow their impulses, explore and discover a new form of being-in-the-world. Conceive installation-based and immersive concepts, to propose movement in space as a way of experiencing, and to encourage your audience to constitute their experience based on their choices' (2021, p. 22).
35. When writing about heterogeneity, we once more recall the thought of Rancière, who understands 'heterogeneity' as a way out of the framework of the existing order and its categories, beyond normative sensuality and its divisions (Rancière, 2007b).
36. For more on the differences between these paradigms, see Rorty, 2002.

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RESEARCH-ARTISTIC PRACTICES

Riots in Performing Arts Research: a Close-up of Dance, Movement and Choreography

Tercet i Czy badania artystyczne ? (The trio iArtistic Research?)

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Abstract

The article addresses the issue of badania artystyczne (BA; literal translation: artistic research) in the field of performing arts, with a particular emphasis on movement, dance, and choreographic practices, and set in the Polish context. The authors aim to identify and describe examples of artistic research processes in the field defined above; to explore the specificity of BA practices and the contexts in which they are realized; to share tools, methods, and knowledge about them at the level of the BA practices themselves and of studies on BA. The paper is divided into five parts: 1) a definition of artistic research; 2) an auto-choreo-ethnographic reflection; 3) a spider-map of BA practices; 4) an in-depth analysis of three artistic research processes (I: *Przyszłość Materii* (*The Future of Matter*) by Magdalena Ptasznik; II: *Badanie/Produkcja* (*Research/Production*) curated by Maria Stokłosa; III: a continuum of practices by Ania Nowak); 5) 'interlacing' – a cross-sectional reflection. The structure of the narrative is based on two orders: a) a textual order – the main axis of the article; b) a graphics-mapping order – a complementary collection of visual-textual materials presented on the Research Catalogue platform.

Keywords: badania artystyczne; artistic research; performing arts; methodology; dance; case study

Introduction

The article deals with badania artystyczne (BA; literal translation: artistic research) in the field of performing arts, with particular emphasis on movement, dance and choreographic practices and set in the Polish context. The aims of the text include three vectors. The first is noticing and recording: identifying, signalling and describing examples of the artistic research processes within a defined field. The second is exploring and analysing: exploring the specifics of BA practices and the contexts in which they are implemented. Here we focus on noticing dependencies and on interpreting and considering the trajectory of their development. The third vector is focused on sharing tools and methods and the knowledge that flows from them: knowledge on the exchange of sources, concepts or conclusions primarily at the level of BA practices themselves, but also of studies on them. Therefore, on the one hand, in the examples we analyse, we pay special attention to the exchange of content and artistic research experiences, including those in progress. On the other hand, we want the process of creating this text to be transparent, which is why we have included the auto-ethnographic thread in the narrative and provided access to our research notes.

We have divided the text into five parts: a definition of artistic research; an auto-choreo-ethnographic reflection; a spiderweb-map of BA practices; an in-depth analysis of three research and artistic processes (*The Future of Matter* by Magdalena Ptasznik; *Research/Production* curated by Maria Stokłosa; Ania Nowak's continuum of practices); 'Interlacing' – a cross-sectional reflection. We used two narrative orders. The first, the text, is the main axis of the article. The second, graphics-mapping, is a complementary collection of visual-textual materials presented on the Research Catalogue platform,

excerpts from which we present here as illustrations.

The auto-choreo-ethnographic perspective: process, working methods, cognitive dispositions and shifts

Before we go on to explain how we perceive the essence of artistic research, we would like to clarify our perspective and outline the dynamics of our analytical work. In the course of cooperation on this article, which we were invited to write by the Pracownia Kuratorska¹ (Curatorial Workgroup), we noticed a displacement of our own research attitudes and points of view, which in the context of the description of movement practices seemed to us attractive from a cognitive perspective and worth sharing with our readers. We began our research on BA in the field of the visual arts we know, and, by approaching practices at the fringes of performative work with movement and body – less frequented by us – we observed the insufficient compatibility of our earlier assumptions. A critical look at the mismatch added to the study of the encountered cases by allowing us better to cater to their specificity. By describing our own movements in an unfamiliar field, we became auto-choreo-ethnographers² of our own research processes, and the traces of these movements are indicated here with distinctions.

We believe that exploring and systematizing creative research requires close cooperation with practitioners³. For this reason, at various stages of the work on this article, we invited people related not only to BA, but also to movement in its broader context of dance and performance, drawing on the hospitality of people from the Przestrzeń Wspólna (Common Space)⁴. The semi-formal nature of the sources of our knowledge (which included

conversations, consultations and collectively authored notes) turned out to be difficult to classify as a classic textual narrative supplemented with quotations in footnotes. In order to provide behind-the-scenes insights into the research process, we documented the subjective chronology of events visually.

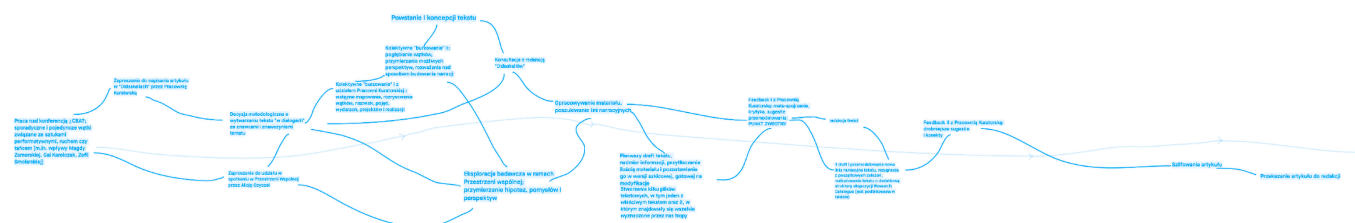


Figure 1: auto-choreo-ethnographic visual-textual record of the chronology of work on the article, available at:

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1228805/1228806>

We ran into a variety of tensions, realizations and strategies in acquiring the knowledge needed for this article. The first one concerns our research dispositions: although we identify with the field of art in the broader sense, embedded in the discourses of visual arts, humanities and social sciences, we employ different vocabularies and knowledge exchange models from those characteristic of performance practices. So we started out with a sense of competence anxiety⁵ that our cognitive devices were incompatible with the practices and rules of movement/dance/choreography (M/D/CH) and that our knowledge was insufficient. Therefore, we asked the Pracownia Kuratorska, Przestrzeń Wspólna⁶ and the editorial office of *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna* (see illustration) to guide us through this unfamiliar territory and to brainstorm research ideas. In the process of harmonizing pre-designed structures to the information obtained, we got tangled up in the trap of perfectionism, related to an imposter syndrome.

We became entangled in the excessive descriptive order and accuracy in this newly accessed world and found ourselves supported by critical remarks of the Pracownia Kuratorska. It was with its members that we systematically confronted our imagination and consulted on conducting our analysis and developing content. As a result of this cooperation, we focused on describing a few examples that became clear in our perception, and resigned from drawing up the full panorama of movement phenomena, let alone cataloguing it. Looking at the feedback technique typical of performing arts, we decided to 'steal' it and weave it into our own methodology. Only the departure from the classic figure of lone female researchers and the use of a method not native to the writing of academic texts made it possible to develop an adequate form of narration⁷.

1. What is artistic research and what characterizes it?

Not wanting to multiply the definitions, we decided to paraphrase the explication that we developed for the BA lexicon published in 'Notes Na 6 Tygodni' (Brelńska, Małkowicz-Daszkowska, Reznik, 2021, p. 93). We started work on the definition with a search for the Polish roots of artistic research in the field of visual arts. Then, we initiated a process of disseminating the concept of 'artistic research' in Polish academic and artistic circles⁸ by following how it resonated in this environment. We treat the BA concept as an internally diverse landscape and therefore try to define it in a way that leaves it as open as possible to be applied to dance and movement and to being updated based on investigations flowing in from new areas.

Artistic research is an area of heterogeneous practices situated between

science and art as well as other areas of social activity, and its purpose is the production and exchange of knowledge. These practices are the result of connecting – in any combination – social sciences, humanities, the exact and natural sciences, visual and performing arts, music, design, architecture, curatorial practices, socially engaged activities, and even business. A single BA project contains individual proportions of ‘admixtures’ of knowledge, methods, tools, languages, aesthetics and attitudes that are also derived from areas, fields or niches outside those elicited above: there is no definitive recipe for artistic research. Artistic research focuses on practice, organizing its content, and presents the conclusions and results of this creative investigation in a variety of formats⁹. It easily inhabits the fertile fringe areas, but it can also arouse various anxieties.

To varying degrees, BA methodologies are realized and often conditioned by their location: the further removed the activities are from institutions, the closer they veer towards methodological frivolity, while in the more structured fields there is a notable tendency to develop theoretical self-reflection. For the purposes of our research, BA draws on the internationally understood term *artistic research* (AR)¹⁰, but we perceive it globally¹¹ – also in the continuum of experimental traditions of the Polish field of art, including the neo-avant-garde experiments from the 1970s.

How does the above definition relate to homegrown practices arising from movement-based performing arts? Our first intuition indicates that attempts to map local Polish roots may turn out to be more difficult in the performing arts (in particular those related to M/D/CH) than in the visual arts¹². What reasons do we sense for this? Several factors can be mentioned, with two being of particular importance:

- the specificity of education within M/D/CH is less ‘academic’ than in other

areas of art, focusing on exchanges between individuals, groups, or initiatives and formalized to varying degrees;

– dance/choreography/performance, although an important subject of domestic reflection on practices in the performing arts, ‘is institutionally homeless in Poland’¹³.

This mainly concerns the necessary infrastructure in the form of production houses, although another manifestation of problems in hosting performances may be dance’s position in the priorities of grant competitions. In both the first and the second case, Polish dance noticeably and actively draws both from foreign experiences and from foreign institutions, as well as from structures in other areas of Polish art (theatre, visual arts). The interlacing developed below is a continuation and development of these threads.

2. Badania artystyczne in dance, movement, and choreography: araneographic activities¹⁴

Studying BA practices in the context of movement, dance, and choreography at a time when, newly emancipated, they are only beginning to be formed discursively requires caution. We are driven by a concern to give equal attention not only to mature and well thought-out, meaningful examples, but also to the ‘seeds’ of BA, both in M/D/CH itself and in related areas. When in this context we talk about crossing or renegotiating the existing divisions of art and science, we cannot focus only on the borderline of artistic expression and artistic research. Let us consider the history of avant-garde movements: the creators undertook transgressive activities, oriented not only along the

borderline between art and science, but also in other fields of art and in areas of socio-cultural life, e.g. political involvement, everyday life, ecology or technology (Dziamski, 1995; Ludwiński, 2009). For us, this means that we are looking for journeys of concepts, methods, tools, perspectives or aesthetics not only between art and science or their individual disciplines, but also in other areas (Bal, 2012). In the course of our work on this article and collecting materials for analysis, we developed a spider-web map in which we registered selected ‘mature’ examples of BA and their seeds.

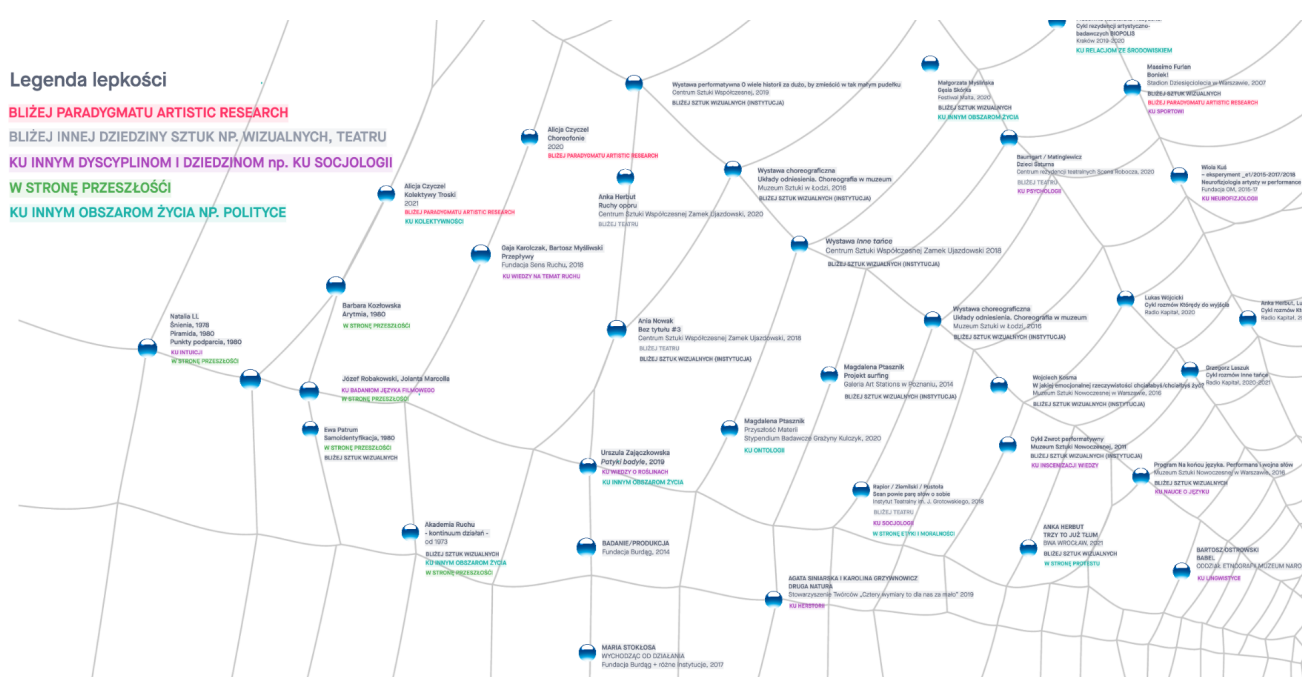


Figure 2: Excerpt from the spider-web map of BA-related practice examples, available at:

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1228805/1228806>

We provide this to accompany the article as source material that allows for a deeper and systematic insight into research and artistic practices. We also hope that, for readers, it will constitute an independent resource of information threads to be intertwined in their own creative and research processes¹⁵. From the entire collection, we have distinguished three cases,

which we will examine closely in the next section.

3. Three examples of art research projects rooted in working with movement

When selecting the cases to be analysed, we were guided by several criteria. The most important condition was the availability of sources: texts, recordings, documentation. We also wanted the aforementioned projects to be diversified in terms of the formula and contexts of their creation¹⁶. We chose the first case – *Przyszłość materii (The Future of Matter)* by Magdalena Ptasznik – because it is thoroughly and systematically documented by the author; the process is recorded with clarity and in an easily accessible form. The second – *Badanie/Produkcja (Research/Production)* – is a recognizable example of BA in the M/D/CH environment, which we referred to while writing this text, and the issues undertaken in this extensive project are related to the self-investigative trait arising from new dance. The third example – the continuum of Ania Nowak's artistic and research activities on the theme of love – was selected due to its connection with visual arts at the level of both the strategy of sharing results and the institutional background of the production.

In the analysis of the above practices, our interest lies in the following issues: the location and related visibility of the project or the symbolic capital inscribed in it; the subject and its problems; the created formula of cooperation (if any) and the methodology used in the project; the formats of sharing the results; and the effectiveness in achieving the chosen artistic research goals.

Case 1: Magdalena Ptasznik, *Przyszłość materii (The Future of Matter)*, 2020

The Future of Matter project, carried out by the sociologist and choreographer Magdalena Ptasznik¹⁷ in 2020 as part of the a.pass¹⁸ postgraduate studies programme and the Grażyna Kulczyk research scholarship¹⁹, is an example of a transparent BA process. The way it is constructed and formulated may result from the artist and researcher's experiences abroad. It is about being rooted in the context of the Western paradigm of artistic research, within which there is a canon of institutional requirements and widespread formats of expression. We treat it as one of the many models for conducting BA.

The Future of Matter is a choreographic exploration of the issues of climate change and its accompanying environmental and social crisis. Ptasznik clearly indicates that this project serves to generate knowledge about how choreography can become a platform for critical reflection, strengthening relationships, and creating social change. The fruits of the artist's creative work include the publication of *To discover a fossil on your tibia. Scories and other mutation of scores* (Ptasznik, 2021), exploring the possibilities of choreographic notation (score) as a space for generating an exchange between writers and dancers; between thinking and movement, text and body, creating structures and performing within them²⁰. The second component of the publication is the *Workshop Manual*, containing a set of ready-to-use solutions. Using the manual, Ptasznik shares the developed tools and techniques and, importantly, notes the participation of external authors in their creation and asks for their further attribution.²¹

From the BA point of view, for projects aimed at sharing generated

knowledge, a project's website is valuable in which the author reveals the entire project structure: she presents research questions and the actions resulting from them; she shares the theoretical background of the project (new materialism, Anthropocene studies, geo-ontology, geo-poetics); she defines its 'conceptual horizon' (including 'ground,' 'duration,' 'accumulation,' 'time that remains')²²; she presents sources and research material (Resources²³); she discusses the methodology; she records the course of the project (the Activities²⁴ and Events²⁵ tabs, including residence, research studio *Unstable spaces*, creating a scenario for workshops, mentoring) as well as its results and accompanying conclusions.

Ptasznik defines this online publication as a 'dynamic documentation' of the process, 'the linguistic and visual record of a choreographic study,' which corresponds to the free distribution of the resulting knowledge as postulated under the Grażyna Kulczyk scholarship²⁶. In this meta-model of research and artistic work, the dominant features are regularity, meticulousness, going beyond one format or medium of creation and exchange, as well as 'setting in motion and relationships'. Ptasznik reveals an interesting turning point in the search process, which concerns research self-reflection. It is a 'self-examination interview'²⁷ in which the artist moves from the research questions with which she started her venture²⁸ to articulating the goal hidden behind them. The implicit intention is to search for the possibility of redefining one's own practices in the face of the alienating conditions of creating art; resisting the compulsion of productivity²⁹; the production of new tools and spaces for questioning what is being represented; balancing the relationship between one's own creativity and the research processes behind it.

The artist also admits that this process was an opportunity for her to depart

from the research model in favour of a performative result (in line with the neoliberal logic of production by creating, for example, a show or performance) and opening up to creating and sharing reflection as a practice of resistance³⁰. Ptasznik's self-study, motivated by her own need for emancipation in the field of arts, made it not only possible to deepen her self-awareness but it also contributed to the creation and sharing of tools for BA work. It materialized in the form of a set of exercises and choreographic instructions and stories, which the artist describes by combining 'scores' and 'stories' to create the neologism 'scories'. It seems important for us to create, explore and test such procedures (also on ourselves) with the intention of others re-applying them in various contexts.

As part of this project, Ptasznik conducts individual exchanges of a direct nature, e.g. mentoring sessions with Myriam Van Imschoot, Philippine Hoghen, Anna Nowicka, Femke Snelting, Ann Juren and Elke van Campenhout. Ptasznik also supports research within specific stages of the process, e.g. a cooperation with the choreographer and performer Mary Szydłowska; and consults the director and author Aleksandra Jakubczak during her residency at the Centrum w Ruchu (Centre in Motion). The artist also opens her BA process to exchanges at various stages of implementation, including through the presentation of partial results in groups related to the a.pass program, resulting in valuable feedback³¹. And the book *To discover a fossil on your tibia*³², designed by Maja Demska, has become a platform for further collaborations – an invitation to co-create an attentive reading community instead of an audience ready to consume the 'spectacle'³³. In the case of this book, engaging in reading means participating in the production of its scattered performance. A small-format, grey-cover publication, it thematically and formally affirms the logic of post-growth and stimulates the embodied observation of one's own relationships in the human-non-human

context. It leads to somatic and psychosocial awareness of the material and non-material environments of which we are a part ([Ptasznik], [n.d.]).

Case 2: *Badanie/Produkcja. Taniec w procesie artykulacji* (Research/Production. Dance in the Process of Articulation), 2014

During the discussion within the Przestrzeń Wspólna, the participants, when asked about examples of significant research and art projects in Poland, unanimously indicated *Research/ Production. Dance in the Process of Articulation*, realized in 2014 on the initiative of Maria Stokłosa as part of Fundacja Burdąg (Burdąg Foundation) programme. The project assumed a double residence at the Studio Burdąg (Burdąg Studio), to which were invited practitioners, researchers, and theorists with various creative competences related to movement. The teams consisted of a choreographer and a person writing about dance critically or academically, and the aim was to conduct a joint linguistic narrative and discursive registration of the choreographic process. Zofia Smolarska accompanied the work of Maija Reeta Raumanni and Antti Helminen (Smolarska, 2014), Teresa Fazan and Mateusz Szymanówka described the performance of Renata Piotrowska's *Śmierć. Ćwiczenia i wariacje* (Fazan, Szymanówka, 2014), the observers of *Surfing* by Magdalena Ptasznik and the playwright Eleonora Zdebiak were Agnieszka Kocińska and then Regina Lissowska-Postaremczak (Kocińska, 2014A; Kocińska, 2014B; Lissowska-Postaremczak, 2014), and Maria Stokłosa's *Wylinka* was discussed by Anka Herbst (Herbut, 2014). This form of cooperation served to strengthen the relationship between theory and practice (see Zerek, 2016, pp. 132-136). The purpose of the residency was, on the one hand, to define the specificity of the innovative language of movement (see Herbut, 2015) and, on the other, an attempt to create a

language of description, venturing beyond the discourse of the time (Zerek, 2016, p. 132)³⁴.

In terms of themes, the cooperations between residents (Piotrowska/Bauer, Fazan/Szymanówki, Ptasznik/Zdebiak, Kocińska, Stokłosy and Herbut) focused on the issues of transformation: death and rebirth, learning about and reinterpreting the world, transgression and examining boundaries, together with accompanying fears and excitement. In our interpretation, they manifest the transformation of the choreographic paradigm and the emergence of a new dance language. Completely different were the issues raised by the Raumanii/Helminen-Smolarska team, which focused on seeking a formula for organizing a community of movement.

Apart from the actions of Raumanii and Helminen, which were realized only at the level of the research process and its documentation, the other projects were presented in the show's convention under two Warsaw institutions related to the visual arts: Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej (Museum of Modern Art) and Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski (Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art; Herbut, 2015). These performances, however, were ephemeral shows intended for a small group of people. The texts created in *Research/Production*, published on dwutygodnik.pl and TaniecPolska.pl, to various degrees enriched with visual documentation, allowed for a more permanent and egalitarian insight into the creative processes and methodologies that constitute them. Here we discuss four different ways of creative writing and the differing natures of the knowledge thus created:

– *W poszukiwaniu całości* by Smolarska is an 'observational' note of the creative process, which reports events from an accompanying perspective;

- *Pozycja trupa* by Fazan and Szymanówki is a duet of independent observation perspectives, in which, in the narrative, Fazan speaks based on her own experience of the process and direct exchanges with Piotrowska, and Szymanówka leads the description through external reference and institutional-production contexts;
- Generating a narrative based on interviews, which in *Pracujemy z ograniczonym chaosem* and *Przedmioty w akcji* took the form of dialogues between Kocińska/Ptasznik and Zdebiak. Lissowska-Postaremczak, on the other hand, created a synthetic account of two interviews;
- *Kontrolowana dezorientacja. Wylinka, vol. 1*: Herbut created an essay of a literary nature, making a poetic translation of the experiences of participating in the process, of being present in the experience.

It is worth noting the clear distinctiveness of the research and creation processes from the meta-reflection arising about them, because it is the co-presence of two components that determines the research and artistic dimension of the project. While it is possible to reconstruct the methods and techniques used in creative processes and their course to varying degrees, the knowledge about how actors and writers cooperate over actions remains rudimentary. One can get the impression that these processes were autonomous, and the texts were mostly created from the position of an observer with an unknown degree of involvement. From this perspective, *Research/Production* appears to be both a research and artistic project, but split between theory and practice.

Research/Production, for which 'Production/Research' would be a more appropriate title, was initiated as a research and artistic harbinger³⁵ on a foundation of Polish dance and choreography, the aim of which was to bring

out the language of meta-reflection. As a result, a 'self-investigative' project was created that was largely hermetic in terms of communication, being accessible primarily to people closely related to dance. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the nature of these activities was a manifestation of exceeding the condition of 'solo generation,' consisting in the transition from self-reflective activities towards activities integrating self-knowledge (theoretical, methodological) with the search for answers to problems rooted in non-dance contexts and its exchange with other environments. The use of this knowledge in action is carried out by subsequent, more methodologically advanced research and performance undertakings – such as the cited practices of Ptasznik.

Case 3: The continuum of Ania Nowak's work

We cite Ania Nowak's artistic research practices as an example of crossing the boundaries of choreography in many directions at the same time. In terms of the issue they deal with, they go beyond self-referentiality, and by combining work with movement, text and images, they are a manifestation of the shift of dance practices towards visual arts and the institutions supporting them. Nowak was educated in a patchwork manner: artistically and academically, in Poland and Germany, which certainly influenced her working methods. She graduated in Iberian Studies in Kraków, and then graduated from the Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz HZT (Inter-University Centre for Dance Berlin HZT), which she recalls as a major qualitative change that allowed her knowledge and skills to develop in a mature and independent manner (Nowak, 2021; Sosnowska, 2018). Although she has been living and working in Germany since 2011, her projects largely employ Polish art infrastructures (including Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, Nowy Teatr in Warsaw, Art Stations Foundation,

Komuna Warszawa, Biennale Zielona Góra). Her work placements are closer to the methodological 'partisanism' of domestic artistic research than to the ordered paradigm of international artistic research.

The art movement is a research tool for Nowak, while her main area of interest is queer-feminist love, which she perceives not so much as a psychological phenomenon, but rather as a political category, a social act, or a method of producing knowledge (Obarska, 2019; Sosnowska, 2018; Owczarek-Nowak, 2018). Her research process is supported by technology, which she sees as a device for establishing identity and creating social relationships – since 2014 she has been running the technologiesoflove.tumblr.com blog, where she systematically publishes fragments of her research on sexuality, pleasure, emotions and feelings that she conducts in the digital icono- and infosphere³⁶. There, we find excerpts from websites, posts from social networks, videos, reproductions of works of art, her own texts, fragments of scores from other choreographers, literature on the subject, and links to other websites. The blog therefore acts as a transparent notebook, through which Nowak shares and comments on her sources, thus divulging her process of acquiring and organizing research material.

The continuity of the notation testifies to the organic nature of Nowak's research work and its relative independence from the production problems characteristic of multi-person choreographic productions, such as forced mobility or work in residency, the hardships of which were mentioned by Szymanówka. The realizations prepared by Nowak – solo and collective performances, such as *Languages of the Future*, *Untitled 3*, *To the Aching Parts! (Manifesto)* or *Inflammations*, as well as entire exhibitions – seem not so much separate projects, but sequential expressions of ongoing research.

The artist discloses her applications for scholarships or grants. She emphasizes, however, that the German system of supporting choreographic productions takes into account their distinctiveness, while in Poland, innovative projects of this kind are usually located in the field of experimental theatre, dependent on existing institutions and only partially financed. Nowak draws attention to a research scholarship that can be obtained in Berlin that provides funds for artistic research in the field of dance and movement every year – its intended effect is the creation of new ideas or methods, and not the production of performances (Nowak, 2021).

Nowak often collaborates with Agata Siniarska and Mateusz Szymanówka, and she is a guest performer and creator of her own performances, which she consults dramaturgically and produces in cooperation with invited performers. In the text *Mobile Cooperation Networks. Not Only About the Polish Dance Community in Berlin* – presenting the background of her own practice – she emphasizes that, in her education, she has assimilated the value of functioning in creative communities but remains critical of its non-hierarchical nature. As she writes: ‘Being a so-called independent choreographer is a constantly fascinating process to me, of critically practising being in a collective and negotiating the roles we give ourselves and others. Currently, it means for me that when working in a group, I avoid idealizing horizontal structures, and I rather seek to consistently cultivate healthy, mobile and soft hierarchies’ (Nowak, 2021). Reflecting on this model seems to be particularly important in artistic processes rooted in the performing arts, which are often abused – as we learn from, *inter alia*, the current discussion on education in drama schools.

In the project *Can you die of a broken heart?* presented in 2018 at the Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, Nowak synthesized her

research as part of a choreographic exhibition. The main research problem was love viewed from the perspective of the relationship between the following orders: the psycho-emotional, the bodily, the socio-cultural and the political. Cardiomyopathy – the title's 'broken heart' – is a heart muscle disease that can occur unexpectedly as a result of a sudden crisis, such as the loss of a loved one. By researching the relationship between health and disease, Nowak broadened the scope of her interests to other conditions, including autoimmune diseases, indicating internal conflict and auto-aggression (Szymanówka-Nowak, 2019; Owczarek-Nowak, 2018).

Using language, she explores the rigorous medical discourse and juxtaposes it with the poetic layer, and then presents it in the form of video performances and performance activities accompanying the exhibition. These sensual, verbal-visual-movement methods of presenting the results of previous analyses of the ways of representing love – or rather the spectrum of emotions, experiences and meanings behind this concept – are, in various discourses, not obvious as the results of research. The artist does not hide her sources, processes, and methods, but they are only available through external channels, such as the aforementioned blog, or interviews. And although Nowak eagerly uses the spoken word in her performances, presenting original speeches, statements, or manifestos, her messages are usually ambiguous, brief, and very literary (Szymanówka-Nowak, 2019; Sosnowska, 2018). And while entering the field of visual arts gives Nowak's BA activities much greater visibility than occasional performances in theatres, only an intertwining and wide viewing of the messages she produces – exhibitions, performances, interviews, blogs – allows her method of producing knowledge to be perceived. Such a perspective provides insight into her methods based on caring, queering the orthodox ways of seeing the world, and striving for the emancipation of individual experience.

6. Interlacing: problems, potentials, and question marks

In the last part, we look at five ‘interlaces’ – threads related to the development of BA in the context of M/D/CH, which in the course of the analyses particularly attracted our attention. As source material, we used examples collected within the spider-web map, a look at the three cases discussed, a review of literature related to contemporary dance in Poland, as well as meetings with the Pracownia Kuratorska and discussions in the Przestrzeń Wspólna. The presented observations are sketchy preliminary diagnoses that are open to further deepening, solidification, and critical verification. The dominant vectors of our observations are budding associations, emerging doubts, and multiplying question marks.

Artistic work with the movement as ‘self-examination’?

Creative work related to movement/dance/choreography can be considered an artistic study. In this field, the body is treated and understood not only as a tool, but also as a complex (embodied) research and cognitive apparatus³⁷. Perhaps that is why we observe the greatest feedback loop in the research dimension between artistic practice and dance- and movement theory³⁸, not necessarily including other types of scientific disciplines³⁹ (although the exception would be neurocognitive research⁴⁰; see Frydrysiak, 2018). This is combined with the observation that the BA discussed here in the Polish context focuses in many cases on auto-thematic issues, such as in the case of Research/Production or, partially, the work of Ptasznik. We see here an expression of the need for autonomy – a link with the context of the

emancipation of new dance as a field of art (*Nowy taniec*, 2012; *Choreografia: autonomia*, 2019).

We are curious as to what will happen when (and if) the inner language of the new dance is discursively grounded. What will be the next 'riots' following research not only in the context of self-knowledge, but also of other external problems, as is already starting to happen (e.g. in the context of problems of climate and botany, of social participation or in the political public sphere)?⁴¹ How and in what contexts will the research-performative disposition of bodies along with embodied minds be involved?

Exploring collaboration

In M/D/CH research – as opposed to 'solo generation' – there emerges a disposition to explore collectivity, which is something other than the joint concept-production-execution work of a team of artistic, technical, and administrative workers towards a performance. This disposition can be observed in the ability to work and communicate with large groups of different potentials and limitations, or in the taking up of topics related to the group's dynamics: with a common, conscious presence within the group, with a parallel self-analysis of joint action and the relationship between artists and audience. It is also visible in the growing popularity of collective cooperation models, of duets or less binding constellations, where the participants' orientation is focused on an exchange of skills and experiences, on producing qualities that cannot be accessed alone, and on creating a space for safe development⁴².

As shown by the *Research/Production* project, Polish BA rooted in M/D/CH shows an interest in creating cooperative partnerships between a

dancer/choreographer and a theoretician/critic⁴³ who, through feedback, look for new forms of self-description and reflection. Another emerging model is the cooperation focused on solving a specific problem, the research into or undertaking of which requires that people with different competences be invited by the project leader⁴⁴, an example of which is *Przyszłość materii (the Future of Matter)*. Interestingly, when we think about collectivity/community, such practices seem more natural to people in the performing arts, where teamwork has always featured, and not so obvious to people in the field of visual arts or the humanities (as opposed to science, where there is also a distributed work model). This is clearly visible in the practice of Ania Nowak, whose performances are a clear result of consultations and work with the team, while exhibitions appear more as authored artwork.

How can you share knowledge about creating optimal conditions for teamwork, about effective and safe communication? In what scopes and contexts will the practices of inclusiveness and horizontal relations develop (including problems related to power and the institutional context)?

Institutional patchwork, partisans, and outsourcing

For many people involved in movement, education has a partisan-patchwork character. They create their own path of education, which includes specialist tuition (also carried out abroad), and the study of other disciplines – not only those closely related such as art history, theatre studies, dance theory, but also philosophy, cultural studies, and anthropology⁴⁵. Building work tools in a bottom-up way allows those involved to see new problems, ask questions differently and define directions in a novel way, but it also requires effort

and economic capital. It is worth emphasizing that M/D/CH education brings international contacts, scholarships and workshops with it, which is visible in all the examples discussed. It is an environment that, in addition to using domestic experiences and achievements, draws from foreign, especially Western, tributaries, where the problem of creating knowledge through art has been dealt with for over twenty years. A perfect manifestation of this is Ptasznik, who received her choreographic research training outside Poland, and the recognition of the internationally oriented Stokłosa, which led to the initiation of *Research/Production* and the invitation to the project not only of Ptasznik, but also of Piotrowska, educated in research in France, and two artists from Finland⁴⁶, as well as Nowak's work in Berlin. Thus, it can be observed that methodologically conscious 'artistic research' is carried out to a greater extent by people⁴⁷ who have access to knowledge and experience gained during international academic curricula, workshops, seminars, and studios. This requires appropriate financial, cultural, and time resources⁴⁸.

We are interested in how the artistic and research infrastructure in dance in Poland will develop further. Will foreign 'outsourcing' continue to dominate?

Platforms, projects, programmes, and research scholarships have appeared in the Polish landscape, such as the Stary Browar Nowy Taniec programme – Grażyna Kulczyk's research scholarship, which Ptasznik used⁴⁹, or the 'Choreography in the Centre' courses of Fundacja Burdąg⁵⁰. Shelter is sometimes provided by institutions derived from the visual arts, where the research topic is somewhat better established⁵¹. The previously explained 'homelessness' of dance and its consequences, in particular the lack of stable financing⁵², affect the nature and scale of the projects implemented here.

What will this mean for BA within M/D/CH in terms of the issues addressed

or possible courses of action? Will there be new alliances, or maybe subversive passages dug under existing institutional structures?

Knowledge-exchange formats

How is knowledge shared within dance/movement/choreography? In other words: how are traces left behind⁵³? During the observation and analysis of existing practices, several 'formats' or models of knowledge exchange caught our attention:

- Interviews with people working with movement turned out to be a relatively widespread and explored source in the form of interviews and description through conversation. It is a method focused on translating experiences and working methods into another language, here: text, which allows access to knowledge regardless of the time and place of the audience's presence. Outstanding examples are Mateusz Szymanówka's *Think Tank Choreograficzny*⁵⁴, and the publication *Ruchy Oporu* by Anka Herbut (2019)⁵⁵, being the aftermath of the above-mentioned research scholarships, or the publicly funded *Choreografia w sieci* by Aleksandra Osowicz⁵⁶.
- Of paramount importance for people associated with dance and movement is participation in shows of work in progress, which allows not only the exchange of knowledge at the embodied level, but also the formation of coupled meta-reflection. An example here is the works in process shown at the Centrum w Ruchu.
- Exchange within different educational models, such as formal education⁵⁷; artistic-research residencies with substantive support for the artists⁵⁸, drawing on the experience of other people; a self-education model, i.e. a

seminars and workshops – usually available for a fee, such as the ‘Choreography in the Centre’ course conducted by Stokłosa, Ptasznik and Piotrowska; a content-related census as part of laboratory-type projects, such as during research projects in the field of science or closed events at dance festivals such as Malta⁵⁹, or as part of semi-open support groups such as the Przestrzeń Wspólna.

– Exchange in a personal relationship: access to process notes, choreographic and research journals or scores, individual invitations to cooperation and exchange of competences in the course of production.

Are there any other models in practice? For people not specialized in the M/D/CH field and trying to understand knowledge exchange on the basis of *backtracking*⁶⁰, an attempt to answer this question may prove difficult due to the specific system of codes that people working with movement use to communicate with each other. To enter this field and become a part of it, you need to be educated in this direction or have many years of experience – you have to travel, to share your time and space to be part of this world⁶¹.

How could BA processes related to M/D/CH open up to knowledge exchange with people not specialized in this particular school⁶²? What is especially worth sharing⁶³?

Empathy within ‘bodies of knowledge’

Recent Polish choreography reveals the postulates of care, empathy, deep emotion, and mutual attunement. Within the social sciences and humanities (see Domańska, 2007), there is a clear need to use methods based on incorporating the body and embodied research⁶⁴. We see here the possibility of cooperation and of a mutual exploration of methods. Among those

currently used, we notice the 'availability' potential within, among others: research walks and joint exploration of the environment involving the body; feedback techniques, subjecting to experience and reflecting on both the roles of people participating in the process and the specific interaction between them; and challenging structural divisions (e.g. theory and practice, science and art, action and description) through somatization (see Shusterman, 2016), embodying knowledge and 'setting it in motion' to integrate the body into scientific practice.

How can this shared feeling in the space of the 'body of knowledge' and accessibility be developed despite the different communication models within the various disciplines of science and art? Would M/D/CH artist researchers be ready to create tools, work methods, or areas of embodied knowledge with the intention of bringing them into a common field?

Conclusion

When we were invited to collaborate on this article, we read the purpose of our activity as creating guidelines for conducting BA in the field of performing arts in Poland. Because we share an affinity for a self-reflective attitude in the acquisition of knowledge, we decided to shift the emphasis to people associated with the field of performing arts in Poland who are already practising BA or are starting to do so. We did not wish to colonize this area of practice by investigating the visual arts nor the Western BA paradigm, but rather to understand what the local specificity is that results from domestic experiences and conditions. We made the decision to narrow it down to M/D/CH practices and we would like to emphasize that the examples presented here are not typical ones and their selection was motivated by the nature of our analysis. We imagine that, on the basis of this text, people with

a different background will be able to independently analyse other projects on the spider-web map. We share the backstage of our work and the collected sources to encourage people interested in BA in the performing arts, while looking at foreign BA practices, to seek opportunities to become rooted and to network by producing local 'seeds' as well as emerging traditions and helpful infrastructures.

The work on the article also caused shifts in our knowledge and has influenced future directions of interest. First, we plan to continue working on updating the definition of AR. Key observations that will accompany us concern, among others: appreciation of the aspect of 'self-research' and emancipation, which has appeared in the field of visual arts but has not been as clear a tendency in the area of M/D/CH with its potential of embodied knowledge; the diverse nature and intentions of subversive activities, and thus their meanings, because the problems related to, for example, institutional infrastructure are varied; and the importance of the inflow of foreign knowledge and experiences in the context of shaping a glocal identity in the field of M/D/CH, where practices self-organize differently than in the visual arts. Secondly, we want to continue exploring the performing arts and raise awareness of BA practices related to its other areas (e.g. theatre or music). Thirdly, as BA researchers, we see the need to develop our own competences and/or to establish further inter- and transdisciplinary collaborations, enabling us to adjust to diverse landscapes. We also intend to continue searching for formats of sharing research results within artistic research studies that would be oriented at various ways of expressing and organizing content. In parallel, we propose a visual-textual narrative on the Research Catalogue platform, which remains a space *in motu et flux*, as a seed of this search.

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Autor/ka

Tercet i Czy badania artystyczne ? (The trio iArtistic Research?)

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Footnotes

1. Zuzanna Berendt, Maciej Guzy, Ada Ruszkiewicz, Anna Majewska and Weronika Wawryk, <https://pracowniaakuratorska.fundacijaperformat.com> [accessed: 30.04.2021]
2. 'Auto-ethnography' is for us a reference to the model of practising science in which 'the special relationship that arises between the "researcher-narrator" and its recipient – the listener or viewer – is emphasized' (Kacperczyk, 2014, p. 38). A subjective account of the procedural experience of working on a text seems to us to be an important element of reflection on new pathways towards knowledge.
3. In the research approach, we feel an affinity to the paradigm of grounded theory, oriented to generating knowledge in dialogue with the people it directly concerns (see Charmaz, 2009).
4. The aim of our research work in the article is not to make a cross-sectional or even more exhaustive review of research and artistic activities in the internally diverse dance/movement/choreography environment, but to notice significant trends and possible directions for the development of this type of practice. Hence, we decided to narrow our sources to a group actively exploring the BA issues we focus on. Among others, we had the opportunity during our discussions and meetings within the Przestrzeń Wspólna; a grassroots platform for the exchange of knowledge between professionals and amateurs who practise and research dance, choreography, and broadly understood body work. This project combines various environments and is international, inclusive, and interdisciplinary (choreography, visual arts, performance, dance theory, etc.), <https://www.facebook.com/rozmowyotancuichoreografii> [accessed: 30.04.2021].
5. Competency anxiety is a concept quoted after Magda Zamorska (see Zamorska, 2021).
6. The online meeting took place on 2 March 2021 and was attended by about thirty people related to the Polish movement and dance environment.
7. At the text level, we use calculations, highlights, additions, and expansions in footnotes; questions that we address to ourselves.
8. One of the steps was to organize the conference *¿ Czy badania artystyczne ?* (*¿Artistic Research?*) under the aegis of The Eugeniusz Geppert Art and Design Academy of Wrocław and as part of the Wrocław Symposium 70/20. The conference programme is available on the website of Tercet *¿ Czy badania artystyczne ?*: www.czybadaniaartystyczne.pl/program [accessed: 30.04.2021].
9. In order to capture the difference between artistic activity ('naturally' having a cognitive component) and badania artystyczne (artistic research), it is crucial to pay attention to what the research results are: research understood as produced knowledge which can be

intersubjectively communicated. In the case of scientific research, the effectiveness of this communication is achieved by standardizing exchange formats, ensuring the intelligibility of content for people from various disciplines. For the results most often expressed in text, these are standards concerning, for example, citations, article structure, and disclosure of methodological and theoretical background. In the case of BA, located at the intersection of various realms, these standards are not predefined, which is the subject of active debate in the community.

10. The English-language AR discourse being developed in North-Western Europe since the 1990s is, however, set in a different institutional infrastructural context, so the discussions and observations made therein often do not correspond to the specific problems

encountered in Poland. However, artists whom we interviewed emphasized the importance of foreign sources of methodological knowledge. *Knowing in Performing. Artistic Research in Music and the Performing Arts* is worth mentioning – a collective publication edited by Annegret Huber et al. exploring the issues of *embodied knowing*, of *sensuous-situational knowing*, and knowledge related to the experience of a creative process: *embodied knowing*.

11. Glocality: the dynamics of local-global relations, the processes of mixing and interpenetration of dominant and emancipating discourses in the context of space studies, situated by Ewa Rewers at the opposite end of ‘objective’ transcultural processes, see Rewers, 2003.

12. We are particularly interested in such aspects of artistic research practices in M/D/CH that not only self-reflect the domestic state of affairs or activities, but those that can contribute more to the general BA reflections, related to trans-disciplinary flow. In other words: we want the conclusions from this article not only to enrich BA in the dance environment, but also to facilitate the mutual exchange of knowledge and working methods between artists from various fields of art and science.

13. Our thinking about dance and its ‘homelessness’ is borrowed from Alicja Czaczel, who infected us with this metaphor during a conversation around the cited lexicon of artistic research and the metaphor of ‘leaving the building’ that we use; see Brelińska, Małkowicz-Daszkowska, Reznik, 2021, p. 101; Fazan, 2020.

14. Araneum: spider’s web (Latin).

15. We want to further develop the spider-web map to continue the process of mapping the field of BA’s performance practices, and ultimately to make it available also in non-Polish contexts. We invite readers to link projects, people, and threads and to contact us at: czybadaniaartystyczne@gmail.com.

16. The case study is, for us, primarily a tool enabling further exploration and exemplification of the trends observed in the course of the analysis. The intention of the selection of cases was not to make generalizations on their basis regarding any research and artistic activities in the field, but to understand their diversity and find starting points for subsequent searches.

17. The visibility of this undertaking is largely related to the symbolic capital and resources of Ptasznik herself, set at the centre of the Polish performance milieu, from where it also explores Western European spaces for choreography. The artist is associated with Warsaw, where she studied at the University of Warsaw and co-founded Centrum w Ruchu. She completed choreography studies at the School for New Dance Development in Amsterdam, was a Solo Project scholarship holder in Stary Browar in Poznań, and participated in numerous artistic residencies abroad. As an artist-researcher, she also draws from her education in the field of social sciences, which significantly influences not only the area of

her interests, but also the ease with which she articulates her own actions in the space of the artistic and scientific fringe and her success in sharing the knowledge generated. See Obarska, [no date].

18. a.pass: an international and transdisciplinary environment established in Brussels for artistic research within performance practices, consisting of a one-year postgraduate programme (a.pass Postgraduate Programme) and a research centre enabling advanced studies and providing an exchange platform (a.pass Research Centre), see <https://apass.be/mission-statement> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

19. Link to the official website of the project:

<https://magdalenaptasznik.hotglue.me/?glowna3>"><https://magdalenaptasznik.hotglue.me/?glowna3> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

20. See <https://ifeellikeleavingtheroom.online/?Magda> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

21. See <https://magdalenaptasznik.hotglue.me/?Manual> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

22. See <https://magdalenaptasznik.hotglue.me/horyzont> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

23. See <https://magdalenaptasznik.hotglue.me/?glowna3-zasoby2> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

24. See <https://magdalenaptasznik.hotglue.me/?glowna3-dzialania.head> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

25. See <https://magdalenaptasznik.hotglue.me/?glowna3-wydarzenia> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

26. The official website of the Art Stations Foundation,

<https://www.artstationsfoundation5050.com/taniec/wydarzenie/stypendium-...> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

27. Ptasznik's interview with herself is a self-presentation for her portfolio in the a.pass programme. The artist uses the metaphor of a 'zig-zag movement,' see [Ptasznik], [no date].

28. These initial questions are: 'How can choreography, by engaging the body and the imagination, contribute to the social reimagining of the future of the environment? How can a viewer be an active co-creator of speculation? What kind of speculation about the future might stimulate their embodied participation in the performance? How can a performance event's entanglement in other temporalities taking place from the "here and now" – beyond the individual, the co-dependence, the human be shown?'

<https://magdalenaptasznik.hotglue.me/?o+projekcie> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

29. In this context, it is worth recalling Bojana Kunst's reflection resonating in the Polish performing arts milieu, to which Ptasznik refers in her sources, see. Kunst, 2020; Kunst, 2016.

30. The prelude to this project was the *Microclimates* performed in 2018 and 2019 in cooperation with the Warsaw-based Zachęta: choreographic performances in the field of visual arts that were a manifestation of the displacement of dance towards the edifices and structures of art. Both the research methodology and its results were made available by the artist in the form of documentation on the project website:

<https://magdalenaptasznik.hotglue.me/?Microclimats.head>. [accessed: 30.04.2021].

31. The documentation of individual stages and presentations:

<https://magdalenaptasznik.hotglue.me/?glowna3-dzialania.head>,

<https://magdalenaptasznik.hotglue.me/?documentation+warsztatu>, information about the presentation *I feel like leaving the room* (28–29/01/2021) concluding her a.pass programme and co-created with other artist-researchers (Rui Calvo, Quinsy Gario, Adriano Wilfert Jensen, Magdalena Ptasznik, Kasia Tórz): <https://apass.be/i-feel-like-leaving-the-room>, <https://ifeellikeleavingtheroom.online> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

32. See <https://ifeellikeleavingtheroom.online/?Magda> [accessed: 30.04.2021].

33. From the perspective of BA researchers, it seems particularly important to us to use such forms of sharing knowledge generated in research and artistic processes that reveal the production's methodological and theoretical background. In the traditional convention of performing arts, whether performance or demonstration, these most often remain invisible to the recipient. The openness of the BA process, i.e. the way in which knowledge is created, is a key element for its transmission within the environment and beyond.
34. Only two years earlier, a synthetic approach to the diversity of such practices and their origins was published, with the term 'new dance' resonating in the environment, see *New dance*, 2012; *Contemporary dance ...*, 2017; *Choreographic Strategies*, 2017.
35. From 2004 until 2020, new dance projects flourished on the Warsaw-Poznań axis, mainly thanks to a rich palette of performances, workshops, meetings, scholarships, and residences for the Stary Browar Foundation at the Art Stations Foundation and on 2021 in the capital's Centrum w Ruchu and the related Fundacja Burdąg, stimulated research in the awareness of body and movement, performative work with biographical contexts or interdisciplinary practices; they also raised the so-called solo generation – see *New Dance*, 2012.
36. The blog was created as part of a research residency at the Centrum Kultury Zamek w Poznaniu (ZAMEK Culture Centre in Poznań) entitled *Love as a Strategy of Developing Knowledge and Spending Time*, preparing for the performance *Offering What We Don't Have To Those Who Don't Want It*, commissioned by the Berlin festival Tanztage 2015 (Sosnowska, 2018, p. 2), see <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/wydarzenia/wieczor-walentynkowy-kem-care-o-milo...> [accessed: 30.04.2021].
37. During the discussion in the Przestrzeń Wspólna, Dorota Michalak brought up this topic.
38. In the spirit of the modern division into types of knowledge and ways of producing it, which 'embodied knowledge' is trying to dismantle.
39. Here we can see the difference with artistic research related to the visual arts, which more often draws on the achievements of other disciplines.
40. Especially the extensive and consistent search by Viola Kuś and the Artistic Research Foundation OM led by her – organisms and machines in culture (FUNom), see <http://trendbook.digitalcultures.pl/funom/neurofizjologia-artysty-w-per...>, <https://www.funom.org/> [accessed: 30.04.2021].
41. Examples include the series of theatrical residencies *Biopolis* at the Pracownia Kuratorska, *Site Specific Interventions* by Alicja Czyczel or *Microclimates* or *The Future of Matter* by Magdalena Ptasznik.
42. As in the Przestrzeń Wspólna, for example.
43. As, for example, in the *Research/Production* project.
44. During the discussion in the Przestrzeń Wspólna, Małgorzata Myślińska talked about her project *Goose Bumps*.
45. Ptasznik initially studied sociology and Nowak philology, while, as part of the discussion in the Przestrzeń Wspólna, other people talked about the background of their education, including: Hanka Bylka-Kanecka, Adelina Cimochoicz, Sandra Lewandowska, Dana Chmielewska, Anna Wańtuch, Agnieszka Sterczyńska, and Alicja Czyczel.
46. Importantly, Finland is one of the leading countries in the field of artistic research, and innovative forms of education have a long tradition there.
47. For example, the activities of Ania Nowak and Magdalena Ptasznik.
48. Adelina Cimochoicz recalled this theme during the discussion in Przestrzeń Wspólna.

49. The official website of Arts Stations Foundation,
<https://www.artstationsfoundation5050.com/taniec/wydarzenie/stypendium-...> [accessed: 30.04.2021].
50. The official website of Fundacja Burda, <http://fundacjaburda.com/blog/choreografia-w-centrum-2020>,
<http://fundacjaburda.com/blog/choreografia-w-centrum-2> [accessed: 30.04.2021].
51. See, for example, Ania Nowak.
52. This is complicated further by the problem of 'grantosis' and the unequal funding for various types of arts, where dance definitely loses out.
53. This question was asked during the meeting in Przestrzeń Wspólna by Alicja Czyżel.
54. The official website of Think Tank Choreograficzny (TTCh), <http://ttch.pl> [accessed 30 March 2021], see
<http://www.artstationsfoundation5050.com/taniec/wydarzenie/think-tank-c...> [accessed: 30.04.2021].
55. Under the same title, Herbut had previously published a cross-sectional text that was the result of her collaboration with the Centre for Contemporary Art at the Jagiellonian University as part of the *Other Dances* project, see Herbut, 2018;
<https://www.artstationsfoundation5050.com/taniec/wydarzenie/stypendium-...> [accessed: 30.04.2021].
56. <http://choreografiawsieci.pl/o-projekcie> [accessed: 30.04.2021].
57. In Poland, the research approach is not available in the field of dance, hence its disciplinary shifts, e.g. from the humanities or social sciences, while foreign universities offer research facilities and support.
58. For example, residences as part of *Biopolis* or in the programme of the Scena Robocza in Poznań.
59. For example, the cooperation between the culture scientist Magda Zamorska and TTCh, see <http://www.laboratorium.uni.wroc.pl/think-tank-choreograficzny-malta-20...> [accessed: 30.04.2021].
60. We mean the procedure also known as *reverse engineering*, i.e. the reconstruction of a process based on the analysis of the finished work, but only available to people with specialist knowledge of working methods, techniques, theory, and language of a given area. In the case of M/D/CH, this knowledge is embodied and the domestic education system brings competences through physical contact and recording information directly in the body. Here, the insight into someone else's practice is obtained not so much through intellectual cognition, but primarily through sensual contact with the work of another person and confronting that with the reaction from one's own body, describing one's own experience. Thus, the text, of key importance for scientific exchange, plays only a supporting role in this field. *Backtracking* as a technique for generating flows between theory and practice in the space of dance/choreography/movement was proposed by Jeroen Peeters, see *Choreografia: autonomie*, 2019.
61. During the meeting in Przestrzeń Wspólna, Katarzyna Kania raised this topic.
62. The same question can be asked of scientific texts that use specialized jargon.
63. A valuable proposition to bring to the interdisciplinary field of artistic research seems to be the MOSS project – Moving Into Soft Skills, offered by Fundacja Burda, i.e. somatically entrenched soft skills training, such as e.g. mindfulness, communication, creativity, self-regulation, cooperation, see <https://movingintosoftskills.com> [accessed: 30.04.2021].
64. It is worth mentioning here, for example, practices related to evocative auto-

ethnography (Kacperczyk, 2009), research and the use of art in the field of anthropology (*Ethnography/Animation/Art*, 2013) or research on 'provisions' and memory performance (Kobielska, Szczepan, 2020).

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RESEARCH-ARTISTIC PRACTICES

Provocateurs of Experiences, Practitioners of Traps

Dorota Ogrodzka

Abstract

This article is a self-analytical description of the work of the Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne (Social Theatre Laboratory), an artistic collective based in Warsaw. It mainly focuses on the Theatre's audience/participant involvement strategies and their ways of constructing theatre experiences and telling stories in a participatory style. The author discusses examples of performances, performative actions, ways of creating the dramaturgy and the type of relationships that performers establish with the audience in the work of the Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne collective. At the same time, she examines what kinds of challenges are faced by groups and artists who declare their willingness to create participatory art. She seeks to propose interpretative notions for naming and describing these challenges.

Keywords: participatory art; performance; experience; trap; collective

When the Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne (Social Theatre Laboratory) was founded in Warsaw's Praga district in January 2016, we inhabited a different socio-political galaxy. That was a mere six years ago but revisiting that time in our minds is like the work of an archaeologist or attempts to dust off pictures that seem almost unreal.

Six years ago we lived in a pre-pandemic world before the most sweeping expansion of conservative forces in the Polish government. At the time no one could have predicted the assassination of the Mayor of Gdańsk Paweł Adamowicz at the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity's event. The climax of Polish women's strikes and the intense struggle for reproductive and civil rights may have been foreseeable, but all that was yet to come. And even though the migration crisis was becoming a reality, full of pain and hardship and giving rise to ethical and geopolitical dilemmas, this was long before the humanitarian crisis that would engulf Poland's Eastern border. We lived on another planet socially, politically and culturally.

In his essay written in May 2020, when the world's grapple with the new virus had just began, Jacek Dukaj pointed out that changes and events started to accelerate in an uncanny way.

I hear over and over again how the pandemic has slowed down the world and people. But it's been the other way around: coronavirus means acceleration. Of economic strategies. Of technological trends. Of geopolitics, of the power play on the world's stage. Of lifestyles. Of changing values and culture. Of the evolution of social systems. Of consciousness. Today, in the eye of an information cyclone and with my mind still unsettled, I reckon that the virus has accelerated us, on average, by 10 years. When we emerge from its shadow, we will be where we would be around 2030 minus the virus.

Now, almost two years later, it is difficult not to agree with Dukaj. If anything, his prediction did not go far enough.

Looking back on the work of Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne, I think of it as reflecting our need to keep on revising our assumptions and stimulating our mindfulness and the ability to name things, paraphrase and challenge social dynamics that flicker with the intensity of a strobe light.

We started out in a different context. What seemed most urgent at the time was different. Social priorities and tensions were different too. In addition, a great deal has since changed in the field of social art in Poland. Many brilliant projects and efforts have been launched, numerous important texts that began to introduce engaged art, including community theatre and theatre pedagogy, to a wide audience have been penned.

Discussing one's own work and one which unfolds in a changing context is risky for several reasons. Many researchers contend that it is impossible or extremely difficult to let go of an affirmative perspective when discussing one's own work, to adopt a detached, self-reflective, critical angle. I agree that to achieve this, one needs to be alert and mindful, but this is what we have been doing from the inception of Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne – we recognized that it was necessary to be both alert and mindful in both our creative practice and theoretical inquiry. And we have always harboured a belief – stemming from the coalescence of our academic and artistic practices – that action can be research. It is a particularly valuable practice to speak of one's own work while striking a balance between deep immersion in experience, the familiarity with all the contexts of one's work and a full-of-wonder, critical outside perspective on the ramifications of one's work.

In her book *The Mother of All Questions* (2021), Rebecca Solnit writes at length about projecting and releasing one's voice, letting go of shame (shame is almost organically passed on through generations of Polish artists

and practitioners, who must prove their right to practising culture and art) and giving oneself permission to name and interpret one's efforts. Solnit suggests that it is a particularly important breakthrough for female artists and activists to talk about their own work and interpret it if they work with themselves, i.e. use themselves as a tool, or incorporate their limitations, body, imagination and condition into the creative process (it is not without reason that Solnit identifies their shame, insecurity or coyness as a significant element of the cultural position of women). Solnit claims that this is emancipatory. In another of her books, *Men Explain Things to Me* (2017), Solnit argues that since it is so common for others to explain to us the meaning of what we do and to usurp the right to understand our actions better than we do, there is no reason why at least one voice in the public chorus of voices should not be our own, especially if the story is not about individual creative work but about co-creation involving collective communication and decision-making. Being aware of the potential pitfalls and traps, my intention is to do just that. I am not afraid of the traps. In fact, methodologically, they are one of the key strategies and ways of working at Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne.

I will weave my story around two recurring notions: the trap and experience. But before I start exploring them, I will first take a step back to look at the context in which the group operates.

The Puncturing Begins

Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne is part of the Stowarzyszenie Pedagogów Teatru (Association of Theatre Educators). For about 18 months now, we have been based in the venue of the School, a grassroots arts organization we are building together with Komuna Warszawa at the very heart of the

Polish capital. In recent years, we have worked closely with a host of organizations including Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego (The Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute), Fundacja Inicjatyw Społeczno-Ekonomicznych (Foundation for Social and Economic Initiatives), Krytyka Polityczna, Teatr Powszechny, Forum Przyszłości Kultury (Forum for the Future of Culture) and Europejskie Centrum Solidarności (European Solidarity Centre), as well as designing action plans for organizations such as Towarzystwo Inicjatyw Twórczych „ę”, („ę” Association of Creative Initiatives), the Cervantes Institute and Szkoła Liderów (School for Leaders).

These names demonstrate that we do not work in a temporal, social and institutional vacuum. The landscape in which we are embedded co-shapes our actions, priorities and choices. We put out feelers to monitor what is happening, including in our own community. Being a part of Stowarzyszenie Pedagogów Teatru brings our artistic profile closer to the perspectives and methods of theatre pedagogy. Being part of the School keeps us in close contact with the alternative artistic community (including its theatre part) where we are a socially oriented wing, exploring not only political, publicly relevant topics but also working with the community.

Founded in January 2016, Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne brought together a group of people who had previously collaborated with each other, including artistic, research-oriented and activist individuals, movement practitioners and theatre educators united by a desire to explore new ways of addressing social themes in the arts. I was the initiator. At the beginning, I organized the rehearsals and workshops from which the group emerged, but I always saw the value of moving towards more democratic and collective forms of creative work¹.

In its early days, Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne was a space of research

into theatre form and of looking at the contemporary world. The first filter was our own affective reactions and critical thinking about the city, the state and democracy, asking ourselves what riles us and what we think needs to be told in the form of stories, what themes and lenses can be used to tell stories about contemporary Poland, its present situation, hardships, tensions and needs. We also thought about how we could use the theatrical and performative tools we had as theatre educators, directors, choreographers and researchers.

From its beginnings, a key priority of the Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne was to seek tools that we could use to explore social realities but also to puncture them. I borrow this metaphor from Joanna Rajkowska, who in an interview titled 'The Art of Public Possibility,' while explaining the goals and strategies of her work, talks about perforating the smooth surfaces of the public sphere, the field of visibility and discourse (see Żmijewski, 2009, pp. 234-257). Impressed by the interview, I wondered what she meant by 'puncturing'. To let some air in? To make something that we usually glide over or consider uniform slightly uglier and rougher? I also liked the idea of looking through small holes underneath something, the assumption that there is something under the surface, multiple layers; and the fact that what is invisible, hidden (deliberately or not) can be revealed. Puncturing also brings to mind stripping something of pathos, as well as an injection, a vaccination, a preventive or healing measure; or, possibly, a poisonous one.

'Can asking questions be at once a poison and a cure?' I wondered while reading Jacques Derrida's essay on the pharmakon, a substance that has both poisonous and healing powers. Interestingly, Derrida used it as a metaphor for art (see Derrida, 1992). Puncturing can also refer to being mean, finding fault; to ruining other people's mood and complacency,

making a mountain out of a molehill. This is what we wanted to do as a collective: to be subversive, to look askance, to deflate the complacency of us all, including the community of Warsaw residents, of academics, creatives and activists (those who often equate working with communities with working for others rather than with internal work for the benefit of their own group or worldview). Our intention was to hold up a mirror to ourselves and things around us, which is a different metaphor that refers to the same process of puncturing smooth surfaces.

Themes at an Intersection

We chose security as our first theme. The process of choosing it generated no small amount of disagreement. Some considered security to be a psychological notion related primarily to the individual's experience of the world and herself/himself in it, including setting one's limits, meeting one's needs and making sure one is comfortable. Others saw it as primarily political as it is used as a tool to manage citizens. They thought that security is embedded in normativizing narratives which serve, among other things, to determine who is welcome in a state and who is not, for it is a construct that can be used to control bodies, communities and minds and to exclude individuals or groups perceived as a threat. We chose this theme because we found each of the above perspectives legitimate, and it seemed particularly interesting to combine them, which later on proved foundational for the Laboratorium approach. Since then, we have always sought to work at the intersection of the individual and the social. We want to include personal stories, existential experiences, to provoke reactions, play with the audience's expectations while allowing them to catch themselves reacting in certain ways and to consider changing these reactions. At the same time, we keep on reaching out to the public and working at the political level, which

we regard as particularly important due to the rise of the ubiquitous therapeutic culture, which, by ascribing responsibility for happiness, success (including economic success), good health and climate catastrophe to individuals, places a heavy burden on them. To balance things out, we want to draw attention to the fact that each problem is systemically embedded and we propose that we take a shared responsibility in striving for change. These proposals are not easy to implement: their costlessness is a fiction, just as is the apparent separation between the public and the private. In fact, they are closely interconnected and it is all too rare, also in art, to think and talk about their coexistence, interconnections and interdependence.

These thoughts led us to create a performance entitled *A Course in Public Health and Safety*². We offered the audience a series of micro-activities using a format akin to a course in which we were supposed to learn together with them the principles of what we identified as social health and safety in contemporary Poland. We were interested in tacit social contracts, transparent normativizing concepts, stigmatizing and privileging processes, the ways in which the state and public systems used the concept of security to control, mould and educate individuals and groups, not always oriented towards equality and emancipation. The micro-activities were created following in-group and field research – we looked at how we used different ways of protecting ourselves and what we had been taught in school, church and families. Immediately, most of these ways seemed to us paradoxical and spurious, masking real needs in favour of commodifying emotions or of promoting privileges or benefits of a section of society, and many of them promoted models based on violence and a belief in the superiority of some people over others.

For examples, we turned to history textbooks (notably passages on the

history of national defence and independence), life insurance offers, school and company health and safety policies, housing and gated community rules, traffic regulations, playground rules, recommendations for camp staff, media coverage on refugees and progressive safe sex guides.

These resources were the starting point for building provocative situations of participatory nature. We sought to identify the full, literal consequences of the health and safety recommendations, checking how they worked, what they led to, what results they produced. This, of course, triggered the mechanism of the distorting mirror, revealing an array of paradoxes and absurdities. As we were building performative situations, we tested them on ourselves in rehearsal. As performers, we realized how easily we succumbed to the persuasive and reassuring discourse of security, how many consequences of the discourse that were at odds with other values we held dear we were willing to accept. We thought how to translate our civic relationship with the seductive power of the security stories into a performative experience mechanism.

How do we pick apart the compelling promotional narrative of a company that makes equipment designed to protect us from the effects of the climate change, the manufacture of which negatively affects not only the natural environment but also those involved in the process? How do we expose the fact that, even though we declare ourselves to be open and non-discriminatory against any living things, we sometimes condone or fail to protest against government solutions designed to control or exclude organizations that are, according to some interest groups, a threat?

When developing *A Course in Public Health and Safety*, we investigated this mechanism in the discourse on migrants, based on the famous 2016 speech of Jarosław Kaczyński, who, appealing to his listeners' need for security or,

rather, their fear and feeling of being threatened, argued that the people arriving from Syria were spreading disease, which, considering the events of the past year, proved merely a prelude to the real crisis. The situations/scenes we designed, whether they concerned migration, space management or education of youth people, were based on our critical and suspicious look at how we act when confronted with security regulations.

Experiences and Traps

From the very start, we searched for a way to create a performative structure that works rather than merely represents. We asked ourselves how to thrust the audience in the midst of action unfolding 'here and now' so that she or he can activate emotions, reactions and mindfulness (which I dwell on more further on) and a critical meta-level. This is when we invented two strategies: experience and the trap.

First, we began to use questions to immerse audiences deeper into their experience, and instructions to lure them into a trap. The notion of experience implies an appeal to emotions and an invitation to become directly involved. Experience engages the physicality of participants as well as their senses, particularly touch, taste and smell, which are very infrequently activated in situations of theatre representation. Theatre works still tend to be designed for watching, listening and understanding.

Discussing the evolution of contemporary art, Brian O'Doherty points out that the emergence of art forms engaging the viewer's body, such as installation and visual performance, was the first step towards challenging the primacy of the eye and mind in the perception of a work of art. According to O'Doherty, this gave art the power to work with the

unconscious, bypassing or outsmarting the defensive mechanisms of the mind (2000).

Performative experience is not much different: the relation between performative experience and theatre corresponds to the relation between installation and painting. One is intended to be experienced, immersed in, be part of, the other is meant to be received, viewed from a distance. In an experience, a member of the audience, and especially the audience as a collective subject, complements and co-creates the meaning.

Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne focuses on involvement not because we want to get our thesis across more effectively but to enable each member of the audience to formulate his or her own ideas, to reach hidden and perhaps contradictory inner emotions, mental aporias, and then use them – together with the theses and antitheses we offer – to build their own syntheses for the topic we offer. We want them to carve their own path stumbling around in a thicket of ambivalent feelings and different perspectives that are often inconsistent with one another.

The notion of experience needs to be clarified here. In everyday language it can refer to almost anything that can happen to an individual or group. However, in a theatre context, I would say that provoking an experience is a different type of strategy than presenting a theatre work. Inviting an audience to immerse themselves in an experience, as I understand it, is to actively bring them into a context, enmesh them in a net of events that affect an individual subject or a collective strongly and directly at the affective level as well as the intellectual one. The idea is to put the audience in the midst of events rather than looking at them from a distance, so that in a sense they become a collective of performing people whose actions or failures to act are relevant to the further development and interpretation of

the action.

Dilemmas of Empathy and Dialectical Circles

At the Laboratorium we have a particular interest in experiences that span at least two levels: the social level involving a set of political, historical and cultural meanings and tensions and the subjective, psychological level, related to the experience of a person who passes each situation through his sensibility, memory, body, understanding and imagination.

A case in point is the Laboratorium's performative work *Empathy* which was created in 2016 and has been developed since then. The launching point for it was our interest in the notion of empathy, which, expansively moving beyond the confines of psychological discourse, entered wide circulation several years ago. Empathy began to be ever frequently discussed in the context of business and politics. We heard about interspecies empathy and about empathy underpinning almost any public situation. Books on empathy and articles encouraging readers to practise it were published. The offering also included two-day courses suggesting that empathy could be learned in forty-eight hours and could serve as a remedy for any dilemma or predicament.

We decided to create a performance work examining these narratives with suspicion but at the same time seeking to identify when and in what versions empathy can be socially transformative. The piece we devised includes a series of narrated situations and scenes in addition to arranged experiences and traps, all of which are mean to demonstrate the ambivalence of approaches that see empathy as an easily applicable remedy or an attitude that can be practised in any circumstances and at no cost. Just as we find the

alluring slogan 'Do what you love' suspicious, we distrusted the belief that can be expressed in the words 'Let's empathize to make things easier'.

Let's look at some stories from our show.

We offer the audience the opportunity to take part in a counter-protest held to derail a fascist march. At the heart of their potential decision is a doubt: Should I, can I or must I – in keeping with my convictions and sense of belonging – engage in this situation which is regarded as a matter of utmost importance while facing a personal crisis, the need to take care of my health or take a rest, or the lack of time due to my precarious employment situation? Or rather, should I permit myself the right to miss it or the right not to blame myself for missing it? How to handle the conflicting and fraught emotions that arise when one is confronted with this choice? How to negotiate between one's values and needs?

Another dilemma, which affects the middle class, including those who self-identify as activists: do we hire a housecleaner despite the fact that we know that neither the conditions of employment nor the rate we are willing to pay are decent or fair but our hiring them would buy us time to fight for labour rights, build healthy relationships with our loved ones or do unpaid work caring for our dependents? By telling, reconstructing or enacting one of these stories, performers confront the audience with a dilemma. They ask them to make a choice by taking a position on the stage or saying what they think.

With these types of stories, we set in motion – to use a Hegelian turn of phrase – dialectical circles suggesting that empathy is important, necessary, possible. We invoke psychological and neuroscientific findings indicating that empathy has natural roots and that all beings are able to feel and

practise it. In addition, we invoke, in a nutshell, progressive narratives holding that we need to turn away from competition and rivalry in social life to focus on solidarity and empathy. Of course, we believe in these narratives ourselves and try to live by them. These are our theses.

But a moment later we cite entirely different claims, saying that empathy can not only be harmful to those who practise it but can prove to be impossible, superficial. Empathy undermines systemic change, causes responsibility to be shifted to the individual, while stripping her of her expectations of public systems. When practised excessively, individual empathy is in fact a gesture of political suicide and a step towards the belief that individuals are responsible for everything.

In our stage creations and stand-up monologues, we refer to our numerous failures to display empathy and how this worked out well for us and others. We construct the field of antithesis telling stories of empathy that led to hypocrisy, to an enduring failure to act or to the annihilation of someone's needs.

Then we invite the audience to contribute (by speaking or writing down their responses on white sheets of paper), to react, to express their emotions (by naming their emotions, defining them on a scale from one to ten, showing them with a gesture or taking a position on the stage) and to join in the process of making a collective decision on how the show should proceed or on the activist action we launch as part of the show. They are encouraged to attempt a synthesis, that is, to understand their positions on the dilemmas of practising empathy.

The dialectic circle is one of our favourite strategies of audience involvement. We involve audiences in the process of examining a spectrum

of possibilities, of showing how complex certain issues are. By doing so, we want to knock both ourselves and our audience out of the ruts of easy answers, complacency and the belief that a pill or a flimsy psychology volume can provide us with a recipe for living a good and noble life. We share the belief that changing the world requires effort, radicalism, self-criticism and paying a personal price and that our efforts often result in helplessness, uncertainty, personal inconsistency and finding out the truth about personal and systemic limitations³, all of which are notions and experiences that tend to be pushed out of the public sphere. We do not seek to determine that certain arguments are right, nor do we want to promote (supposedly) good choices. Our goal is to shatter the illusion that there is something that can be unequivocally regarded as a good choice in situations that generate tension between somebody's personal needs and their values or beliefs. We are interested in endless ambivalences that we recognize not only as the fundamental emotional and ethical experience of individuals and society but also as the fundamentally dialectical structure of our world.

We encourage viewers to practice mindfulness which we understand as the ability to notice facts, events and one's reactions to them. We assume that this perspective enables one to accept themselves, their incongruences and inconsistencies, while not necessarily stripping them of social sensitivity and agency. Of course, this may seem naive but, in the final analysis, is there anything more we can do? The bereavement theorist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross argues that in the face of our fragility, transience and imperfection, the first step to make change and create a new world is to accept our loss and go through the stage of grief, including grief for one's ego and its possibilities (cf. 1998).

We Are All Trapped

The trap is a special type of experience. The idea of a trap is that it causes those entrapped to lose control, partially or completely. On the face of it, the trap may seem to be about the audience or participants, but in fact it is about the group of performers. Traps in the Laboratorium's work are usually introduced through objects, stories or instructions. Instructions help to set up a situation that is formally artificial but evokes real emotions and impressions. A spectator invited to complete a task does not know what it will lead to, but if (s)he decides to trust it, (s)he submits to the experience and falls into a trap. Experiences and traps are closely connected. Every trap is an experience but not every experience is a trap.

The trap is a notion introduced into art theory by the British anthropologist Alfred Gell. His starting point is the fundamental question of what can be considered art. How do we define something as art and something else as not art? (cf. Gell, 1998). Gell distinguishes three common criteria and adds a fourth of his own. The three existing criteria are:

- The aesthetic criterion, which is highly suspect, particularly in the postmodern era but lingers in the collective imagination and understanding. It holds that something is art if it is beautiful, artfully crafted, intricate and executed with virtuosity. (This criterion is invoked when art viewers resort to the world's most famous argument: 'It can't be art, can it? My four-year-old child would paint something like that').
- The interpretative criterion, which comes into play when one props up their judgment with art history, the canon and tradition supposedly legitimizing something as art.

– The institutional criterion according to which something is art if it has been accepted by the artistic or academic communities, becoming part of the description and display circuit at an art institution.

The researcher also proposes a fourth path: the action criterion. Gell gives the example of the 1988 'ART/artifact' exhibition curated by Susan Vogel at the Center for African Art in New York. The show included a Zande fishing net which was displayed next to other works of contemporary art. Gell contends that the curator's intention was to shift the viewers' perspective while making a critical gesture targeting art history and its arrogant colonialism. The curator wanted to break the trend of exoticizing such objects in order to expose the superficiality of art institutions' decisions that result in placing objects such as the fishing net in the context of other non-Western creations, considering them, regardless of their function and meaning, as products of a foreign culture fit for an ethnographic exhibition.

Instead, Vogel placed the fishing net side by side with works of contemporary New York artists, which provoked a heated discussion. The art critic Arthur Danto, who authored a critical essay for the exhibition catalogue, argued that associating the fishing net with contemporary American art is confusing and can only be justified by the institutional criterion that defines something as art after its inclusion in an art show. Alfred Gell begs to differ. In his opinion, the curator's decision is a masterstroke undermining all the previously mentioned criteria for legitimizing art and calling for a fourth criterion. According to Gell, the inclusion of the fishing net in the system of contemporary art prompts questions about how art works, i.e. what is its social function, and about its performance, effectiveness, agency⁴. First of all, the fishing net contains the story of its context – the story of who uses it, why and in what

circumstances, as well as of what can be caught in it and how. The object is thus a model of a trap and, as Gell argues, when placed next to works of contemporary art, it serves as an invitation to think about them in the same terms and ask the same questions: who uses them, why, in what circumstances, what can be caught in them and how.

This perspective provides a new key to understanding and classifying art – as a working instrument, as a trap provoking attention, emotions, relationships, thoughts, habits.

The trap is... both a model of its creator, the hunter, and a model of its victim, the prey animal... But more than this, the trap embodies a scenario, which is the dramatic nexus that binds these two protagonists together, and which aligns them in time and space (Gell, 1999, pp. 202-203).

Gell thus suggests that we look at objects in their full context and consider their functions, the way their elements are interconnected, the embedded structure of relationships and the potential to animate that structure. It can be said that in this perspective the fishing net – and likewise art – becomes an object that activates a complex situation and multi-level responses. This perspective allows us to go beyond the simple division between recipient and creator. Therefore, by comparing contemporary art to a net and seeking to show an artwork in terms of a trap offers the chance to break the semiotic regime in which the question of ‘significance’ obstructs the agency of art. The constant search for meaning and the artist’s intention prevents us from seeing art’s activist power, what it does. Referencing Gell’s idea, Roger Sansi asserts that the most evident example of the prevalence of this regime

in popular experience is a question often heard in modern art museums, 'What does that mean? What's the meaning?' (cf. 2014), while it would be more relevant to ask about what artworks 'do', how they work, and to regard them not so much as expressions of certain values but as provocations and impulses intended to provoke a response. At the Laboratorium we are very fond of the trap as a dramaturgical mechanism that does something to audience members (and to performers), provokes emotions, thoughts and reactions, challenges their habits.

How a performative trap works in practice can be explained with reference to *Empathy*, specifically the scene entitled *The Question Machine*, which begins with some audience members entering, one at a time, a space containing a set reminiscent of a carnival show or TV quiz, full of glittering red-and-navy-blue tinsel that creates an aura of excitement. Its tackiness brings to mind the 1990s 'New Year's Eve with TV1' show. Upon entering, audience members sit down in three chairs set up in the middle of the stage (numbered one, two and three).

Opposite them sits a performer who is about to ask them a series of questions. He asks about their fears, dreams, discomforts and aspirations. Some questions are trivial and concern things such as breakfast eating habits. Others are more serious, relating to the respondents' attitude to refugees, their romantic disappointments, life failures. The interviewees are expected to answer the questions but have the right to refuse. A camera is recording their faces with live footage streamed to the waiting room and displayed to the rest of the audience who are unaware that the machine contains an element they cannot see. The interviewees are shown cards with additional instructions, cues for imagination, a research tool for empathy. Each of them is given a cue specifying the point of view they should take

when providing their answers: 'Imagine you are a clergyman/a mother of five/a recent divorcee/the CEO of a corporation that has declared bankruptcy/Imagine you have cancer/you work night shifts in a supermarket warehouse'. These and other cues present the audience with immediate challenges to their imagination, empathy and ability to quickly judge what an identity or situation might mean. Naturally, some of the cues trigger stereotypical, superficial and shallow associations (first reactions and automatic thoughts are also part of our research). We want to catch people off guard but we side with them, acknowledging that we are also prone to emotional and behavioural reflexes which we refuse to acknowledge. Sometimes we combine several 'identities', encouraging an audience member to include all of them in her answer: 'Imagine you are a priest, a homosexual and a victim of domestic violence', or 'Imagine you are a feminist, a mother of five children, one of whom is disabled, and you'd just had a love affair'. Interviewees do not always succumb to their first responses, especially when combined identities are concerned. Sometimes they successfully apply the dialectic circle. They quickly examine several different perspectives and eschew answers that come too easily. If empathy is exercised here, it happens at the very moment of that effort.

Those watching the live footage have no idea that the interviewees are shown identity cues, so the answers given by their partners, friends or colleagues often raise their eyebrows, as they are markedly different from what they expected to hear. For them and the interviewees, it is an exercise in imagination and a platform for examining their responses.

Neither group is fully aware of the scenario. They follow rules that are gradually revealed. Their control over the situation is very limited. I suggest that the scene be referred to as a trap, chiefly because the questions are not

straightforward but come wrapped in a subversive instruction. The instruction is an overriding force and lures the audience into an ambush.

When the 'machine' is opened at the end of the scene, everyone enters it, including those who have stayed outside and had only partial knowledge of the rules of the game. The audience faces a line of performers who show them the previously hidden cues, such as 'Imagine you have a loan of 3,500 PLN to repay/you'd just learned that your partner had cheated on you/you are employed at a greengrocer's'. A performer reads the questions and asks the audience to answer them out loud or in their heads. At the end, when the final few questions are asked, the performers show the card 'You are yourself'. This is the time to reflect, breathe, be mindful.

That last sequence is intended to dismantle the trap. The audience gains full knowledge of how the trap works and can finally decide how to use that knowledge. The instruction is withdrawn, or rather, fully revealed. What matters more is the questions, the present moment and the community of (shared) experience we are all immersed in at that point, somewhat helpless in the face of the questions and multiple situations we are confronted with; entrapped by the first associations that come to mind which are difficult shake off. We, the creators, have been frequently told by the audience that this moment makes them emotional. 'I was starting to realize', one person told us, 'that being myself was the most complicated thing in our culture, some incomprehensible expectation and un-obvious aspiration. What does it actually mean to be me? Whatever the answer, it is anything but easy. Being me also requires empathy and understanding.'

The evocative questions, the way they are asked and the conditions for reflection created for the audience prove to be a very powerful experiential impulse. Many spectators later admit that when they were standing next to

other people and grappling with the questions, they experienced genuine and extremely ambivalent emotions, a kind of solidarity, collective empathy and self-reflection.

Performative mindfulness

In our productions, we often tell participants that if they do not want to answer our questions, feel angry, irritated or anxious, want to opt out or watch from a distance, they can do so. We communicate this clearly, in various ways, in the form of encouragement and instructions⁵.

Our machine is an invitation to explore different empathy levels. From the start of the sequence, we encourage participants to stop being judgmental about themselves and others and to check what thoughts and emotions accompany their perception of the scenes and proposed experiences. Therefore, we draw their attention to their inner world, suggesting that they perceive it as part of the stage, of the theatre space. As a result, the performance is different for everyone. In addition to what happens to everybody, there are individual, subjective performative fields that are different for each person.

Consequently, we hand over a large portion of responsibility to the audience and always treat them as agents in a performative field who have control over the situation insomuch as they can withdraw from it or imbue it with their own meanings. Their participation is one of the things we want them to look at. Even when we build a scene that includes a trap, we make sure it is later deconstructed, dismantled.

Also important are the time we give and the conditions we create for the audience to reflect on how they have fallen into the trap so they can examine

the situation; take a step back to see whether the fact of 'falling into the trap' was or was not due to their responses, values, social ideas or perhaps the power relations in a theatre setting. We encourage the audience to be mindful.

In recent years, the word mindfulness has become a buzzword in much the same fashion as the term empathy did a few years earlier. One of the reasons why this happened is the growing popularity of mindfulness practices. In the past ten years or so, they have been more and more frequently offered as part of commercial courses and self-development workshops. Mindfulness has been enlisted by capitalism, e.g. becoming a tool for controlling and stimulating the effectiveness of corporate employees⁶. Yet it should not be dismissed; its origins can be traced to Buddhist tradition and the ages-long practice of meditation. Mindfulness was first introduced into modern psychology and neuroscience, and more broadly into Western culture, by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a physician, MIT theoretician and mindfulness practitioner (cf. 2009), who argues that the practice is not about relinquishing thinking or analysis but about affirmative observation of one's own feelings, body signals, associations and thoughts, which enables one to perceive and realize the fact that events are happening in real time. It is also meant to help give up denial and avoidance of unpleasant events and feelings. Acceptance allows for a moment of choice: Do I want to try to change something? To act differently than on automatic pilot? To try to change my attitude or external factors? In the Laboratorium's practice, a mindful approach is not about passive being and acquiescence. It can be the starting point for activism and for developing a critical social sensibility.

Performances that involve the audience are of course intended to elicit reactions. But it is also important what the audience can do with their

reactions. We do not just want to catch them, make fun of them or wave a finger. ‘Well, well, well, if it isn’t Mrs Capitalist and Consumer!’; ‘Not a shred of empathy, you’re such a hypocrite!’; ‘There you go, deep down you’re a fascist!’. Such diagnoses would represent symbolic violence of theatre and performance against the audience.

Instead, we invite individuals to experience things mindfully, to notice what is happening to them, what social narratives and individual tendencies are affecting them, to try to view these observations as valuable, authentic knowledge, to look at them with curiosity rather than judgment or expectation.

We deliberately design situations entangled in a net of judgments, dependencies and contradictions; situations to which our culture almost immediately responds with ready-made theses.

In order to find antitheses – other perspectives – and to arrive at a syntheses requires emotional and critical labour and a negotiation of different extremes. Performative traps enable multidimensional participation – they involve the audience as self-reflective subjects who, over the course of the performance, are given the opportunity to experience themselves and to look at their social sensibility in the context of the proposed topic.

Storytelling Tools

We tend to reconstruct situations rather than to enact them. That is why we use the present tense when telling stories and invite audiences into the midst of action as if it were a site visit. One example is *Lessons in Resistance*⁷, a piece exploring the 2019 teachers’ strike, an attempt to give the protest greater public visibility, to persuade the audience to take an

interest in the events that were confined to school buildings and pushed out of the public eye. *Lessons in Resistance* was made on Zoom, which further complicates the question of audience involvement as instead of a community of bodies gathered in one place there is a community of interacting intimacies, people immersed in their everyday, private settings and participating in the work from that perspective⁸.

Lessons in Resistance starts with a story about the Polish public education system. An actress says, 'Let's start by entering the school. Let's see what happens. It might not be easy.' The camera follows her, enabling the audience to symbolically enter a building. The situation brings to mind live, phone-recorded coverage, the TikTok aesthetic where individual performance and presentation is the prevailing paradigm.

As we enter the building, the audience is shown a snapshot of Warsaw as seen through one of the theatre's windows in order to activate real-time experience, with the weather outside and the Palace of Science and Culture's clock displaying the current time. The mediating broadcast aside, it is obvious from the start that we are entering a school building in real time, which is crucial for the quality of participation we want to get to help raise awareness of the cause of Polish schools. This makes it possible to form an activist collective from those watching, to transform the audience symbolically into 'everyone'. At the end of the show, the figure of 'everyone' is proposed as necessary for social change to occur. It appears in the rallying cry of the final song and on the banner draped over the facade of the school.

In the beginning, we follow the actress as she ushers us into the school spaces and describes them for us, invoking the collective knowledge of schools, the shared multi-generational experience and the recognizable signs of school realities. The corridor. The toilet where cigarettes were furtively

smoked. The cubicle walls and doors inscribed with a chronicle of the students' loves and disasters. The door to the teachers' room, the threshold of anticipation and horror. The stairs leading to the first floor, a setting for trysts and first friendships. The biology lab conjuring the stress turning into stomach ache. The spectators can again look at things from the perspective of a school desk, they can solve a test, jump at the sound of the school bell. The topic of the teachers' strike does not come up until the second part, when we suspect that the memory of the school has already been triggered enough that there is no easy escape from it, and the audience experience emotions evoked by their school memories. This is when we begin telling the story of the protest, pointing to its social, political and economic implications. We invite the audience to adopt a meta-perspective, a position of detachment and critical thinking, from which we ask the question about the state of Polish schools. We ask the audience to voice their opinions, we encourage them to signal what they think and to make decisions about the future of the school or the strike – just as citizens and authorities did during the nationwide strike of Polish teachers in 2019. But this time they have direct agency. If those watching refuse to make a decision or get involved, their choice 'works' later on in the performance, offering an emphatic proof of what happens when everyone remains silent. What we get as a result is a micro-scale laboratory of participation.

We are not so naive as to think that the audience's involvement reflects their attitudes in a full and unmediated way. After all, there are the theatrical conventions, the audience's habits concerning the rules of theatre participation and the limits of the framework we operate within. How do we work with this?

Firstly, from the start, we problematize these habits and the complex

situation of participation in a theatre work – we subject it to scrutiny and encourage suspicion. Secondly, we make sure that the audience always has the option to not participate, to refuse, to withdraw or hide, which at times becomes meaningful. We consider non-participation as a form of participation. Thirdly, we make an effort to build relationships with the audience. We ask ourselves what we want: do we want to recreate the power relationships in some way? Who is supposed to have power, and how do we bypass the obvious but enduring fact that it is the directors, creators and initiators who tend to have the upper hand in a performing arts setting? First of all, the creators are familiar with the rules of the game, they know the structure everyone is part of. With these limitations in mind, we always devote a large portion of our rehearsals, preparations and audience tests to reflecting on how our invitation works, what it gives to the audience and what it takes away from them, what possibilities are actually offered and what possibilities the audience think they have; to what extent we, the creators, are willing to take risks, surrender control, what we want to achieve and what we want to research; whether and how we take responsibility for audiences' responses, including unpredictable reactions, and how we handle them. This presents an ethical, participatory and aesthetic dilemma. It is often the case that audiences are invited to participate in structures or situations whose 'codes' they do not know.

Aesthetic Dilemmas of Participation

The machine sequence is formally simple. There are questions, a film camera, chairs and microphones. Any reaction fits our script easily, blends in rhythmically and structurally, including an absence of reaction, an answer that subverts the meaning of the scene, a lie or even a grunt. Things get more challenging when we invite the audience to get involved in situations,

as their structure is less clear and gives us less control.

A case in point is the scene in which we tell stories that can potentially trigger empathy but can also tempt with the option of withdrawing it. We describe moments in our childhood, at school, at work and in close relationships when someone meant well but ended hurting us. Everyone but the storyteller is allowed to note down the emotion(s) they feel when listening to the stories. The audience are encouraged to express their emotions freely and non-normatively and to rate their intensity on a scale of one to ten. In effect, audience members often write down phrases like 'Oh fuck! 7,' 'I'm not talking to her anymore, 5,' 'I'm in heaven, 10'. The performers often improvise but their stories are concise, fast-paced and rhythmically flowing as a result of rehearsal, their mastery of the convention and the tools we have developed. In the second part of the scene, the spectators are invited to share their stories and they readily do so. They see many benefits including a kind of 'cleansing' that results from naming and talking about their memories (often for the first time). When presenting a story as a performer, they feel a sense of agency that many of them lacked in the situations that are being reconstructed. A mechanism recognized by community theatre and theatre pedagogy is activated: sharing a story from the stage legitimizes the experience, makes it visible, allows one to control it. Moreover, many people say that they feel their story helps put an important social topic on the public agenda and is an argument in a public discussion about change.

The stories told by the audience are not necessarily fast-paced and rhythmically flowing. Some are convoluted, confusing, punchline-less, rambling. This produces an instructive exercise in empathy for other audience members and the creators, an exercise in participation understood

as allowing the audience to co-shape the action and share directorial and dramaturgical control. We design many situations like this, ones in which the audience get the chance to disrupt the dramatic flow. Such disruptions often occur unexpectedly and prove that a relationship has been built and a sense of agency triggered. We are committed to enabling this experience and testing the participatory potential. This mobilizes us as creators to mindfully examine our own emotions and reactions in contact with the audience, their willingness to participate and their way of contributing content and presence.

In his book *Prawo do kultury* (The Right to Culture), in a chapter on 'Moving Beyond Participation' Igor Stokfiszewski holds that we should think about participation after participation and test the possibilities of developing a participation paradigm more consistently and radically, even, or perhaps especially, at the price of sharing the privilege of determining the final shape of social and artistic situations (2018, pp. 257-271). In the context of social art, participation can be seen not only as a horizon of working with a broad audience or a strategy for inclusion of subjects and voices that are diverse or rarely heard in theatre situations, but it also involves the risk of disrupting the creators' vision, ideas and the structure they have devised. Participation requires a departure from, or at least a relaxing of, the primacy of aesthetic perfection and consistency. Participation after participation takes place at the expense of the language of art.

Manipulation, Provocation, Participation

When provoking experiences and setting traps, we always ask ourselves questions about manipulation and violence. We draw audiences in without their consent and without granting them a sense of control. Aren't the

situations we set up unequal? Don't we take advantage of the audiences' helplessness, ignorance, submissiveness? Don't we 'adjust' their reactions to suit our ends?

We are committed to testing various options while communicating our ideas as honestly as possible. We are interested in the similarity of performative situations to social life. When facing everyday social situations, our knowledge and ability to control things tend to be incomplete, too. We believe that providing an artistic translation of social conditions, inviting audiences to experience emotions that arise from a shortage of power, knowledge or subjectivity, and drawing their attention to the fact that this is the way things are in real life, strengthens their critical thinking and thus their ability to understand their own identity and condition. In keeping with the belief in the world's dialectical logic, we also want to reveal the 'blind spots' in social life that resist questions about making a good choice and finding the right solution.

To explain this mechanism, I will cite an example from the performance *The Island: We Are All Castaways*⁹. Plot-wise, the performance's starting point is Sigríður Hagalín Björnsdóttir's novel *Blackout Island*, in which Iceland is mysteriously cut off from the rest of the world. The internet and telephones stop working, there are no incoming planes, no supplies, no news, no possibility of leaving the island. The initial surprise turns into anxiety, then into panic and, finally, a disaster. Food and medication start running low, no information is coming in, riots break out in the streets, an organizational and decision-making chaos ensues. We shifted the setting to Poland and added an island subplot about an island discovered in the Baltic Sea – it can accommodate and feed twelve million people, less than a third of Poland's population. In the climax of *The Island*, the audience is told of the island and

informed that the situation must be solved. The government abdicates. Up to that point, the performance is a story we tell, a theatrical representation.

The performance was developed during the pandemic. Its starting point was a theatre production of the same title. We took it online knowing that we wanted to preserve, even strengthen, its participatory element. The story took on even more relevance during the pandemic. Earlier, it was mostly about how society justifies class division, how the notions of usefulness and productivity often imperceptibly cause exclusion or social divisions and inequalities.

In the midst of the pandemic, with everyone locked in their homes, the media began to report on the shortage of hospital beds and ventilators. In some European countries where health care systems were on the brink of being overwhelmed, decisions were taken on who should be hooked up to the available ventilators and who should not based on the patients' usefulness. Seen in this context, the island metaphor became even more telling.

In the second part of *The Island*, the audience are split into rooms and told they are about to take over the reins of the country. Each group is joined by one female performer serving as their secretary. The audience draw lots to determine their specific government role. The roles include Minister of Culture, Minister of Health, Prime Minister, Digitization Minister, Ombudsman, etc. Each group is asked to hold a meeting to work out a solution and the best way to communicate it to the public. The secretaries record the discussions unfolding in the different rooms. At the end of the discussions, before the speeches are drafted, the secretaries read their notes to the groups as a kind of feedback. When listening to these subjective transcriptions, participants often realize how easily they slip into political

newspeak, how rapidly they adopt the discourse of social engineering. It is a sobering moment, one of the many cold showers that we administer to the audience. The fact that they need to consider multiple factors and make complex decisions, none of which are simple, infuses the discussions, speeches and votes with great emotions. The audiences' reactions vary but they tend to accept the challenge. They often try to evade the task, protest, call into question the ethical standing of the experiment every step of the way. Yet, despite their reservations, they take on responsibility for finding 'less bad' options and implementing the solutions. The discussions reveal much: attitudes, values, strategies. Spectators turn into performers: they make speeches, propose solutions. A vote is then held to select one of the solutions which is then applied by the winning government to the group comprising all spectators and performers so that no more than one-third of them are allowed to leave for the safety of the island.

The finale is full of excitement: those who are not allowed to go the island after are booted out of the Zoom meeting (or required to leave the stage in the live theatre version) and asked to go to another space where they listen to a propaganda speech about the importance of doing 'invisible' support work for the chosen ones. They are told that they will not benefit from their work, but they will help the rest survive. It is a narrative of sacrifice, submission and inequality incorporating quotes from speeches of Polish politicians given in recent years. At the end of the performance, the audience are left with their emotions and invited to join a post-performance conversation.

In post-performance conversations, participants often say that *The Island* got them thinking, was a lesson in communication, imagination, resistance and self-reflection, an encouragement to pause and think about the seemingly

smooth narratives that are used to justify exclusion, inequality and violence; an act of puncturing smooth surfaces. One can, of course, object to this format as the audience is forced to act without giving their consent/expressing their readiness, but we decided to make use of these circumstances in this part of *The Island*, because they resemble emergency situations in which one has to respond, communicate and decide (about oneself and others) without adequate knowledge, competence and time.

This action is a trap – the audience fall into a situation they cannot control. They only regain control gradually, including through resistance. When they come up with solutions, draft speeches and decide the way the performance is going to develop, we, the creators, virtually lose control, at the symbolic and dramaturgical levels.

A sequence that involves the need to choose a path without knowing what is possible, what will turn out well, is a laboratory situation, an artificial one, but, as it happens in an instruction-based performance, it has the power to evoke real emotions and trigger authentic inner conflicts.

The trap works. After falling into it, we need to look for a way out. Even if we refuse to take part, speak or act, the fact usually makes us think of the circumstances we face. Entangled in a net, we stop denying that something restrains our movements. We need a strategy. When later someone asks questions about the chosen strategy, the reasons why it was chosen and the resulting emotional, intellectual, communicative and social consequences (at the micro-scale of the community of audience members), one can hope that this experience will enhance the audiences' ability to reflect. The subtitle of the performance, *We Are All Castaways*, is an encouragement to grapple with the sad truth of the human condition – we are all in crisis as a society. There are no perfect recipes or solutions. The only path to saving dignity

leads through critical thinking, staying in touch with oneself in challenging and difficult-to-understand situations and, if possible, through acting in solidarity, respecting equality and not excluding anyone. We feel that a theatre practice navigating the borderland between the individual and the political can be used to stimulate these three values: critical thinking; the ability to be in touch with oneself, one's emotions, needs and experiences; and a focus on building a solidarity-based community.

This is what we should keep in mind if we want to involve audiences in performative practices.

Summary

In its practice of involving audiences, the Laboratorium focuses on the following key aspects:

- Experiences, i.e. situations that involve feeling and imagining, triggered by questions, a story or by engaging audiences in performative actions or event reconstructions.
- Traps, which we see as a kind of dramaturgical script or a net capturing audiences' and performers' emotions, thoughts, bodies and responses.
- Giving thought to what kind of relationship with audience members we want to create.
- Invoking and deconstructing stories, events and social mechanisms; applying or recreating them in the performative present.
- Working in the borderland between the individual/psychological and the political/social on the assumption that these levels are inseparable.

- Resorting to provocation but avoiding manipulation (or persisting in it) by giving the audience impulses (time, space, encouragement) so they can observe their own reflexive reactions and by being forgiving and accepting (to a degree) but at the same time critical.
- Asking questions and pluralizing the perspective by, among other things, triggering the dialectical circles of colliding theses and antitheses. We believe that, in the absence of perfect solutions, it is possible to strengthen social sensibility and openness by examining topics from multiple perspectives.
- Inviting audience members to co-operate within a precisely set formal and aesthetic framework; staying open to audience interventions that may lead to a formal disruption resulting in boredom, a derailment of the dramatic momentum, rambling action, having to endure discomfort and loss of control.
- Giving greater public visibility to topics that involve violence, oppression, discrimination and underestimation and tend to be pushed out of the public eye; we do this to strengthen political will, agency and democracy on a micro-scale.

Translated by Mirosław Rusek

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This article would not have been written without years of conversations with my Laboratorium colleagues and collaborators. Many of the ideas contained

here are the result of our joint reflection.

In my article I use a variety of different grammatical forms. I refer to audience members and participants as they, she, he and (s)he. I realize that this does not exhaust the need of including all subjects, but I have opted for this solution as a transitional one until I can use neutral or even more inclusionary personal pronouns in academic papers.

The article is an expanded version of a paper I presented at the 'Involvement Strategies in the Performing Arts Space: Research Methodology, Mapping, Ethics, Democracy' seminar held in 2021 by the Institute of Theatre and Media Arts of the Faculty of Anthropology and Cultural Studies of the Adam Mickiewicz University in partnership with *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*. The seminar was conceived by Agata Siwiak.

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Footnotes

1. The issue of democracy, joint decision-making and participation within such groups is of course a separate topic. Our colleague Iga Dzięgielewska (Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw) is currently writing her master's thesis on the paradoxes and challenges of working in a non-hierarchical and equal way while respecting the needs, desires and limitations of all members of a collective in line with its stated mission, all this in a capitalist environment.
2. *Kurs bezpieczeństwa i higieny społeczeństwa* (A Course in Public Health and Safety), directed collectively, Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne/Stowarzyszenie Pedagogów Teatru, Warsaw, 2016.
3. Socially repressed emotions are perspicaciously discussed by Tomasz Stawiszyński, including in his book *Ucieczka od bezradności* (Escape from Helplessness).
4. Inspired by the concept and ideas of Alfred Gell, Weronika Plińska (2021) has recently written an excellent book on the agency of art.
5. Wojtek Ziemilski's production, *Come Together* (Studio teatrgaleria, Warsaw, first performed on 24 February 2017) focuses, among other things, on the problematic nature of calls/appeals/invitations to the audience and the possibilities of moving beyond theatrical conventions to gain agency with respect to the action of a performance work.
6. The tension between the emancipatory and therapeutic dimensions of this practice, on the one hand, and its commodification, on the other, is discussed by Zuzanna Ziomecka in her book *Wyspa spokoju* (Island of Tranquility, 2021).
7. *Lekcje oporu* (Lessons in Resistance), directed by Dorota Ogrodzka, Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne/Stowarzyszenie Pedagogów Teatru (first performed on 15 December 2020).
8. The question of participation in events streamed or performed online, including the issue of intimacy, is investigated in the section *Nowe uczestnictwo* (New Participation), edited by Dorota Ogrodzka, *Dialog* 2021 no. 7-8.
9. *Wyspa. Wszyscy jesteśmy rozbitkami* (The Island: We Are All Castaways), directed by Dorota Ogrodzka and the ensemble, Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne/Stowarzyszenie Pedagogów Teatru (first performed on 27 June 2019, online version 7 November 2020). The production was inspired by Sigríður Hagalín Björnsdóttir's book *Blackout Island*.

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LOCAL CULTURES

From Servitude to Cognitive Sovereignty

Research Perspectives on Contemporary Knowledge-Creative Practices of Local Cultures

Ewa Bal Jagiellonian University in Kraków

Abstract

In this paper, the author attempts to outline the cognitive benefits of studying contemporary knowledge-creative practices of local cultures. She perceives such practices as a response to the demands formulated within decolonial studies and the new humanities to remedy the epistemic injustice typical of the Western world. Beginning with Boaventura de Sousa Santos's concept of epistemicide and its specific relevance to the Polish cultural context, the author shows how it can be opposed within the framework of various models of situated and relational cognitive practices developed within decolonial, feminist and performance studies. At the same time, she enquires what modifications must be made to these models in the context of Central and Eastern Europe to foster the development of humanities, both locally and in a broader global context. Analyzing the recent performances in the cultural milieu of Upper Silesia and Dąbrowa Basin, i.e., Teatr Śląski (Silesian Theatre) in Katowice, Teatr Korez (Korez Theatre) in Katowice, and Teatr Zagłębia (Zagłębie Theatre) in Sosnowiec, the author proposes her concepts of local knowledge, which she calls ethno-nostalgia and ethno-futurism. She treats them as examples of micro-utopias which can, firstly, have an apotropaic function in the face of contemporary challenges and, secondly, be an alternative to the various versions of 'folk histories of Poland' that are currently emerging, and thirdly, develop the idea of pluriversum put forth within decolonial studies. Furthermore, the paper presents the author's future research agenda at the Laboratory for the Study of Knowledge-Creative Practices of Local Cultures that has been recently opened at the Jagiellonian University.

Keywords: knowledge-creative practices; compassionate thinking; epistemic injustice; epistemicide; ethno-nostalgia; ethno-futurism

Epistemicide

Alojzy Pokora, a character in Szczepan Twardoch's novel (2020) and the protagonist in its stage adaptation directed by Robert Talarczyk at Teatr Śląski in Katowice, Poland¹ bears an overtly meaningful surname (*pokora* means humility). This is because he embodies one of the possible life stories of children from working-class Silesian families. At the beginning of the twentieth century, they were given the opportunity to get an education but at the price of humbly acknowledging the supremacy of the system that allowed them to get that education. Alojzy, born into a poor Silesian mining family just before the end of the nineteenth century in the small town of Nieborowitz in Prussia, is the only child in his large family to be sent to a German school at the age of several years. Initially, he is briefly placed under the care of Father Scholtis, who teaches him an adequate German and makes him forget the Silesian language, which the boy had hitherto used at home and which inevitably betrayed his 'simple' origins. Alojzy then goes to a boarding school, where he faces a series of unimaginable humiliations and even physical violence for being a commoner, which is still evident in his manner and speech. Its perpetrators are schoolmates who usually come from affluent bourgeois and aristocratic families and who, unlike the boy, breathe their Germanness like crisp air. They treat Alojzy as an inferior, non-human being, making him bark and whine like a dog.

Alojzy manages miraculously to graduate from the school after several years of this torture (this is actually made possible by an aristocratic German friend who, captivated by the 'simplicity' of the worker's son, decides to defend Alojzy from his tormentors). He even gets enrolled at the University of Breslau, although he has to interrupt his studies to serve in the imperial army during the Great War. All these achievements, however, prove

insufficient to gain recognition in the eyes of the representatives of the upper classes. Their stigmatizing gaze is personified in the novel and staged in the performance by Agnes – the half-imagined addressee of Alojzy's story, the daughter of a wealthy German industrialist. Alojzy builds his entire life around Agnes while she barely notices his presence in her surroundings. Her contempt is the inexhaustible fuel for his life choices. As a result, he constantly feels as if he is out of place: both in his family home, school, among the imperial soldiers, then among the German communists and, finally, even in his marriage.

Twardoch's novel thus not only evokes well-known cultural scenarios of colonial mimicry (Bhabha, 2010, pp. 79-80), but also points to the connections between class difference and the racist discourse. Like Jean Veneuse, the protagonist of René Maran's novel about whom Franz Fanon writes in his essay *Black Skin, White Masks*, Alojzy tries unsuccessfully to climb the social ladder, to rise to a higher level in the gamut of skin colours. For Veneuse, the crowning achievement would be a relationship with a white woman (Fanon, 2020, p. 89). In the play, the impossible scenario of Alojzy's cultural affiliation is further emphasized by the way in which – played by Henryk Simon – he exists on stage in opposition to his school and military colleagues. He almost always appears before the audience smeared with earth or mine dust, barefoot and defenceless against the upright, well-groomed, and athletic bodies of his schoolmates and army comrades, clad in army jackboots and dressed in well-tailored uniforms, reflecting, as it were, the very racial underpinnings of cultural difference. With his body, Alojzy also contradicts the patriarchal model of masculinity, which associates success in life with domination and conquest. More importantly, he does not counter it with some alternative model of subjectivity other than his own humiliation. Thus, Twardoch's novel and the play clearly show that the

education system to which Alojzy is subjected requires him to forget his Silesianness, but at the same time, does not equip him with useful cognitive tools, self-determination or cognitive sovereignty. It alienates him from his family home and his inherent system of worldview references but does not make him part of the German bourgeoisie and aristocracy or the Polish nobility. The latter treat Alojzy's peasant roots and his later Polonophile patriotism with the usual condescension.

Thus, the educational process and social advancement of Alojzy Pokora are, in fact, a model of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in his book *The End of the Cognitive Empire. The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of The South*, called 'epistemicide,' caused by the Eurocentric modern sciences and the genocide resulting from European colonialism (Santos, 2018, p. 9). For years, Santos, one of the most articulate and radical decolonial theorists, has been demanding that we overcome the primacy of Western epistemology, marked by a Eurocentric, patriarchal, and colonial perspective from nowhere. One that privileges the philosophy of civilizational progress, the dominance of the culture of writing over the culture of experience and the body, and the culture of the metropolis over the peripheral one. He also calls for contrasting it with the so-called epistemologies of the Global South, which emerge as part of the struggling resistance against oppression and against the knowledge that legitimates such oppression (Santos, 2018, p. 2). He provides a coherent justification for this need. Today, according to Santos, societies affected by historical colonialism may be free from direct political and administrative tutelage. Nonetheless, they are still struggling with the experience of epistemicide, which includes the loss of their native languages, their systems of cognitive references, cosmology or spatio-temporal conceptualization of the world – in other words, those components of culture that did not fit and unfortunately, still do not fit within the

Western paradigm of knowledge production and distribution.

And since colonialism, as Walter Mignolo (2011) always reminds us, was the *sine qua non* of the Western concept of modernity, it called colonized communities to live exclusively within their own proper and privileged system of cognition. It also relegated their stagnant ways of conceptualizing the world to the realm of supposedly primitive, backward customs, beliefs, and expressions of emotional states, which could, at most, be the subject of anthropological or ethnographic studies. Only an erudite researcher rooted in the Western university tradition could speak competently about colonized communities, as they supposedly lacked the appropriate discursive devices, skills, and resources to achieve even minimal self-awareness or to engage in producing academic knowledge².

This is why Santos advocates that local knowledges of communities subjected to imperialist pressure should not only be recognized and recovered, but their epistemic value should also be restored within the framework of a new ecology of knowledges, that is, the recognition of the copresence of more sustainable and globally diverse systems of knowing (Santos, 2018, p. 8). This objective is worth accomplishing, even if it involves dismantling many paradigms of scientism, such as understanding what knowledge is, changing research methodology, and the relationship between the subject and object of study or university and school pedagogy. At stake in this endeavour is the decentralization of the geopolitics of knowledge, something scholars from decolonial and feminist standpoint theory have also fought vigorously for (Escobar, 2018, pp. 63-85; Harding, 2018, pp. 39-62).

In the face of this challenge, several questions come to my mind almost spontaneously. First, how to use them effectively in the cultural context of Poland, as well as Central and Eastern Europe more broadly? This is one of

the territories where the discourses of the Global North and Global South, as well as the geopolitical divisions between the East and West of Europe, intersect. Second, how to relate the concept of epistemicide to a range of local knowledges and knowledge-creating practices of communities that have experienced cognitive annihilation in this part of the world? Even if it only happened as a result of feudalism that prevailed for nearly three hundred years or nationalist policies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (including the exclusionary practices of Polonization, Germanization, Russification, ethnic cleansing, and forced displacement), as well as the disciplinary effects of ethnographic and anthropological research. Not to mention the contemporary pressure of civilizational progress and constant 'catching up' with the West, also in the field of humanities. And finally, we need to answer the question of what onto-epistemological benefits can come from studying the knowledge-creative practices of local cultures, including recovering lost or marginalized but locally situated ways of knowing in this part of the world.

I am not alone in posing these questions, of course. Ewa Domańska called for the remedy for so-called epistemic (in)justice in at least several papers. She argued that, contrary to appearances, it is important not only for Latin America and Canada, but also – and equally – for the Central and Eastern European region (Domańska, 2012, pp. 85-101; 2011, pp. 220-226; 2017, pp. 41-59). However, she was primarily concerned with the production and distribution of academic knowledge. She reasoned that in Western Europe and the United States, where the so-called centres of knowledge creation are located, Central and Eastern Europe is still sometimes considered a province or, at best, a *case study* for testing theories created in 'the West'. Her concerns, therefore, corresponded with Santos' thinking about the gap between the epistemologies of the Global South and the Global North.

According to him, these geographically distinguished epistemologies are, in fact, indicative of the world's economic divisions. Santos argued that epistemicide is not just a historical process but the result of a seemingly invisible yet deep and ever-widening *abyssal line* – an irreconcilable disparity in society's wealth levels. These neo-imperial practices translate directly into the availability and distribution of a particular paradigm of knowledge and, consequently, trigger the mechanism of excluding a range of local knowledges (sociology of absence). Therefore, the primary objective of Santos and other theorists from the decolonial studies circle (Grosfoguel, pp. 73-90; Escobar, 2017) is to overcome this abyssal line and the process of epistemicide by reformulating the academy so that the image of the world produced within it consists of multiple locally produced worlds.

Domańska, on the other hand, encouraged double decolonization of Poland: external – to shed the stigma of the periphery in opposition to Western centres of knowledge production, and internal – to overturn the marginalized position of small academic centres, as well as smaller institutional and social initiatives as compared to the flagship academic centres of knowledge production associated with Kraków and Warsaw (Domańska, 2017, pp. 41-59). It does not quite seem to me that Domańska and Santos' appeal has been heard in Poland. It requires, above all, a reorientation of research methodologies, a demonumentalisation of erudite knowledge, and a turn to alternative, local practices of its production, which have rarely been the focus of attention in the Polish humanities. The latter instead strives to constantly catch up with the West for fear of being accused of provincialism.

Therefore, my answer to the questions and challenges outlined above is a study of the knowledge-creative practices of local cultures. It has the added advantage of significantly shifting the researcher's attention to the kind of

knowledge production process that, instead of taking place in the academy, takes place in environments that are not directly associated with it but rather rooted in local creative communities that demand recognition of their epistemic subjectivity.

Knowledge-creative practices of local cultures and ‘knowing-with’

At first glance, the Polish term I am proposing, *praktyki wiedzytwórcze kultur lokalnych* (knowledge-creative practices of local cultures), could be considered to be equivalent, at least in its first part, to the English term ‘knowledge-making practices,’ which can also be explained as ‘practices of knowledge production.’ However, in the term *knowledge-creative practices*, I mainly mean to capture the creative nature of this activity, for example, in the field of art and, at the same time, its performative character. They can be viewed, as Diana Taylor wished long ago, as prisms through which researchers gain insight into ways of producing knowledge about the world that are different from those previously recognized. After all, her definitions of performance have always included the term *epistemic lens* (Taylor, 2003), which shifted the burden of academic reflection from the realm of performativity aesthetics to the field of theories of cognition and its socio-cultural conditioning, including direct political intervention. I have also recently written with Mateusz Chaberski about the epistemic perspectives of performance studies and their role in the process of situational and relational cognition (Bal; Chaberski, 2021). We showed where the theories of performative cognition intersect with the findings developed by feminist philosophy (namely, *feminist standpoint theory*) and the sociology of science (Bruno Latour). We also investigated what cognitive benefits result from this

meeting. As we have tried to explain, they chiefly lead to a change in the paradigm of knowledge based on the superiority of the subject of research on the subordinate object, or the paradigm of '*wiedza, że*' (as discussed in Polish Ryszard Nycz, 2017, p. 11), or in English 'knowing about,' to the paradigm of knowledge arising from the mutual relationship of multiple subjects who co-evolve in interaction, that is, 'knowing with'. Therefore, starting with the title of our study, we pointed out a significant shift in emphasis from the category of 'situated knowledges' (referring to a corpus of existing local knowledges) proposed by Donna Haraway (Haraway, 1988, pp. 575-599) to 'situated knowing,' i.e., the process of knowledge production, in which the ways and processes that condition our knowing matter more than their effects. Together with the authors accompanying us in the volume and the case studies they conducted, we showed that the performing arts and various tangible and intangible techno-naturo-cultural affordances provide a medium for this relational cognition and are capable of redefining, for example, Western concepts of time, space, the ocularcentric paradigm of knowledge, performance as research, the production and persistence of cultural identities, or offering utopian or speculative visions of the future and the past at the interface of the human and the non-human.

Our perspective also took into account the decolonizing potential of such situated knowing, but – more importantly to me in this context – it did not directly include the need to restore epistemic causality to local communities that have experienced or are still experiencing the process of epistemicide in Central and Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the concept of 'knowing-with,' understood by Santos as 'entering into relationships with spaces and times inhabited by subaltern social groups' (2018, p. 147), encourages one to consider such geopolitical cognitive conditions: 'it may claim to be present

and share a certain action or ongoing experience, it may consist of opening up the past to understand the present or closing down the past to open up the future; it may (...) require a strong emotional and bodily investment of the five senses' (p. 147). Therefore, Santos emphasizes direct contact with hitherto marginalized subjects and groups, embedded in the experience of practices that engage the body, such as dance, music, singing, and the affective dimension of cognition, which he elsewhere calls using the Spanish neologism *corazonar*. The Spanish verb *corazonar* has a double meaning: as *razonar con*, meaning 'thinking with,' and, perhaps more importantly, 'thinking with the heart,' from *corazon* (heart) and *razon* (mind). In Polish, in my opinion, this cognitive stance can be most adequately rendered as *współ-czucio-myslenie* (co-feeling-thinking). The co-feeling-thinking researcher does not situate him-/herself in the position of a detached erudite observer but of an auto-bio-geo-graphically engaged subject, whose knowledge is born out of an affective relationship with various subjects, times, and territories.

Diana Taylor, in her latest book, calls this process of cognition by the collective Spanish term *presente*, understood as the researcher's affective, political engagement with the object of study, and as a kind of peripatetic participation that engages not only the researcher's senses, but also allows him or her to become aware of several limitations and difficulties that accompany the process of cognition (2020, pp. 1-37). In her own words:

Walking is a thinking/becoming in motion, a pedagogy and training (peripatetic). Walking is one of those acts that form, rather than result from, thought. The act of walking produces its own way of thinking, un-thinking, and thinking-feeling negotiating assuredness and vulnerability, motion along with uncertainty. It demands we pay attention to terrain, to time, to the conditions on and of the

ground under our feet, to the limits of our own physical bodies, to our balance and fear of falling, to the politics of access and characteristics of a specific location, to the direction of our movement, to distance and reduced visibility (p. 40).

Most likely, Taylor knows what she is talking about, as she regularly engages in human rights actions, especially for migrants from Latin America. As a daughter of a Canadian settler raised in Mexico and working in the United States, she situates herself between the cultures of the Global North and South. Therefore, in her research projects, Taylor has repeatedly not only supported the activities of artists with Latin American origins (as part of the Hemispheric Institute she created) but has recreated, with her research team and students, the migrant experience by following human trafficking routes, among others (Taylor, 2020, pp. 38-44). She also explicitly sought to clarify her cognitive position of *in-between*, that is, of being between different forms of cultural, linguistic, and social belonging, precisely at the junction of the Global South and North, as in this way she legitimized, as it were, her moral right to speak on behalf of subordinate subjects.

Thus, looking at how many local conditionings accompany the processes of cognition, it is necessary to realize that to substantiate the benefits of studying the knowledge-creating practices of local cultures in this part of Europe, two things are needed. In addition to the methodology employed, it is also necessary to clarify what we consider as local cultures and how to explain their experience of epistemicide in Poland. This issue is closely related to another, namely the concept of indigeneity or indigenusness and belonging to the land, which in the broad European – and especially in Polish – cultural context, needs yet to be discussed.

Folk histories versus local knowledge-creative practices

The issue of indigeneity and the relationship of local communities with the land in Poland and, more broadly speaking, Europe seems to me to be highly problematic. Especially so when juxtaposed with the basic tenets of indigenous studies developed in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Latin American countries, that is, territories that have experienced historical colonialism. Indeed, researchers from this circle were the first to point out the need for a change in the methodology of conducting research whose subjects are local communities of all kinds, as well as to point out the ethical implications of how the researcher is situated in relation to the object of his or her study (Smith, 1999, Simpson, 2017). Therefore, they wanted to accurately describe and define the indigenous communities, or the so-called first nations, namely the original inhabitants of the colonized lands, to distinguish them from the settlers, usually associated with white colonizers from Europe. This distinction has been used to identify the researchers themselves. In English-language literature, they are referred to as indigenous researchers (as opposed to settler researchers). It is argued that the former are ethically closer to the interests of indigenous communities. That being the case, for indigenous studies, the question of research ethics is critical. They aim to create a counterbalance to the Western *episteme*, which has appropriated the local knowledge of colonized communities for its own, often rather objectionable purposes (such as the disciplinary effects of disciplines like ethnography and anthropology). This, in turn, leads to the question of who has the right to deal with and study local communities.

In a now classic study *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous*

Peoples (1999), the Maori scholar Linda Tihuwai Smith encourages to include in the academic discourse those communities who have had little experience of the so-called mainstream education system and cultural circulation and whose knowledge has often been considered naïve, immature or primitive. This knowledge should be mainly transmitted by researchers from these communities. Such an assumption, however, inevitably leads to an extreme essentialization of the researcher's identity, which is particularly difficult to maintain in a contemporary world marked by global mobility and migration.

Besides, for multiple reasons, it is difficult to understand the indigeneity of local communities in Europe in the same manner as in the Americas, Australia or New Zealand. For the purpose of this argument, I will focus only on the two premises that I believe are the most prominent. One concerns the peasant attitude towards the land, formed yet in the feudal era, recently described in many publications devoted to the so-called folk history of Poland. The other premise pertains to the mass ethnic cleansing, massive displacement, and the consequences of the creation of nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Of course, this paper does not allow an in-depth review of all the books that have lately been much-debated, such as Adam Leszczyński's *Ludowa historia Polski* [A People's History of Poland] (2020), Kamil Janicki's *Pańszczyzna. Prawdziwa historia polskiego niewolnictwa* [Serfdom. A True History of Polish Slavery] (2021), Kacper Pobłocki's *Chamstwo* [Peasantry] (2021), whose authors make an effort to describe Polish history as people's history. All of them present the history of European modernism from the point of view of those classes that were not its direct beneficiaries. Therefore, instead of the totalizing view from 'above' typical of the Western *episteme*,

they offer a local view from 'below.' Among these arguments, there is a quote from Pobłocki's book that perhaps well illustrates my thinking about the precarious status of indigeneity in Poland and sheds some light on the ambivalent attitude of the peasantry to the land during feudalism:

This is another paradox of Poland: on the one hand, subjects are formally assigned to a land and cannot move away from it. And if they escape, it is under the harsh penalty of cutting off their ears or nose, or even death punishment. On the other hand, they are not infrequently moved from house to house, from village to village. In this way, it was ensured that a person would not get too attached to a place, would not put down roots in it, and would remain in a state of social death [i.e., epistemicide – author's note] (Pobłocki, 2021, p. 77; own translation).

Pobłocki says that attachment to the land was regulated by the tools of feudal coercion and not by the peasants' will. The lord was free to transfer and sell his men and to manage them as he saw fit or according to his economic needs. Consequently, the lives of the serfs in Poland resembled more that of slaves in America than that of the so-called first nations, which now make claims to the lands seized from them.

Suppose today, as Pobłocki and Leszczyński argue, we are mostly a society that consists of the descendants of these peasants and serfs without land. In that case, it is much more difficult for us to build local knowledges in connection with a territory that we would recognize as our own and significant. Our possible sense of community and local identification may be determined more by a commonality of language (regional dialects) than by

attachment to the land. However, if I understand Pobłocki correctly, language commonality has also been thwarted to some extent by the discipline imposed by Polish as a national language (Pobłocki, 2021, pp. 294-295). In my opinion, only in recent years has there been a conscious attempt to emancipate regional languages, such as Silesian or Kashubian, which I will discuss in a moment.

The above, basically accurate, observation by Pobłocki regarding the ambivalent attitude of the peasantry towards the land has perhaps only one drawback. Speaking of 'peasantry in Poland,' Pobłocki makes another totalizing generalization, suggesting that the peasantry all over the territory of the Polish Commonwealth of nobility, as well as during the Partitions, was the same everywhere, that is, equally shared the fate of social inferiority under serfdom. Meanwhile, Dariusz Zalega, among others, argued in his latest two books (2019, 2021) that the life of Silesians was not shaped by serfdom but rather by nineteenth- and twentieth-century workers' revolutionary uprisings that broke out in various parts of Europe, including Prussia and Spain, and whose 'travelling' participants were the unruly residents of Upper Silesia who fought for a better life. It is also difficult to agree with the statement that the opportunity for linguistic identification of local communities has been missed in Silesia. For at least the last fifteen years, I have observed a notable shift towards linguistic emancipation in this region, which I once called 'performing localness' (Bal, 2015, pp. 137-147). It manifests itself, for example, in theatrical productions played in Silesian, translations of world literature into Silesian, and novels written in two or more languages (including Silesian), as well as the efforts of local cultural activists to refer to Silesian as a language rather than a dialect³. I have written about these phenomena many times before, so I will not repeat the arguments here. However, I want to emphasize that in studying the

knowledge-creative practices of local cultures it is imperative to avoid overly hasty generalizations and to follow all sorts of nuances rather than overly easy-to-see regularities.

The second reason to be cautious about essentializing indigeneity relates to the mass displacement, eviction, and ethnic cleansing that lasted through the entire twentieth century in Europe. Their illustrative testimony is, for example, the exhibition at the Berlin Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion and Reconciliation, which opened in June of 2021 and was widely discussed in Poland and Europe⁴. It incontrovertibly shows the scale of migrations in the twentieth century. It also allows one to understand the far-reaching consequences of nationalist ideologies and Nazi policies, which are still felt today, and, importantly, to see the disciplinary effects of the post-war new deal in Europe. The exhibition also shows the fate of the victims of the most recent wars in the countries of the former Yugoslavia or Syria, whose residents also had to face the experience of ethnic cleansing and seek salvation in migration.

Gundula Bavendamm, director of the Documentation Centre, was supposed to guarantee that the exhibition told a different and more reconciling narrative than that once pushed forward by Erika Steinbach, which painted a demanding picture of expelled Germans. Bavendamm's primary strategy was to zoom in and capture the individual experiences of losing one's home, fleeing or migrating, that is, experiences of participants or witnesses of past and contemporary events still alive, and the traumas of the children and grandchildren of displaced persons. Therefore, the experiences depicted in the exhibition take the form of specific individuals, the voices of flesh-and-blood people. Hence, their testimonies are transpassive and easy to relate to one's own analogous, although not identical, situation of uprooting. I must

admit that the exhibition proved particularly valuable to me. For the first time, I could situate my own hitherto undefined consequences of displacement in a broader collective experience. And these were consequences I personally faced as a granddaughter of repatriates from the East who settled in Upper Silesia after the war. This is because the exhibition triggers presumed deep affects in viewers and translates the experience of losing land and home into the body, voices and sounds, i.e., non-discursive ways of knowing. In this way, on the ruins of the old, probably no longer existing world, the exhibition builds up those relationships with the land that either have not yet been conceptualized or whose importance has not been appreciated (or perhaps explained somewhat differently).

Ethno-nostalgias and ethno-futurisms or Isles of Atlantis and micro-utopias

Therefore, I dare say that this performative way of producing and distributing knowledge about the world is one way of situated knowing or an example of local knowledge-creative practices. It evokes the experience of losing one's home and involves the transmission of affects more than the essential attachment to the land. In order not to stop at this one example, I will refer to a production staged four years earlier by Teatr Korez in Katowice, directed by Mirosław Neinert, under the title *Mianujom mie Hanka*⁵ [my name is Hanka in Silesian). In fact, in a typical way, it actualizes in the audience a sense of belonging to the land and is some form of recovery of Silesians' epistemic subjectivity, or the cognitive sovereignty mentioned in the title of my article.

The performance is based on the reportage *Jak Niobe. Opowieść górnośląska* [Like Niobe. An Upper Silesian Story] by documentalist and chronicler

writing in Silesian, Alojzy Lysko (2016). Most of his works were printed in just a few copies, often self-published, which also testifies to the exclusionary policies imposed by a particular understanding of literature. The events he depicts cover a time similar to where Twardoch's *Pokora* is set. However, the only protagonist of the play based on Lyska's reportage is Hanka, played by Grażyna Bułka, a Silesian woman who reports on a decades-long course of universal history from the perspective of her town, family, household or even kitchen. And it is with this particular location that the character of Hanka differs from Alojzy Pokora, who, in his attempts at social advancement, was thrown from place to place according to the logic of history based on conquest and domination. Without moving, Hanka reports how almost the entire world, national borders, dominant languages and discourses are changing around her while she stands guard over the local Atlantis (as an invisible land on the political map). She watches as members of her family fall prey to the seductive ideologies of nationalism or communism, as they are forcibly enlisted in the army, serve in various armies, often fighting each other, and as fate throws them again and again to the farthest corners of the world. From her point of view, these discourses are not worth competing with. However, one can legitimately resent the fact that regimes, changing now and then, blame her family members for life choices (if they can even be called choices), which, after all, do not stem from their real political commitment but from the need to survive in a world whose geopolitical framework seems impermanent and fleeting. For this reason, Hanka finally rejects her son's proposal to move to Germany after the war and lead a prosperous life as a pensioner there. This is because she believes that her home is where she was born, even if this piece of land does not bear the marks of political sovereignty (it is located '*kajś*', in Silesian somewhere, as Zbigniew Rokita said (2020), but it is not necessarily known

where exactly).

Hanka's self-determination and cognitive sovereignty are thus determined by her very bodily presence on stage, her actions, her Silesian speech, and what she manages to create as a result of her encounter with the audience. Such sovereignty, involving the transmission of affects, can still be described by the English term *transmotion*, proposed in the collective work by Carter, Davis-Fisch and Knowles (2017, pp. 95-116). Watching Hanka perform small daily tasks, listening to her story, and singing local songs with her, the viewers get emotional, laugh and cry. At the same time, her testimony triggers a strategy of local cognitive resistance that consists of persistence and concern for those closest to her, thus contradicting the philosophy of conquest, civilizational progress and individual success, typical of modernity.

The show opens our cognitive horizons to the analogous individual and communal experience of duration (or survival). At the same time, it makes us aware of our own sense of non-rootedness (resulting, for example, from the migratory past of earlier generations), which can produce nostalgia for territory and belonging to a local community. However, I do not understand this nostalgia as idle sentimentality or romantic longing for a lost homeland or, even worse, as a rationale for pipe dreams of territorial claims. Here, nostalgia or, as I have called this experience elsewhere, 'ethno-nostalgia'⁶ is more of a purely empirical sense of the lack of solid ground and the associated sense of needing to find one's own Atlantis, even if it were a utopian ground. However, this is the kind of utopia that, as Ewa Domańska said, falls within the framework of affirmative or prefigurative humanities (2017, pp. 41-59). This means that, firstly, it has an apotropaic (amuletic) function – it wards off the possibility of various catastrophes by creating a protective layer in the form of a specific social imaginarium, i.e., visions

showing various possible forms of social coexistence (ibid.). And secondly, these realistic micro-utopias, as Domańska calls them, can be materialized on a local scale, limited in time and space, as valid in specific times, for the needs of a specific community, to aid the well-being of its members⁷.

There is perhaps only one risk associated with creating such micro-utopias, which requires extreme vigilance, especially in times of post-truth and the dominance of fake news. I mean the kind of reality greatly influenced by the new media and the filter bubbles, or so-called 'cyber tribes' that arise within them (Pariser, 2012; Matuszewski, 2018; Bal, Wojnowski, 2020). The latter may or may not organize around ideas that treat the defence of local identities as a pretext for establishing a new ethnocentric world. Its virtual or real inhabitants (a trait characteristic of cyber tribes) so reformulate the immediate reality around them, as well as the entire world around them, including its future and past, that they see themselves at its centre as if in a fortress threatened by an enemy attack. This is the risk that the latest production of Teatr Zagłębie in Sosnowiec, directed by Robert Talarczyk, based on a script by Zbigniew Rokita, under the telling title *Nikaj* [nowhere], warns against⁸. For while in the biographical novel-reportage *Kajś* Rokita showed the complex process of recognizing the twisted paths of his own history and cultural identity, in *Nikaj*, he warns everyone not to misunderstand his attachment to the Silesian land as a form of fierce local patriotism.

Nikaj is a kind of anti-utopia, but one that is possible to fulfil soon if one looks at the scale of movements openly challenging the achievements of modern science, such as the anti-vaccinationists, flat-earthers or others. The play is set in Poland, in Silesia, after a major catastrophe involving the passage of a mysterious, extremely violent Tempest. The family home of a

typical Silesian (Rokita himself, perhaps, as I infer from the names of the Hajok family members taken from his reportage) looks like some *pars pro toto* of the post-disaster world. In a small room, someone has put somewhat splintered signposts pointing the way toward the landmarks of former Europe, though they all sound the same: '*Kajś*' [somewhere]. This is probably because the Polish state is in disarray, ruled by rival tribes: Zagłębian, Silesians People's Party, All-Polish Youth and Thunderians, each of which is ready to fight their enemies by any means.

It is a world based on the dogma of the 'only right' idea, every time a different one, which organizes the philosophy of action of all these tribes. Every now and then, another patriotic group of fanatics in identifying colours appears on the stage and demands declarations of obedience from the household, the members of the Hajok family. Even the members of the Silesians People's Party are a threat to the Hajok family because, after all, one never knows whether a typical Silesian family will pass the test of fidelity to the local culture, language, and sense of belonging to the land. Therefore, at one point, Rokita, through his characters, creates a perverse version of the genesis of the world, the beginning of which is the planetary struggle between the Zagłębian and Earth. It is not difficult to guess that Earth loses this battle at the outset and must surrender to the will of Zagłębie.

Further down the road, it only gets worse. Zagłębian master the globe, lay the foundations of the first civilizations, are the first to invent the wheel, and finally set foot on the moon, from where, unfortunately, only Nikisz can be seen (Nikisz, that is, Nikiszowiec, is a district of Katowice, the capital of the Silesian province, which has always depreciated the cultural distinctiveness of the Zagłębie people). Needless to say, it is impossible to live on such a

planet ruled by local fanatics, so the Hajoks see their only salvation in a hasty escape by rocket to the moon.

The show's grotesque, hilarious and, at times, bloodcurdling style is very different from Hanka's nostalgic tale. However, the differences are essentially apparent. The reason is that both *Kajś* and *Mianujom mie Hanka* paint the possible projects of local worlds. This leads me to conclude that there is little difference between ethno-nostalgias, understood as micro-utopian isles of Atlantis (better worlds), and a kind of ethno-futuristic dystopias in which the logic of modern times takes on the form of extreme consequences, including collective annihilation. This is because both visions serve a similar amuletic function, either protecting or warning us of the dangerous implications of events for which we are not ready or satisfying deficits. They are not, however, the same as social movements that embrace ethnocentric visions uncritically and are prepared to reach for the wartime instruments in their rhetoric and actions. And to present not exclusively Polish examples, let me recall the bloody clashes the escalation of discourses around the independence referendum in Catalonia led to in 2017. The two hostile camps, supporters and opponents of independence, represented by Carles Puigdemont on the one side and Mariano Rajoy on the other, have become hostage to the rhetoric of war. The only way out of it turned out to be a physical clash, with the use of weapons in the streets of cities, and this in a country that, after all, remembers the civil war (Bal, 2019, pp. 19-29).

That is why I see the need to study the knowledge-creative practices of local cultures, to look at them and participate in them. This is, perhaps, where the decolonizing projects of the so-called 'pluriversum', or a fairer world made up of many worlds, lie. The examples I analyzed are mainly from Upper Silesia and Zagłębie Dąbrowskie, but there are, after all, many more such

places. I am thinking here, for example, of artists who refer in their work to the specific position of the *in-between*, that is, being between different cultural codes related to a particular location. These include, for example, Katarzyna Szyngiera, who, together with Mirosław Wlekły, examines the dynamics of Polish-Ukrainian relations in the theatre. Also coming to mind are Ukrainian directors of the younger generation working in both Poland and Ukraine, such as Olena Apczel and Roza Sarkisian, as well as the Polish playwright Joanna Wichowska, who take an insightful look at the tensions between East and West Ukraine, taking into account the perspective of women. There are, of course, many more such artists, not only in theatre, but also in the field of performance or literature. All this allows us to presume that we face the opportunity to create a network of collaborating researchers and artists who can exchange experiences and support each other. The aim would mainly be to show that the experiences typical of this part of the world, from both the most recent and the distant past, make it possible to create a successful alternative to the fixed patterns of thinking. One of these patterns is the division into the West and East of Europe, which has probably become illusory. That, at least, is my scientific credo today.

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Footnotes

1. *Pokora*, according to a script by Szczepan Twardoch, based on the novel *Pokora* by the same author, directed by Robert Talarczyk, premiered on 11th June 2021 at Teatr Śląski in Katowice.
2. In this case, Mignolo is talking about the westernization of the world within a monolithic system of cognition and its cognitive appropriation, the timeframe of which is set between

the 'discovery' of America in 1492 and the end of World War II in 1945. The latter caesura, in his view, brought a clear shift in the distribution of knowledge geopolitics with the establishment of the Cold War order (2018, p. 90-113).

3. In this context, the activity of, for example, Grzegorz Kulik, a translator and editor of the Silesian portal: www.wachtyrz.eu, is worthy of note.

4. I give the most illustrative examples:

<https://www.dw.com/pl/ucieczka-wypędzenie-pojednanie-muzeum-w-berlinie-...> [accessed: 24.10.2021] <https://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/7,121681,27328422,muzeum-o-wypedzonych-...> [accessed: 24.10.2021]

[https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C909032%2Cniemieckie-zbrodnie-ucie...](https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C909032%2Cniemieckie-zbrodnie-ucie-...) [accessed: 24.10.2021].

5. *Mianujom mie Hanka*, a monodrama by Grażyna Bułka based on Alojzy Lysko's reportage, *Jak Niobe. Opowieść górnośląska*, directed by Mirosław Neinert, premiered on 21st October 2016 at Teatr Korez in Katowice.

6. The title of the research project I submitted in 2021 in the competition for a Consolidator Grant to the European Research Council: *Situated Knowing in the Ruins of Eastern and Western Europe. Ethno-nostalgias and Ethno-futurism in the 21st-century performances*.

7. Ibidem.

8. *Nikaj*, script by Zbigniew Rokita, directed by Robert Talarczyk, premiered on 11th September 2021 at Teatr Zagłębia in Sosnowiec.

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INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

Work Is Always Elsewhere: Instituent Practices and the International Performing Arts Field

Marta Keil

Abstract

The article, which is a revised and expanded version of a chapter of the doctoral dissertation *Devising Institutions. Institutional practices in contemporary performing arts*, applies institutional critique as a perspective for reflection on modes of production and distribution of the international performing arts circuit. Based on an analysis of hypermobility as the prevailing political condition among artists and artworkers active in this field, the text introduces the notion of situated instituent practices as a tool to reflect those artistic approaches that challenge the prevailing modes of production and distribution. The examples of works by Sarah Vanhee and Benjamin Verdonck are presented as a gesture of 'active withdrawal' from the dominating working modes and rhythms that opens up for a political potential of the process of 'home making'.

Keywords: institutional critique; situated artistic practices; Sarah Vanhee; Benjamin Verdonck; Gerald Raunig

This article, a revised and expanded version of a chapter of the doctoral dissertation *Wytwarzanie instytucji. Praktyki instytucjonalne we współczesnych sztukach performatywnych* (Devising Institutions: Institutional Practices in Contemporary Performing Arts)¹, applies

institutional critique to reflect on the principles governing the international performing arts field and its circuit. Based on an analysis of hypermobility as the prevailing political condition of artists and producers of modern independent theatre² as part of international co-productions, networks and festivals, I introduce the notion of situated instituent practices as a tool to analyse those artistic practices that challenge the hegemonic modes of (co-)working in the international sphere. I am particularly interested in ways out of the dominant patterns of work and cooperation in the arts field and the possibilities of establishing another models. I understand instituent practices not only as a method of analysis, but also as a perspective highlighting the potential of political agency of these artistic practices that form an interesting answer to the exhaustion of the critical theatre. My starting point is that current social polarization and the nationalist turn (that we are observing in Poland and many other European countries, and that drastically cuts opportunities for the development of contemporary art and consequently, spaces that foster critical thinking), call for artistic practices that open up the space for envisaging, testing and experiencing various ways of building and maintaining social relations and engage working methods based on thinking-with and acting-with³.

This reflection presented in the article is grounded in my curatorial practice, which I understand and maintain as a form of knowledge production. My main research tools are therefore participative, close observation, case study and co-research: methods that draw on involvement in the project in question and thinking-with its authors. I attempt to see the relational basis of performing arts as their strong political potential for seeking out new ways of gathering, building relationships, thinking (critically) together and conceive models of collaboration. This very potential becomes particularly evident and interesting in the moment of negotiating the rules of getting

together in every artistic project or gathering.

The first part of the text draws on the concept of instituent practices coined by Gerald Raunig, one of the leading thinkers of the third wave of institutional critique, juxtaposing it with the feminist notion of situated practices, i.e. practices grounded in a specific local, sociopolitical context, a given ecosystem, but also in the bodily experiences of participants. I then ask how situated instituent practices can be enacted as part of the hypermobile international festival circuit of contemporary performing arts in Europe and discuss selected artistic practices that redefine the dominating models of production in that field.

Instituent practices as situated practices

Gerald Raunig's notion of instituent practices draws on the concept of constituent power (analyzed by Antonio Negri⁴, among others), i.e. power materialising in the process of establishing a new structure or order, when it is not yet frozen within its framework of rules. As Mikołaj Ratajczak and Jan Sowa write in the Dictionary of Terms that accompanies the Polish translation of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Commonwealth*:

Constituent power is the power that establishes a new political and juridical order, the source of a constitution. Constituted power is the power resulting from the emergence of that order, acting on the basis of the constitution. Negri argues that modernity is characterized by insurrections leading to the development of constituent power, which then declines or is absorbed into the order constituted by it and thus neutralized (Hardt, Negri, 2012, p. 520).

Therefore, constituent power is captured at the moment of its vulnerability, but also of its potentiality; it is fragile, susceptible to influences, still open to various unforeseen and not-yet-invented solutions. Referring to this concept and advocating a renewal of institutional critique as a critical and political practice, Gerald Raunig observed:

If institutional critique is not to be fixed and paralyzed as something established in the art field and confined within its rules, then it has to continue to develop along with changes in society and especially to tie into other forms of critique both within and outside the art field, such as those arising in opposition to the respective conditions or even before their formations. Against the background of this kind of transversal exchange of forms of critique, but also beyond the imagination of spaces free from domination and institutions, institutional critique is to be reformulated as a critical attitude and as an instituent practice (Raunig, 2006).

Raunig works on the assumption that there is no such thing as a space free from institutions and power relations, as they pervade, structure and shape all aspects of social life. Consequently, there is no space 'outside' institution (just as there is no outside of capitalist forms of labour and production in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's concept). So the question of how to find a way out from institutions is pointless. Rather, it is vital to seize the moment when an institution is still in the process forming and negotiating; when its structure, working methods and relational models are still being developed; when the decision-making process, the division of responsibilities and common reference points such as values and aesthetic assumptions are discussed, chosen and established.

Referring to Félix Guattari's reflections on the problem of institutionalization (every revolutionary movement loses its emancipatory potential over time and becomes institutionalized, enclosing itself in the structures established by it, even if its premises were completely different), Raunig notes that a 'progressive institution would be one which conducts – counter to the initially static quality of the term institution – a moving practice of organizing' (Raunig, 2004).

Movement means here a constant process of becoming, subjecting institutional practices to critical and, above all, self-critical reflection, expanding the group of interlocutors and co-decision-makers, carefully observing the changing context and reflecting it from different perspectives, and, most importantly, always asking the question why and for whom a work is being done. Opening up to questions and doubt and the related risks also entails a change in the pace of work (questioning the process requires time, but time and space in mind are needed first to articulate it) and, consequently, at least a partial withdrawal from the competitive race for the institution⁵.

The notion of withdrawal will be particularly important here. Raunig's proposal foregrounds refusal, escape, retreat, desertion, exodus, 'the conceptual movement of flight,' thus rejecting the imposed operational rules, transforming and reinventing them: 'Instead of presupposing conditions of domination as an immutable horizon and yet fighting against them, this flight changes the conditions under which the presupposition takes place' (Raunig, 2006). Importantly, Raunig understands a withdrawal not as a passive resignation but a refutation and change of the working principles; it is a 'flight that is simultaneously an instituent practice.' The moment of instituting a structure, a rule, a working model, is, to some extent, hijacked

in order to try instituting it otherwise. Withdrawal would thus happen when one refuses to follow the dominating rules but continues to be involved by conceptualising and testing alternative rules or structures. The responsibility is therefore not given up, neither the agency is – even though the gesture of withdrawal might require a radical, temporary cut off current entanglements and relations. Withdrawal consist thus in challenging the hegemonic forms of instituting ('that's the way we do it!') and reinventing them anew.

This way of thinking is rooted in Paolo Virno's concept of exodus, where flight does not mean resignation or surrender:

The term is not at all conceived as some defensive existential strategy – it is neither exiting on tiptoe through the back door nor a search for sheltering hideaways. Quite the contrary: what I mean by Exodus is a full-fledged model of action, capable of confronting the challenges of modern politics ... Today, just as happened in the seventeenth century under the spur of the civil wars, a realm of common affairs has to be defined from scratch. ... The political action of the Exodus consists, therefore, in an engaged withdrawal. Only those who open a way of exit for themselves can do the founding; but, by the opposite token, only those who do the founding will succeed in finding the parting of the waters by which they will be able to leave Egypt (Virno, 1996, p. 196)⁶.

Building on the concept of exodus, Raunig advocates a refusal to submit to the currently dominating institutional structures rather than a complete abandonment of them. The philosopher uses the notion of double parrhesia as the main argument for this course of action. In his interpretation,

parrhesia is both political and personal, which makes it a double critical strategy: the former is an attempt at questioning the existing order, the latter involves self-critical reflection:

What is needed here and now, is parrhesia as a double strategy: as an attempt of involvement and engagement in a process of hazardous refutation [of an order – M.K.], and as self-questioning. What is needed, therefore, are practices that conduct radical social criticism, yet which do not fancy themselves in an imagined distance to institutions; at the same time, practices that are self-critical and yet do not cling to their own involvement, their complicity, their imprisoned existence in the art field, their fixation on institutions and the institution, their own being-institution. Instituent practices that conjoin the advantages of both ‘generations’ of institutional critique, thus exercising both forms of parrhesia, will impel a linking of social criticism, institutional critique and self-criticism. ...Here exodus would not mean relocating to a different country or a different field, but betraying the rules of the game through the act of flight: ‘transforming the arts of governing’ not only in relation to the institutions of the art field or the institution art as the art field, but rather as participation in processes of instituting and in political practices that traverse the fields, the structures, the institutions (Raunig, 2006)⁷.

In Raunig’s view, maintaining constant tension between the two forms of criticism is the key to keeping the institution ‘on the move,’ in the process of becoming, which prevents it from being confined within its structures.

In this context, the introduction of instituent practices as one of the foundations of the (art) institution would imply the need to make the difficult decision to keep it in a constant state of becoming. It would involve a readiness for incessant self-reflection and an ability to problematize and question its own rules and working modes. But the point here is not to be constantly destroying what has been built, but to keep reflecting and keep the institutional frames open for various perspectives; to keep paying attention to how and where the institution is situated, to its ecosystem and relations with artists, visitors, neighbours, funders, humans, non-humans, geopolitical situation, transnational alliances etc. In other words, the aim would be to focus on the performativity of the art institution⁸ and to tap its political potential. This way of thinking need not lead to programme inconsistencies or lack of stability. On the contrary, the idea would be to expand and firmly ground the institution in its ecosystem and create the best possible working conditions precisely through focusing on how and where it is situated. Which obviously requires a withdrawal from a model in which the main goal of an institution is to serve the ideas of the master figure. For there is no space for a constant monologue anymore nor enough patient listeners to bear it; what is needed urgently instead is a practice of active listening.

Hence I would like to propose to weave the concept of instituent practices and the feminist notion of situated practice, that is, a practice developed in a relationship of interdependence with its surroundings (i.e. the geopolitical, economic, environmental and social context). I refer here to the concept of situated knowledges by Donna Haraway who notes that

the science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned
rationality. Its images are not the products of escape and

transcendence of limits (the view from above) but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions – of views from somewhere (Haraway, 1988, p. 590).

In the arts field, the point would be thus to primarily involve close attention to the environment in which a given artistic practice is carried out; to note, observe and reflect the sociopolitical context, economic conditions, infrastructure (place of work, spatial characteristics, available tools), environment, human and more-than-human relations. Therefore, a situated instituent practice never focuses only the institution's program proposal but expands to its structure, modes of production, rules of collaboration etc.

This means that a situated instituent practice draws a particular attention to material conditions of artistic work: the resources that make it possible to carry out its activities. Resources are understood here not only as financial but also infrastructural capacities (availability of space, technical equipment), immediate social environment (neighbours), human (the institution's staff and collaborators) and more-than-human (the ecosystem in its literal sense).

Obviously, careful observation of the local environment and the relations formed within it, exposing and problematizing the ways in which decisions are made, creating conditions for listening (especially to those voices that are not often heard), requires a great deal of time and can be emotionally exhausting. Moreover, these efforts might not bring an instant success and surely they will not be easily marketable. 'Active withdrawal' thus means also giving up a strong position, a PR excellency, and to allow doubt, to take

risks and to repeat questions instead. It does not necessarily mean a permanent weakening of the institution, but will certainly entail the need to look for new allies and develop a new constellation of support. A refusal to operate under the existing (market) rules and the dispersion of the current centres of power do not have to – and must not – be tantamount to a renunciation of agency. But they require a redefinition of effectiveness: grounding institutional agency in relations with partners and audiences rather than rankings; reformulating the principles of development (not growth but quality of relations); establishing a new mode of cooperation and practicing radical solidarity. Sometimes it would entail, for example, to be able to give up a part of one's curatorial concept, choices and habits that might be dear to a curator, but that have to be put on hold for a moment, in order to open up the space for those who have, until now, had no access to the institutional resources. As a consequence, an institution transformed along these lines may not win another competition and rank among the top three, but it would be able to act thanks to a strong network of new alliances.

For the purposes of this study, I would like to propose an understanding of the institutional ecosystem at three levels:

- intra-institutional: as an institution's mode of operation, analyzed from the perspective of reproductive labour, where 'zero waste' refers not only to sustainable use of material resources, but also to human resources and management of the energies, time, intellectual and emotional resources of its employees; this was the subject of the project Porozumienie (Agreement), carried out by Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Igor Stokfiszewski and the author at Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw in 2018 and 2019;

- local: as the grounding of an institution in a specific social, geopolitical and

economic context, which I understand as establishing relations with its immediate environment: neighbourhood residents, organizations and institutions, the social and artistic fabric of a place, the current sociopolitical and economic problems;

– international: as an element of the complex global system of art production and a major influence on its framework, direction and development.

All of these elements make up the biotope of an institution: they form an integral part of it and help shape key participants and recipients of its activities, keeping it sustained and alive. An institution's biotope is what enables it to function; ignoring or misinterpreting its determinants leads to the implosion and atrophy of the institutional organism.

But what if the rules and pace of work on the international performing arts field disrupt the relations with other elements of the institutional ecosystem? If they undermine its stability because their demand for constant movement makes local rootedness impossible? Or, moreover, they require artistic practice to be conceived in such a way as to be easily relocated and adapted to a variety of contexts, and therefore, almost by definition, prevent it from being grounded locally? The contemporary international field of independent performing arts is shaped primarily by festivals, production houses and residency centres, interlinked in a network of co-production and cooperation, which increases the hypermobility of artists and curators. It involves constant travel for work, in pursuit of another residency, production or festival presentation, and preparations for a new project (i.e. research trips made by artists and curators) – appearing at conferences, teaching workshops, engaging in collaboration with another artist, etc.

The hypermobility of creators, producers and curators of contemporary

performing arts is one of the serious and widely discussed problems of this art field⁹. The genesis and consequences of the development of the European festival circuit were discussed by me elsewhere (Keil, 2017), so I will just reiterate here that the rise in festivals since the 1980s and 1990s is directly linked to the social and economic context of art production. In other words, it is a result of social, political and economic changes that have been taking place in Western Europe since the 1980s, and in post-communist countries since the 1990s, including the transformation of the industrial model of capitalism into a cognitive one, based on knowledge production, communication and mobility. The need to be constantly on the move increases precarious working conditions and dependence on market requirements (e.g. artists are forced to use a small, easily adaptable production format; performances with a minimal cast also work better), erodes bonds, giving only an illusion of new ones, and prevents regeneration¹⁰. Artistic practice, stretched between one project and the next, lacks continuity, focusing instead on the result and the end product. Mobility and flexibility are vital in this model, as is the constant readiness to move from place to place and from job to job; the ability to establish contacts and weave one's own network of interdependencies and influence (searching for collaborators, residencies and funds, building a network of relations with curators and those responsible for festival selection, etc.) On the festival field, and in the festival art-production model, the task of artists is to provide curators with ready-to-sell products, assessed according to their varying prestige (Keil, 2017, p. 43).

The nomadic, festival mode of work is exemplified well by Rok Vevar, a Slovenian curator, dramaturge and dance scholar, who in 2009 described the pattern of his work in recent months as follows:

So I was teaching at:

- Festival of theatre reminiscences at Krakow
- Baltic Circle in Helsinki which happened at the time of IETM meeting in Ljubljana (for which I co-selected a programme)
- Teaching at these festivals opened up opportunity to teach young dance critic at the first Sofia Dance Week in Bulgaria
- After that I went to Divadelna Nitra, a Slovak theatre festival to teach in FIT lab again
- After coming home I had to prepare for East Dance Academy meeting with a short festival programme and for Exodos lecture about Slovenian dance and theatre scene in the 2nd half of the 20th century

This year I attended:

- One residency programme in Portugal, for one project that was presented two weeks ago in Linz (European cultural capital)
- As a dramaturge I was co-mentoring two projects that were presented at a Riga performing arts for which I can't remember the name
- I've just come from Kuopio in Finland where I attended one ANTI-Festival; this year's edition was on walking performances
- Immediately afterwards I went to Zagreb at NDA meeting where we would every evening go to festival Platforma, then Perforacije
- And now I am here at DISKURS 09 [Giessen, Germany - Ed.] (Vevar, 2010).

Importantly, such a working pattern tends to be reactive: the touring

calendar and itinerary are developed in response to invitations, open calls and competitions, so they cannot be predicted much in advance. It has little to do with informed and strategic development of one's own path (unless an artist is in a position to pick and choose from offers). As a result, constant adaptability to new circumstances is required: the key factor is availability, which leads to a weakening of social and personal bonds. Of course, this working pattern is determined by the market conditions of the art production system discussed above – and puts the ones involved at a further disadvantage. Consequently, artistic practices have difficulties to be grounded in any local context and have an actual (even if only minimal) impact on it, which entails a loss of political agency.

The continuous movement of artists, researchers, curators and producers clearly affects the ecosystem of the art institution: on the one hand, the constant exchange of people, their practices, ideas and experiences is a source of novelty, lifting the institution out of the rut of conventional thinking and keeping it open to what is yet unidentified and unexpected. We can see this situation as a form of maintaining the ecosystem's biodiversity, a quality necessary to foster its development.

But, if we follow this line of thought, we will soon realize that many of these new elements do not even seep through to the ground on which the institution rests and which sustains it (and includes its everyday practices, reproductive labour and relations with its immediate surroundings). While mobility is valuable, hypermobility, occurring at increased speed and split into numerous short trips, disrupts the institution's ecosystem, allowing it no time to trace, identify and adopt new elements. For how can one understand the context of an artist's work or establish a genuine, long-term relationship of exchange with her or him, if one doesn't even have time for an unhurried,

meaningful conversation? These trips, on which it is impossible to see anything but the airport-hotel-show-hotel-airport route did not actually differ much from shopping; they relied on the consumption of finished products, exploited human and non-human resources and left a high carbon footprint, offering little in return (except, of course, a possible invitation to a festival that will allow you to stay in business). The negative experience of participation in the international performing arts circuit was addressed by the artist Sarah Vanhee:

I am convinced that artists have fobbed off their pioneering, leadership role into what I would call negative internationalization. You are presumed to be exceedingly flexible, preferably young, always ready to travel, with no family and not too many commitments. In short, you must cultivate the illusion that you can cut all your connections, that at any moment you can cut yourself off and become a totally cut-out figurine. It is being sold and promoted as an attitude of boundless freedom, but what is really behind it is an ideologically-motivated demand for extreme flexibility, which makes your existence vulnerable and precarious. I think it makes us incredibly weaker, because it turns us into a kind of pulled-apart, detached cosmopolitans (Vanhee; Van Imschot, 2018, p. 36).

The pace of constant travel thus weakens one's voice and ability to influence reality. For how can you really affect it if you are a one-time visitor, for a duration ranging from a few days to a few weeks, and where the geopolitical context is incidental (resulting from the location of the production house or festival that provided a room or studio that could just as well be elsewhere)?

This was identified as a major issue by the RESHAPE project¹¹, on which I worked as a facilitator in 2019-2021 with a group of artists and curators from Europe and the Mediterranean on developing new forms of contemporary trans- and postnational practices. And while it took us a long time to grasp the multitude of tools, needs and factors that each of us brought to the group and to discuss our understandings of such fundamental concepts as politicality, agency, institution and practice, we all quickly agreed that the terms 'transnational' and 'postnational' are (from our very different perspectives) not particularly apt in thinking about contemporary art practices. On the one hand, they emphasize movement, presupposing the value of mobility as a fundamental condition of contemporary work in the arts while ignoring its negative ecological and political consequences; on the other, while this juxtaposition allows us to envisage activities across national and regional borders, it also deftly sidesteps their true, political dimension, experienced by those who are forced to apply for a visa.

From the perspective of our group, composed of art workers with vast experience in international cooperation, mobility, crucial to some of us for political and economic reasons (lack of funding options in the local context), could only be sustained with a change in its basic principles. As we wrote in the course of the project:

Trans- and postnational artistic practices have been shaped by the context of self-congratulatory hypermobility, which includes the commodification of otherness, a trend towards the homogenization of artistic work, resulting in the creation of a creative monoculture, but also exclusion through the imposition of hyperlocality. What are the dialogues between nomadic artists and the temporary communities they inhabit, and what conversations they can never

have? In our search for the other, did we give ourselves a chance for a true encounter? Or did we create 'otherness' in response to specific expectations? To what extent did that process lead to a restriction of diversity and a homogenization of expression? Who was actually given the possibility to travel? Who was invited and who was not? Who was excluded from this privilege? ... In a situation where I get lost on my travels, when I no longer really know where I am and there is no connection to my surroundings (human or non-human), the self becomes the only stable point of reference. As a result, we run the risk of radical self-orientation, losing the ability to establish deep relationships with others¹².

Significantly, the life- and workstyle shaped by hypermobility is problematic both from environmental (high carbon footprint) and political perspectives, which, as always, are closely linked. The phenomenologist, political philosopher and ecological scholar Michael Marder has brilliantly analyzed these implications, debunking the myth of the nomad:

The nomads who leave wastelands behind them and make deserts grow are not this or that group of marginal populations, following an escape route from sedentary lifestyle; they are all of us at our environmentally irresponsible worst. They (we) remain faithful to the historical-ontological notion of the human, the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene, who lives on the earth as though it were already a desert (the 'green desert' of the Amazonian rainforest, as the Brazilian dictatorship coded it in the middle of the last century, or the blue desert of the ocean) and, in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, facilitates the actual desertification of the world. This

human, revelling in the feeling that he or she has no determinate place in the midst of beings, passes on the face of the earth as a hurricane, unattached to any specific shape, structure or form of being. ...Each place, if not the placeness of place, is a way station, a drive-through, that through which one passes in one's peregrinations and, in passing, empties it, vacates and evacuates it, on the way to another, equally abused locale (Marder, 2016, p. 498).

The international performing arts field, where festivals are a major factor, has another crucial political consequence: it reinforces geopolitical, class and wealth divisions. Accordingly, there are those who are free to move and those for whom another journey means arduous, often humiliating and sometimes futile efforts to obtain a visa; those who can choose to travel and those who are forced to do so; those who move at will and those who have been violently displaced from their places of residence by political, social and economic circumstances; lastly, those who are mobile enough and available to travel efficiently, who have access to education (including an opportunity to learn foreign languages) and well positioned art schools which make it easier to get noticed and join various networks, and those who cannot gain entry into the performing arts market - and to which, in consequence, they remain invisible.

These divisions are also evident in the tendency of artists to substitute rail for air travel: this solution, increasingly common in the European art world and certainly the most sensible in terms of reducing carbon emissions, contains an element of class, social and colonial distinction. Since, for example, a three-day train journey from Brussels to Istanbul remains a

luxury for many: the economic barrier (high train fares), family status (looking after a child or other family member), and precarious working conditions (involvement in too many projects at the same time and the need to juggle multiple commitments) simply make it impossible to extend the round trip to six days. And they exclude artists from outside Europe¹³ and such regions as South-East Asia, where the rail network is less extensive (an issue raised by Fu Kuen-Tang, dramaturge and curator, artistic director of the Taipei Arts Festival in Taiwan, during Creation of Dance Work, an online discussion held by the European Dance House Network on 8 September 2021¹⁴).

At the same time, while the international performing arts field requires urgent changes, it cannot risk being completely closed. The fundamental value of the exchange of thoughts, experiences and practices at a transnational level seems obvious: the exchange creates the conditions necessary for diversity, gives access to new and unexplored contexts, provides artists and their audiences with tools of mutual support and solidarity, and facilitates collaboration and development. Secondly, the conservative and nationalist turn that has become so pronounced in recent years in many European countries must be counterbalanced by a strong and open international network of support, collaboration and solidarity. That is why we cannot afford to abandon the infrastructure facilitating the presentation of international shows: paradoxically, for all its entanglement in market mechanisms, the same infrastructure can be an instrument of political change.

This is particularly the case for artists and art workers who cannot receive state funding for their work: because there is no public funding system for the arts in their local context (as in the United States) or because their

practice is regarded by the country's government as subversive, overly critical and, in extreme cases, hostile or dangerous (as in Brazil under the rule of Jair Bolsonaro). A good example is the work of the Mexican collective Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol which, as its co-founder Luisa Pardo admits, is supported to a large extent through cooperation with Western festivals¹⁵. Another case in point is the practice of the acclaimed Brazilian artist Lia Rodrigues, whose annual world tours allow her to support her company as well as a small independent arts centre operating in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro – for her and her collaborators, the collapse of the festival system would mean not only a serious risk of going out of business, but also the loss of political agency and the ability to introduce changes in her own community.

So how can artistic, curatorial and research practices be rooted in performing arts in such a way as not to limit the perspective to the artists' own community? How can we rethink mobility and transnational cooperation so that they strengthen the local ecosystem rather than exploit its already meagre resources only to meet the market requirements of competitiveness and prestige? Is it possible to take over the concept of being rooted from nationalist discourse where it serves to divide people into those who 'are from here' and those who have come from elsewhere, reinforcing xenophobia?

One of the proposals developed by us as part of the RESHAPE project was to follow the philosopher Sara Ahmed's idea and to attempt to create a home as a space of political commitment in temporarily inhabited places (Ahmed, 1999). Ahmed points out that what migrants have in common is neither a shared past (which is different in each case) nor the ontological experience of migration (the loss of a home), but an uncommon estrangement. It is this

state and the various ways of experiencing it that can serve as a possible ground for a common cause and collective action.

Ahmed provides a valuable insight by proposing to understand home as a space based on affect rather than belonging or origin. The philosopher unpacks the phrase 'to feel at home' to reflect what the feeling of being at home actually involves. Here, the creation of home would depend on the possibility of a lived experience of locality. In this sense, Ahmed points out, home is closely linked to our body as a tool that enables our contact with the environment; it becomes, in a way, a 'second skin'. Home would thus be an important element of our subjectivity, but in terms of affect rather than the place of origin or residence. The process of creating and inhabiting a home, liberated thus from ethnic or national concerns, would allow the status of home to be expanded into the experience of movement:

The immersion of a self in a locality is hence not simply about inhabiting an already constituted space (from which one can simply depart and remain the same). Rather, the locality intrudes into the senses: it defines what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers. The lived experience of being-at-home hence involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them: being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, inhabit each other. To some extent we can think of the lived experience of being at home in terms of inhabiting a second skin, a skin which does not simply contain the homely subject, but which allows the subject to be touched and touch the world that is neither simply in the home or away from the home. The home as skin suggests the boundary between self and home is permeable, but also that the boundary between home and away is permeable as

well. Here, movement away is also movement within the constitution of home as such. That is, movement away is always affective: it affects how 'homely' one might feel or fail to feel (Ahmed, 1999, p. 341).

Home so conceived can also be a space in between, an interval, a gap; it can also be a form of passage through a given area. In this perspective, it could be built in the process of moving, in the 'in-between' space that is not grounded in individual or collective memory or family ties; the construction of home does not have to follow the lines set by nationality or family roots. In this context, artistic practice can be rooted 'elsewhere,' outside one's place of residence, and the process would occur primarily on the level of conscious observation and affect. This is precisely how agency can be regained in transnational performative practices; how a nomad can at last turn into an ally. As we noted in the course of the RESHAPE project:

In our professional experience as nomads, we had to learn how to make a home and how to feel at home. It is not about the family home, but home as the place where you do your political homework, in the sense proposed by Sara Ahmed: so the point would be to create homes. Because some of the political work cannot be done without being rooted at home¹⁶.

A world tour in one's own city

In this context, I want to examine two artistic practices that are interesting examples of situated instituent practices and attempt to redefine the international performing arts field: works by Sarah Vanhee and Benjamin

Verdonck. They are both Flemish performing artists of high international position who, at one point in their careers, decided to (temporary) limit their presence in the festival circuit to pursue projects in the local community. Verdonck stopped touring abroad for one season; Vanhee changed her pace of travel, reducing the number of trips in favour of focusing on grounding locally her project Bodies of Knowledge. Importantly, both of them are geopolitically and economically privileged artists for whom the decision to work locally or internationally is (still) a matter of choice.

Both artists decided to withdraw (even if it is only temporary) from the international festival field in order to turn to their local context and, just as important, towards the audiences who are neither associated with the art community (a considerable part of festival spectators) nor are regular theatregoers. Their exit from the festival circuit is, in a sense, also an exit from the art market, a step possible, paradoxically, only because they had had an opportunity to secure a strong position in it beforehand. Their personal and professional experiences, which have led them to take a different direction in their careers, are thus similar, as is the way they challenge the dominant working model of Belgian performing arts institutions which, however experimental, have to follow the pace of conducting rehearsals resulting in the form of a production, shared with the public; meet attendance targets, participate in networking and international co-productions, prepare festivals, etc. Both projects analysed below require a change of that pace and both are relatively challenging financially, if you look at the ratio of the preparation costs (especially in the case of BOK) to the number of spectators who will be able to see the outcome. On top, both are not easy to promote as a festival hit.

In the season 2020/2021 Benjamin Verdonck decided to complete a world

tour in his own city, Antwerp. The tour lasted from 1 September 2020 to 30 June 2021. This meant that Verdonck cancelled most of his foreign trips that season and concentrated on working in the local context. It was possible because he is one of the artists supported by Toneelhuis, a local production house, which was also responsible for producing the project. So, in his case, the decision to forgo festivals did not mean the loss of funding.

For several months Verdonck moved about the city's squares, streets and housing projects with miniature theatres in a box which had been a part of his artistic practice for years. Verdonck combines work with objects and storytelling, and each of his performances is intended for a specific audience. His Antwerp shows were seen by the audience gathered in a given venue, passers-by, neighbours and residents met along the way. It did not mean a radical change of his aesthetics: the sets and objects used by him had gradually shrunk to the size that made it possible to carry them in a small suitcase or backpack. As he said in 2018:

In the past I did a lot of projects in the public space, often bigger projects for lots of people. After about 15 years I felt that these kinds of projects no longer made sense. I had the feeling that I couldn't scream louder than the billboards that screamed around me. So I decided to go in another direction, i.e. as small as possible. That way you can infect or infiltrate the public space. I developed a number of miniature theatres that I can take with me in a box on the train or on my bike. I play these shows everywhere, both in more institutional contexts and in the so-called public space. When you travel from place to place internationally, you discover a lot, but there is also a whole world to discover in the city of Antwerp. Next year I am planning a world tour in Antwerp, and I will try to

play in as many different places in Antwerp as possible (Verdonck, 2018).

The implementation of the project was slightly delayed, as a result of which, ironically, it began in the pandemic year, when travelling was not possible anyway. But the idea for the project and the decision to carry it out had come earlier, before it occurred to anyone that international festivals would have to cancel their programmes. During the strictest lockdown in the autumn of 2020, Verdonck performed for housebound inhabitants, appearing in front of their doors and windows and sometimes on balconies, with the help of a ladder or crane if necessary. He even put on shows for people queuing at a local shop. As he wrote:

I have the suspicion that all of the cities
in which I usually show my work, the whole circuit,
can be found in this city.
an exercise in not giving in to the idea
that you have to be everywhere simply and purely
because you can be everywhere.
developing a knack for accidentally
having useful encounters and making discoveries.
a licence to be free, perhaps,
continually moving between
studio and city, city and theatre, theatre and studio (Verdonck, 2020).

Importantly, while the artist stayed in the local context, he did not give up the curiosity about the transnational relations, but redirected the focus of his

explorations from trips far beyond his surroundings to the multicultural community of Antwerp, neighbours who are usually underrepresented and often are not perceived as part of the local art field.

Sarah Vanhee's Bodies of Knowledge moves much more slowly than Verdonck's miniature shows. It is a months-long alternative school project based on mutual learning, for the exchange of knowledge that is often repressed, underrepresented or excluded from the dominant public or academic discourse. It is usually a lived, embodied knowledge, grounded in experience, affect and daily practice. The project is typically set in a small tent (with a capacity of twenty people), which Vanhee describes as a 'semi-nomadic classroom,' situated for a few months in a Brussels location. The tent first appeared in the Anderlecht district between September and November 2020 as part of the Kunstenfestivaldesarts; from September to December 2021 it operated in Square Jacques Brel in the city centre and meanwhile has various versions resulting from the process of introducing new lockdowns and adapting to social distancing rules. There was BOK a pied, a form of peripatetic school, taking place during the walks (only 2 people only: one sharing their knowledge, the other listening) or BOK-telephone, within which the conversation would happen over phone.

I happened to attend a 'full version' of BOK that took place in the tent in Brussels in 2021. For four months, every Saturday the tent was open to the public who came to attend lectures and talk to the people who had been invited to participate in the project over the many months of work of BOK team (including Sarah Vanhee, Damla Ekin Tokel, Flore Herman, Nouha Mhamdi, Nadia Mharzi and Johanna Polge). The process of team work in a given locality is key: it aims at building connection and mutual trust with local communities, neighbourhood residents and passers by and identifying

the ones ('the bodies of knowledge') who might like to share their knowledges. Trust is crucial here: most of 'the bodies' have often little experience in public speaking and are rarely connected to any official educational institution. Many of them have never appeared in public settings as the ones to take the floor. That is why the carefully maintained process of listening is key. Usually, one conversation is not enough: there is a recurrent series of talks with the potential 'body' before they decide to show up in the tent (and still there is no guarantee they will). The spatial and dramaturgical arrangement of the space is of particular importance. The hexagonal tent holds twenty chairs and pillows arranged in a circle, there is no podium or stage. Each meeting follows the same precise yet simple structure. At the beginning, a member of the BOK team welcomes the participants and briefly describes the principles of BOK:

Upon entering and co-creating this space, let's consider:

BOK is a place for listening as much as for speaking.

We respect that not everyone is used to taking the floor in public.

We're trying to challenge the usual dominant order of speaking out in society.

Different languages might be used, so let's try to translate.

We won't tolerate any form of violence or discrimination.

This is an alcohol- and drug-free zone.

Out of respect, we try to stay for a full session¹⁷.

Then the moderator briefly introduces the individual whose story we are going to hear and gives the floor to him or her. The meetings are held in French or in Flemish, sometimes in English. If a participant does not speak a given language, the spontaneous translation between the participants is

organised. When the lecture or story is over, the host opens up the space to questions from the audience, reminding them of the applicable rules:

If you want to speak, try to formulate a question or comment rather than an opinion. Before you speak, look around to see who else is here, who has not spoken yet and who may not be often heard in public debate¹⁸.

Each session is about fifty minutes long and is followed by a break. The programme of each open day usually lasts several hours and is known a few weeks in advance. When I attended BOK (23 October 2021), the programme included 'A meditation exercise in listening to yourself and the world,' Valérie's story about 'A polyamorous relationship, or how to experience love beyond hierarchies,' a lecture by Saidou entitled 'Mauritania, a country of six communities and a thousand poets,' and a lecture by Awatif, the founder of Job Dignity, a project combating the homelessness of women in Brussels. BOK hosts arrange the programme in advance, ensuring a multitude of topics, voices and perspectives. The speakers are sometimes accompanied by friends or family, and sometimes they come alone.

A set of questions suggested by the BOK team and expanded in the course of the project is used to choose the topics and identify the individuals willing to share their knowledge and practices. So far, a list of ninety-six questions has been compiled; the first twenty are given below:

1. How to survive and live with little money?
2. How do you decide when to obey authorities and when not?
3. How to use our hands for healing?

4. How can I dare to speak up?
5. How to do commerce in an ethical and sustainable way?
6. How to be less afraid?
7. What could you teach you didn't learn in school?
8. What can we learn from our dreams?
9. How can I listen more and better?
10. What are interesting alternatives for representative democracy?
11. What rituals and practices do you know for mourning?
12. What would ethical housing look like?
13. How to live an erotic life?
14. What should we never forget from the past?
15. How to dare to say no?
16. What are useful open source applications?
17. How to have more pleasure in life?
18. Who's your heroine?
19. How to resist power abuse?
20. Who taught you something you couldn't have learned at school, and what?¹⁹

As the BOK team declares, questions are one of their main tools for extracting the knowledge that is absent from everyday discourse and dominant educational institutions.

Bodies of knowledge is primarily a practice of listening: to the knowledge that might seem trivial or negligible in a different context, voices that have no chance of being heard in public; views that challenge the dominant order, experiences that offer an alternative to academic knowledge and are often rooted in contexts remote from the Belgian one. This is another instance of creating transnational bonds in one city or even a single district. As Vanhee

wrote at the beginning of the project:

Bodies of knowledge is a place for people to learn from each other.
Things one usually does not learn,
told by voices who are not always heard,
from different parts of society and the world.
In BOK we try to exchange knowledge that could potentially
nurture a more just and humane society.
It's a room for listening, questioning, connecting.
BOK welcomes life experts rather than professional authorities
(Vanhee, 2019).

I see both projects in question as examples of 'active withdrawal' from the current model of international production in performing arts. I believe that the artists' decisions and actions are important instances of situated instituent practices, developed as a result of careful observation of the local context while ensuring the maintenance (and establishment of new) transnational relations. Both Vanhee and Verdonck challenge the fundamental rules of the international field of artistic practices: they propose a departure from one-timeness, eventualization and hypermobility in favour of interdependence, relationship building and listening.

Importantly, they were able to make this gesture because of their high and economically privileged position. First, they had been able to develop their careers through participation in international festivals, which contributed to their status and recognition in the local art community. Second, they were both supported by the local funding system for performing arts: Benjamin Verdonck is an artist affiliated with Toneelhuis, Sarah Vanhee completed

BOK as part of her Ph.D. dissertation *Bodies of knowledge* – the public space as a forum for the exchange of repressed or underexposed knowledge, based on her artistic practice and research at the Antwerp School of Arts and the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (ARIA).

Of course, intensive work with the local community or with the ones who are not frequent art creators or recipients is not a new activity in the context of performing arts either in Flanders or Europe. What makes both BOK and Verdonck's project special is their starting point: the perspective of artists active on the festival circuit who have decided to withdraw from the hypermobile frenzy and to focus on intimate encounters grounded locally and their deliberate strategy to challenge the rules of the international performing arts field. Their withdrawal from the circuit will likely be temporary, which does not lessen the significance of their gesture or deprive it of a political dimension. On the contrary, BOK will continue to be held, in other cities in Belgium and outside it, including Norway and the Netherlands. In this sense, the change of the festival model in the countries that will host BOK in 2023 and 2024 (the need to plan the budget differently and to re-allocate the time and attention of the festival team, the adoption of a longer time span for preparation, and the shift of the audience from spectators of a one-off event to partners in a long-term relationship), has already occurred. BOK is thus a situated instituent practice because it proposes its own institutional structure and work pace in place of the existing one; it formulates a working method that disrupts and occasionally turns upside down the customary modes and pace of work in the field of international performing arts. For such initiatives as BOK to be carried out, a thorough revision of the principles underlying the performing arts production system is required – at the level of subsidies and accounting for them, at the level of institutions (and methods of assessing their

performance and reporting their expenses), and in terms of canon building (the hierarchy of artists is often based on the numbers of awards received and festivals attended). It is also necessary to change the basic principles of hosting project authors: to reduce the frequency of touring in favour of longer visits, to facilitate links with the local art community and audiences, and build strong transnational alliances based on the affective creation of home and conditions for inhabiting it.

BOK is not the only project of its kind; quite the opposite: it remains part of the broader phenomenon of artistic practices that presuppose a much longer and intense working time on-site (compared to the standard rhythm of festival presentations) and rely on painstaking development of a relationship of intimacy with participants. Events of similar duration and level of intimacy with audiences are increasingly frequent on the international circuit, as exemplified by the work of Tania Bruguera and Ivana Müller (in particular *Notes*), numerous temporary schools run by artists as part of international theatre festivals (including *Kunstenfestivaldesarts*, *Santarcangelo Festival*, *Dublin Theatre Festival*, etc.). Will they become a model, copied and built on, like the projects of *Rimini Protokoll* and *Jérôme Bel* before? Will they be able to redefine the international performing arts scene before they turn into another product to which alternative proposals are necessary? As we already know, instituent practices are moving practices – this means that if they are fixed in the form of a model, they will lose the basis of their political agency. Perhaps they are more aptly described as working methods: a catalogue of ways of thinking with and being with audiences that will work only when they are carefully grounded in the local context. In this sense, they have a chance not to be locked into a universal model that can be adapted to any conditions; they are rather a methodology that always has to be updated, rewritten and fine-tuned in relation to the given ecosystem.

Translated by Robert Gałązka

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Footnotes

1. The dissertation, written under the supervision of Professor Krystyna Duniec, at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, was defended in February 2021 in Warsaw.
2. I mean theatre and dance that are produced outside the repertory theatre system: as part of production house programmes, international theatre networks and their co-productions and contemporary art centres - or with the support of private foundations and agencies.
3. I refer here to the epistemo-ontological category of 'thinking-with' proposed by Donna Haraway and developed by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, which underlines that subjectivity always originates in relationality and interdependence with other subjects, both human and non-human. See Haraway, 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017.
4. Cf. Negri, 2009.
5. The two orders cannot be reconciled: their coexistence is precluded by the radical difference in the working pattern and the choice of areas of activity that need to be promoted: opening up to doubt and self-reflection requires strong emotional support; hence, an appreciation of reproductive labour which sustains work and regeneration. This does not mean, of course, that a 'moving institution' cannot go on to become a new, attractive model in the art market.
6. This understanding of the critical attitude is opposed by the Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe. See Mouffe, 2008.
7. Here, flight does not mean an exit from society - Raunig notes that the concept of exodus or withdrawal in the context of art is often misinterpreted as an incentive to withdraw from the common, an affirmation of the artist working away in his studio. In fact, Virno argues the opposite: withdrawal from the existing rules of society within the framework of the state serves to strengthen a new form of political subjectivity: the multitude, because it allows this form to be constituted.
8. See, e.g., Vujanović, 2018.
9. See, e.g., the project Re/framing the international of the Flanders Arts Institute in Brussels: <https://www.kunsten.be/en/research/internationaal-werken/re-framing-the...> [accessed: 8.02.2022] ; international research and art project RESHAPE (Reflect, Share, Practice, Experiment), <https://reshape.network> [accessed: 8.02.2022]; international symposium The Fantastic Institution and Return of the Fantastic Institution, BUDA, Kortrijk 2018 i 2019, <https://www.kunsten.be/en/now-in-the-arts/the-fantastic-institution/>; <https://www.kunsten.be/en/now-in-the-arts/the-return-of-the-fantastic-i...> [accessed: 8.02.2022]; digital conference How to be together? Conversations on International Exchange and Collaborations in the Performing Arts, Tanz im August / HAU Hebbel am Ufer oraz Zürcher Theater Spektakel 2020, <http://2020.theaterspektakel.ch/en/program20/production/how-to-be-toget...> [accessed: 8.02.2022] ; Creation of Dance Work. Producing in different contexts, economies and conditions, European Dancehouse Network, Atelier, 2021, <https://www.ednetwork.eu/activities/type/atelier> [accessed: 8.02.2022].
10. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic put a sudden stop to the art production system, but it is not clear yet for how long. The artistic practices reflected in this text may be an indication of far-reaching changes, but they stem from ideas conceived before the lockdown.
11. RESHAPE (Reflect, Share, Practice, Experiment) was a transnational research and art project, bringing together European and Mediterranean artists, curators and institutions to

jointly create new ways of working in the arts and innovative organizational models and reflect on concrete answers to crucial challenges related to the production, distribution and presentation of contemporary art practices. I worked as a facilitator of one of the project trajectories (Trans/Postnational Artistic Practices) and explored the theme of transnational artistic practices with a group art professionals. The group included Norway-based Slovakian artist and curator Martinka Bobrikova (she participated in the project as a member of the duo BobrikovadeCarmen); Barcelona based curator, researcher and artist Pau Cata; Heba el-Cheikh, a theatre manager from Cairo; Prague performing arts curator Petr Dlouhy, co-founder of the Cross Attic collective; Skopje visual artist Gjorgje Jovanovik; Dominika Świącicka, a Warsaw curator and visual artist; Brussels-based curator and producer Marine Thévenet, member of the art collective L'Amicale, and Ingrid Vranken, a Brussels artist, curator and dramaturge. See <https://reshape.network> [accessed: 20.11.2021].

12. Material developed by the Trans/Postnational Artistic Practices group during RESHAPE workshops, previously unpublished.

13. A fact pointed out by Lázaro Gabino Rodríguez, co-founder of Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, in his bravura reply to a letter by Jérôme Bel, a prominent French choreographer campaigning against air travel.

14. See Keil, 2021.

15. A conversation with the artist during the 40th Zürcher Theater Spektakel festival in Zurich in August 2019.

16. Unpublished material from a workshop held as part of the RESHAPE project.

17. A set of rules displayed inside the BOK tent.

18. Recreated from memory and notes after attending a BOK session.

19. See <https://en.bodiesofknowledge.be/question-list> [accessed: 11.11.2022].

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INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

Ms Ula and Ms President

Censorship as a Mechanism of Local Theatrical Life; the Case of Ula Kijak's 'Nieskończona historia' at Teatr Nowy in Zabrze

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Abstract

The article highlights an attempt at modifying the performance *Nieskończona historia* (Unfinished Story) by Ula Kijak at the Teatr Nowy in Zabrze in 2012 – after a protest by some local Catholic and right-wing activists, and also by the sponsors of the theatre. Jerzy Makselon, the managing director of the theatre, tried to organize a special non-public performance of the play with the Mayor of the City as an expert in order to decide on the future of the performance. The author of the play, Artur Pałyga, declared that the Zabrze case is just the tip of the iceberg because the problem of censorship is very present in Polish theatre, and often generates conflicts between managers and local politicians on the one side and artists on the other side. However, the strategies of censorship and mechanism of power are usually not as apparent as in Zabrze. The research approach applied in the article combines institutional analysis, legal aspects and reflection upon the social significance of the artistic phenomena described.

Keywords: censorship; Ula Kijak; Artur Pałyga; theatre and local politics; Teatr Nowy in Zabrze

‘Censorship, even when legal and based in law, avoids the spotlight.

Censorship is shy’ – Zygmunt Hübner wrote these words in *Polityka i teatr*

(Politics and Theatre) (Hübner, 2009, p. 64). The lack of shyness in attempts at censorship is one of the reasons why the suggestions to introduce changes the 2012 performance *Nieskończona historia* (Unfished Story) directed in Zabrze by Ula Kijak, on the basis of Artur Pałyga's play, are such an interesting case study for the history of censorship in Polish theatre in the last decades. Statements for the media made by the directors of Nowy Teatr in Zabrze, where Kijak's performance was created, reveal a number of circumstances and mechanisms usually hidden from the public eye. Furthermore, the theatre director's reference to the organiser (the local government) as an institution meant to determine the artistic shape of the theatre and mediate between the cultural institution and other participants of the local public sphere, foreshadows later, much better known and researched attempts at censorship in the theatre in the following years.

Most of these cases are situated between the classic, liberal way of thinking about censorship, where 'freedom of speech' is taken as a default and commonly available state, violated by external interventions of an institutionalised censor, linked to political or religious power – and the new censorship theory, where every utterance is, from its very inception, determined by a number of dispersed factors, structural conditions, violence and inequalities, inscribed into society, where censorship is both internalised and distributed (Bunn, 2015, p. 26) between numerous instances and institutions linked to the state, politics or the market, including the art market. This division is described by the American historian and theoretician Matthew Bunn, who points out that the way in which a given researcher views censorship mirrors their outlook on society.

Coming back to Hübner's thought, it is worth to recall his expression 'censorship beyond censorship', which refers to a number of censorship

practices understood as 'ideological', but not requiring the participation of a formal censor. 'The phenomenon of ideological censorship', Hübner explains in *Polityka i teatr*, 'is difficult to describe and precisely analyse, because it is impossible to strictly determine who the mysterious "ideologue" is'. It seems that Hübner's intuitions stemming from his institutional practice are compatible with those analytically and systematically described and recognised by Bunn, especially that Hübner, even though he lived his whole professional life in the People's Republic of Poland, always emphasised that the mechanisms of 'censorship beyond censorship' are also at work in Western democracies.

When applying reflection on new censorship theory to the field of theatre, it is worth referring to Grzegorz Niziołek's research. In his article 'Cenzura w afekcie' (Censorship in Affect), he points out three models of structural censorship, i.e. censorship that 'acts with the help of affective cultural norms, not political institutions' (Niziołek, 2016, p. 262).

The first one refers to Judith Butler's idea that censorship is a form of producing speech, rather than blocking it. It is an understanding of censorship which Bunn mentions as characteristic of new censorship theory, placing Butler alongside i.a. Bourdieu or Foucault. This assumption results in the statement that 'no text can be fully uncensored or censored' (Niziołek, 2016, p. 262) – and each political work in the theatre is a game with strong performatives constituting how we understand the 'majority'.

The second model, derived from the ideas of Sarah Ahmed, is based on understanding censorship 'not as a boundary between the excluding and the excluded, but as a form of circulating affects, which orient themselves towards certain objects and avoid others' (Niziołek, 2016, p. 263). One has to note that in the case study presented below, the affects will direct

themselves towards objects linked to religion. The key aspect here is the role of emotions in shaping not only social norms, but also feelings of community, including the nation understood as a political community, as well as the 'majority'. Niziołek writes that the political stakes of this model are not about 'belonging to the community, but the right to express feelings and desires in the public space.' The central dilemma here is the extent to which gaining this right requires manifesting one's adherence to the community.

The third model distinguished by Niziołek stems from Michael Warner's ideas. Niziołek sees in it an opportunity to deconstruct the ideological understanding of the Polish theatre audience. He states that 'Polish theatre identifies the audience with the public, and the idea of a public with the nation – the public' (Niziołek, 2016, p. 263). The last of these substitutions, realised in the space of local communities and local 'public opinion' will prove to be vital in the case of Ula Kijak's performance created in Zabrze.

'It's a pity censorship is no more'

Nieskończona historia is a play by Artur Pałyga. It presents the lodgers of a tenement house in an unspecified city, suddenly confronted with the death of their neighbour, an elderly lady listening to the nationalist Catholic station Radio Maryja. The community devoted to the radio station is not represented in terms of anticlerical satire – the critics noted empathy, warmth, as well as 'metaphysics of the everyday' in the spirit of Miron Białoszewski. The Warsaw premiere directed by Piotr Cieplak three weeks earlier was accepted enthusiastically, without any controversies, also by critics associated with the conservative side of the spectrum, even those directly linked to the Catholic church.

‘The performance is brimming with faith that our imperfect world is moving in the right direction,’ Hanna Karolak wrote in the Catholic *Gość Niedzielny* (Karolak, 2012), then published in Katowice, not far from Zabrze, by the Metropolitan Curia publishing house, in a review whose title echoes Franciszek Karpiński’s religious song: ‘Wszystkie nasze dzienne sprawy’ (All Our Daily Matters). In *Teatr* the conservative critic Jacek Kopciński notes: ‘An amazing scene in which the church kitsch is combined with a good woman’s empathy, which reveals its mystical power’ (Kopciński, 2012). *Tygodnik Solidarność* praised the performance: ‘excellent theatre for a demanding audience. Theatre of the kind we are no longer used to, with the influx of shocking performances’ (adz, 2013), also noting, without a trace of outrage, that ‘the scene involving the Shakespearean motif of play within the play is set in what is sometimes a chancel, and sometimes a venue for cabaret songs’ and ‘church pews become benches by the rubbish bins’.

In Zabrze, however, the theatre directors demanded that the priest should not wear a stole in the scenes reminiscing his youth, and his former love should not be visibly pregnant. Furthermore, a scene involving one character hitting another with a Bible was supposed to disappear. The two remaining changes concerned the way the text was delivered by the actors (Mrozek, 2012). The justification given for the changes was based on the needs of the audiences and their demands presented after the premiere. Joanna Derkaczew summarised the messages from dissatisfied viewers in *Gazeta Wyborcza*:

After the premiere in Zabrze on April 1, the theatre received three angry e-mails whose authors demanded censoring *Nieskończona historia*. They wrote: ‘It’s a pity censorship is no more’. They were not anonymous. Attorney Krzysztof Woryna stated that his

complaint is an open letter, also addressed to the president of Zabrze and the Gliwice diocesan curia. The viewers claimed the performance was offensive to their sense of good taste and their religious feelings. However, they used different arguments. The first one referred to the penal code. Another mentioned her rights as a consumer. She wrote she did not get what she paid for, deceived by the description advertising the performance on the theatre's website. The third viewer simply wrote a number of insults and complained about the actors smoking on stage (Derkaczew, 2012a).

Reviewer Bartłomiej Miernik described the crucial scenes as follows:

The two scenes which caused outrage among the conservative inhabitants of the city seem insignificant compared to things one can see every day on Polish stages. In one of them, a young woman with a pillow tied to her belly stands next to a priest. They do not interact. Apparently, the audiences and the theatre directors were disturbed by the fact that the characters are standing close to each other. In the second scene a man is searching the Bible to find the answer why he thoughtlessly followed a beautiful woman to a church. He reads at random, quoting fragments about the dynasties of Israel or snippets irrelevant to his question. Resigned, he comes to the conclusion that he will not find an answer in the Good Book. That's it, nothing more. It's good that the creators did not allow the theatre director to change the performance. It delights with its precision and consistency in formal choices (Miernik, 2012).

The scenes mentioned here can still be seen – even though the last performance of *Nieskończona historia* took place in Zabrze on June 15, 2013, a year and two months after the premiere, during which time it appeared on the stage seventeen times (according to the repertoire archive at e-teatr.pl, a portal create by the Theatre Institute in Warsaw; dates of the performances in 2012: March 31- the premiere, April 14 and 15, May 19 and 20, June 1 and 2, September 28, November 15, December 8; in 2013: January 6, February 1, March 1 and 16, April 12, June 8 and 15). A recording of the performance is available at the Theatre Institute archive, accessible by request through Encyklopedia Polskiego Teatru (the Polish Theatre Encyclopedia) website (signature IT/5248/DVD/AB).

The scene with the Bible shows the frustration of Andrzej, a believer who clumsily tries to ‘pray with the Bible’ (a practice in, among others, Neocatechumenal movements). The book opens first on the second chapter of the 1 Chronicles, enumerating the descendants of Jacob from the generation of Judah, and then on the 21st chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, with the description of apostle Paul’s visit in the Jerusalem church, right before his capture. The recording shows that most of the time it is not the actor who is holding the book – it is presented to him by the actress saying dialogue which the play attributes to the character called ‘God’, and which consists of quotes from the above-mentioned biblical texts. Finally, a tussle ensues – Andrzej attacks the woman-God. Even the Judeochristian imaginary can provide a context for this scene in the form of Jacob’s struggle with the angel in the 30th chapter of the book of Genesis, painted by Rembrandt, among others. In their defence, the creators of *Nieskończona historia* pointed out that the performance does not use an actual copy of the book considered holy by the Christian, but a prop. In their open letter they wrote:

The scene of hitting an actor by an actress with a stage prop of the Bible is a consequence of the director's and actor's analysis of Andrzej as a character – a man lost and discouraged by the world and his faith. It is not a realistic scene of an argument/fight between two people, but a metaphorical image of Andrzej's view of his own relationship with the Holy Bible (Kijak, Pałyga, Skaza, Jankowska, Rumińska, 2012).

As for the scene with the priest, it is worth noting that the author is wearing a 'secular' costume – beige trousers and a T-shirt, and the only indication of his status as a clergyman is a stole on his shoulders, which, according to the Roman Catholic rules concerning liturgical vestments could mean he is involved in an action restricted for the 'priestly authority', such as hearing confession ('The stole is a sign of action, not jurisdiction'; Nowowiejski, 2010, p. 214). In Pałyga's play, the scene does not explicitly show a confession, but it does have confessional character, first with Judith, a teenager telling about her romantic and erotic fascinations, then with father Piotr remembering his own love. Its object, Magda, appears in the flashback scene. Pałyga's text does not suggest she is pregnant. Adding a protruding belly (whose artificiality is emphasised, as evidenced by the recording – it is visible that the belly is in fact a pillow) is the director's gesture, making the Zabrze performance different from that directed by Piotr Cieplak in Warsaw.

'Correctional rehearsal,' or the legal aspects

In purely legal terms, taking into consideration the contract with the director, did the theatre directors have the right to demand changes in the performance?

The second paragraph of the contract signed by Kijak with Nowy Teatr in Zabrze stated that 'The director's conception will be agreed upon with the Head Director of the Theatre'. In administrative law, this refers to a form of cooperation in which both parties have to agree on something, as opposed to, for example, 'expressing an opinion', which is not binding for the person whose work is judged. However, 'the director's conception' is not the whole of the performance, but a concept in the form of a short description or a conversation presented at the outset of the work on the performance, sometimes added to the contract as a basis for the first payment (in Kijak's case there was no such requirement, the first payment was planned after the end of the second week of rehearsals, on January 27, 2012).

Point 8 of paragraph 7 of the contract gave the theatre the right to call on the director to 'make suitable corrections' and set a date by which they should be ready. As will be shown later, it is this clause that Makselon and Stryj wanted to use in order to conduct a 'correctional rehearsal' and introduce the changes. Among the potential reasons for such demands, the contract mentioned 'flaws', 'legal defects' or deviations from paragraph 2, i.e. the director's conception presented earlier.

One can perhaps imagine an extreme interpretation of the notion of 'legal defect' used in paragraph 7, according to which any image, word or gesture which someone could potentially see as insulting to religious feelings in the understanding of article 196 of the Polish penal code, would be a 'legal defect' serving as a basis for 'corrections'. The stole or the Bible could meet the criteria for being items that can be object to the crime of insulting religious feelings, according to the legal doctrine (cf. Dąbrowski, Demenko, 2014, p. 162) - hence the attempt at defence by the creators of the performance, emphasising that a prop was used instead of the actual Bible.

An ultimate, absurd consequence of such a reading of the law would be a ban on all representations of the clergy or references to religion. A short digression: it is not much different from the regulations used in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where it was forbidden to use clerical vestments on stage; this law influenced the premiere of Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Wedding* in 1901.

However, the above-mentioned clause from the contract between Nowy Teatr and Ula Kijak stated that if the director were to fail to introduce the corrections by the given date, the theatre could withdraw from the contract, 'thus refusing to accept the work'. This would indicate that the whole procedure of seeing the necessity to make corrections should take place before accepting the work, i.e. the third dress rehearsal (this is how the moment of accepting the work is defined in point 2, paragraph 1 of the contract). The events described here, including the pressure on the director to introduce changes in the performance, took place later, after accepting the work. This means a 'correctional rehearsal' would be in violation of the contract.

It is worth noting that the regulations at work in the Republic of Poland, the contracts and the Polish legal literature are deficient in their use of terminology capable of grasping the particularities of creative work in the theatre. The lack of a proper definition of the 'director's conception' (mentioned above and present in Kijak's contract), a term understood only on the basis of habit, tradition and unwritten agreements, is but one example. If the matter was to be resolved in court, the interpretation of this phrase would depend on the judge.

The following is a fragment from a legal commentary by Elżbieta Traple, part of the volume *Prawo autorskie i prawo pokrewne. Komentarz*, edited by

The work of a theatre director deserves a few words of explanation. Turning a literary work into a play, performed by the director, is a clear case of adaptation, legally protected as a derivative work. Practice has long distinguished 'ordinary directing' from stage adaptation (the distinction can be seen on theatre posters). Stage adaptation happens when the interpretation of the work includes features of an adaptation, i.e. when the director consciously shifts the play's focus (e.g. places secondary characters in the foreground, without changing the plot), or changes the construction of the work. Stage adaptation often consists in adapting the play to the needs of a new viewer, a new point of view on the values contained within a theatrical work. That is why stage adaptation is a creative activity, leading to a derivative work.. In contrast, directing can consist exclusively of a simple preparation of the play to be performed on a specific stage, efficient guidance of the actors, providing 'rhythm and pacing' (also through certain cuts in the text), executing theatrical qualities intended by the playwright. Such ordinary directing is subject to performing rights and, consequently, the director should be regarded as a performer (Traple, 2011, p. 53).

This is why another chapter of the same volume, written by Monika Czajkowska-Dąbrowska, states:

The assessment of the role of the director has long been a controversy within the doctrine. It depends on the treatment of the

performance itself. If we consider it to be a work separate from the dramatic work performed (which could find a basis in the law, article 1, paragraph 2, point 8, the director should be viewed as a creator as understood by the copyright law, and a person creatively working in performance. If the show were to be treated as an execution of a play, the director only has the latter role (Czajkowska-Dąbrowska, 2011, p. 542).

The volume was published in 2011, but it uses certain terms in ways they were understood in theatre criticism, and on 'theatre posters', several decades ago, as if the Great Theatre Reform was a recent innovation. Regardless of these anachronisms and the lack of precise terminology, it has to be noted that the law and its commentators notice the authorial potential in a theatre director's work, and based on her contract, Kijak – as a director – was supposed to prepare a performance that would be an 'original result of her work' (paragraph 8 of the contract).

Behind the scenes

What were the specifics of the process in which the directors of Nowy Teatr communicated with Ula Kijak about expected changes in the performance? Such situations are often difficult to reconstruct, as the theatre's requests are presented not in an exchange of letters or e-mails, but during unminuted meetings and individual conversations in office rooms. Artur Pałyga described one of such meetings in his text on the e-teatr website, published in the same month:

We are having this amazing meeting at the theatre in Zabrze. All

the actors are there, as well as the theatre directors, who are trying to explain that for the good of all we should agree to these wretched changes.

‘But what will the changes change? What happens if we change something, and they will demand further changes?’

‘If you make the four changes, we will be on your side’ (Pałyga, 2012).

This clearly shows how the process of agreeing on the corrections takes place informally. Pałyga continues:

Then the theatre director said something about whether we want to cancel the performance because of an actor’s illness (accompanied by a knowing look). All in a ‘you know how it is’ mood. And it’s either-or (Pałyga, 2012).

The meeting also involves tales about circumventing censorship during the Martial Law – once more, the times of the Polish People’s Republic become the main reference point for the imagination when facing censorship. A process of haggling, often described in the context of censorship in the Polish People’s Republic, also takes place:

We have agreed. We are sitting downstairs with our heads down. We have agreed because we are nice. I was surprised by all of this. Not the performance, not the play! And the changes, damn, stupid, nonsensical, under visible pressure, because it was all after the premiere, but whatever. We agree on two, not four, and that the public will be told that for such and such reasons, for the good of

the performance, the following changes took place. And then a voice from the actors, that it is a suffocating, humiliating feeling. That this is how you take dignity away from people (Pałyga, 2012).

Pałyga's account also presents attempts made by the theatre directors to antagonise the actors, the theatre crew and the people involved in this particular production. 'And the theatre directors repeated, not just as suggestions, but direct statements, that we will benefit from this controversy, and the theatre will be harmed. That we left, and they had to stay there. And in the coming years they will not risk a performance like that.' However, this point of view is subverted by one of the actors, happy that 'Finally, something has changed here!'

In order to understand the particularly emotional tone of this account, it is worth noting the broader context. On the day of the premiere of *Nieskończona historia* in Zabrze, another play premiered in Bielsko-Biała's Polish Theatre, where Pałyga worked as a programme consultant. Ingmar Villqist's *Miłość w Königshütte* (Love in Königshütte), dealing with Silesia's history right after the Second World War, including the Soviet and Polish violence towards the local population, caused political protests and a request made by the right-wing PiS politicians that the theatre director, Robert Talarczyk, be removed from office (Klimaniec, 2012). It was a time when Pałyga had a particularly intense experience of the political and institutional consequences of his artistic work.

Censorship not always shy

While theatre directors' decisions to cancel a performance before the

premiere can be seen – at least in some cases – as acts of censorship, it sometimes happens that a reference to the ‘shyness’ of censorship mentioned by Hübner can serve as a defensive strategy, as described by Pałyga:

I remembered another conversation in another theatre in another part of Poland. A long conversation two days before the premiere, which started with ‘I won’t allow you to show this here’ and ended on ‘But you know we will simply talk about it and it the whole country will know’, and I felt so helpless that it was the only thing I could say, that it was so convulsive. But the director didn’t say ‘So what?’ He said: ‘OK, you’ve convinced me’ (Pałyga, 2021).

However, in Zabrze the theatre directors were surprisingly open and verbose about what happened and what they demanded from the artists. Information about the attempts at changing the shape of the performance was not obtained through investigative journalism and it does not come solely from accounts provided by one party, the creators of the performance. Director Jerzy Makselon himself admitted in a media statement that he proposed to organise a special show for the city authorities, including the president, Małgorzata Mańka-Szulik. Makselon did not try to hide behind a refusal to comment, quite frequent in media practice, nor did he blame the decision to modify the performance on the deficiencies of the creators in terms of their skills or, like it happened at Teatr Stary in Kraków under the direction of Jan Klata, when Oliver Frlić’s *Nie-Boska komedia. Szczątki* was cancelled.¹ As the creators of the performance noted in their open letter, ‘the theatre director decided that the show would be a ‘correctional rehearsal,’ not a proper performance, which meant the actors were to play for Ms

President for free.'

Asked by the media whether he does not see censorship in such a solution, Makselon replied:

It could also be understood as a result and expression of very good cooperation between the local government and the cultural institution it runs. [...] Ms President knows the city very well, she has an excellent social sense and can influence the public opinion. With just a few conversations she is able to give appropriate proportions to certain phenomena, to discourage or encourage certain groups (Mrozek, 2012).

Explaining the reasons behind the idea to organise a closed performance, Makselon presents something understood by his critics as a potential act of censorship in the light of completely different values and contexts. The priority here is no longer creative independence, the autonomy of the institution or respect for the rights of the artist (also her copyright, resulting from the work being accepted by the theatre) – but rather harmony within the local people, presented as a 'community'. The key assumption is based on the conservative views of the audience, presupposed by the theatre director: 'In Zabrze, you cannot assume that by causing outrage in one part of the audience you will be able to draw other people to the theatre. You can conduct dialogue with the audience only when the audience is actually there' (Mrozek, 2012). The voices of protest are identified with the whole of the audience.

Pałyga also points out how the responsibility for cancelling one of the shows was transferred to the director: 'You can thank Ms Ula for calling different

people in the whole country. You know we were supposed to play today, for just a few people. You can thank Ms Ula that the show did not take place!' (Pałyga, 2012).

The sarcastic rebuke present in the above comment, the complaint about revealing a 'family secret', the familial 'Ms Ula' – all those tell a lot about the functioning of institutional theatre and the position of the director within it. Kijak herself attempted to reflect on this position four years later in the doctoral dissertation, *Mit artysty a codzienność reżyserki* (The Myth of the Artist and the Everyday Life of the Director), defended at the Directing Faculty of the Theatre Academy in Warsaw. She wrote:

There are two basic positions of power in the Polish theatre system: the director of the performance and the theatre director. While the head of the theatre owes their power to the fact that they are an employer indicated by official sources (the law, competitions, contracts, rules), the power of the director of a performance is based on the fact that they are a creator – an artist. It is the 'myth of the artist' that constructs the director's sceptre. And because there is a widespread belief that theatre cannot exist without such directors, the whole community is involved in maintaining the myth of the 'artist-director' (Kijak, 2016, p. 21).

The opposition between the 'official' power of the theatre director and the 'unofficial' power of the artist-director, stemming from custom and myth, has to be viewed in a more complex light. While the power of the theatre director has the advantage of them being a legal 'employer' (in the case of a performance director without a permanent job contract they are in fact a

person ordering a certain work, as used in the contract), a number of steps taken by the directors of Nowy Teatr in Zabrze during the whole affair were based not on official sources, but rather on informal local connections or uncodified theatre customs; in some cases they were attempts to work against legal contracts.

Pałyga's and Kijak's accounts, as well as authorised comments by director Maskelon published by the media, show the importance of informal relations, rather than formal procedures, in maintaining the position of power in the case of a head of a public cultural institution. The key role played by informal relationships, combined with the 'weaker' side's use of anticipatory humility or familial tone in communication are all elements of clientelist relations. 'A certain amount of ceremony serves both sides, and the most important thing is the "familiality" of the whole system. [...] The patron (even when represented by their deputy) shows their kindness and generosity; the client benefits from it' – says Antoni Mączak, an expert on the history of clientelist systems (Mączak, 2000, p. 16).

Where does the patron's strength originate from? 'Above all (not only in the early modern age), the patron uses public funds, and has a share in the state' – says Mączak (Mączak, 2000, p. 15). It is not difficult to notice that this is the main advantage of the theatre director in relation to the director of the performance, as well as the state organisers in relation to the theatre director. The director determines the pay of the artist, and the president of the city or the voivodship board prepare a budget draft, containing the subsidy for the theatre (even though the budget itself is ultimately approved by the council).

The emotional relationships and 'informal competences' were also the reason which the president of Zabrze, Mańka-Szulik, gave for appointing

Makselon as theatre director:

‘It was us who offered this job to Jurek, but he didn’t take much convincing. We wanted someone who, apart from the formal requirements, understood Zabrze and could love it’ – she told the local press in 2007, appointing the new head of Nowy Teatr (Polok-Kin, 2007). Before that, Makselon had been the head of the Młodzieżowy Dom Kultury (Youth Cultural Centre) in Stalowa Wola and an official at the Zabrze city hall.

Whose is the theatre?

‘Whose is the theatre?’ – it is a question asked by researcher and curator Marta Keil. In her doctoral dissertation on institutional criticism in the field of Polish theatre and performance studies, she points out that during the last few decades of Polish debates on the subject, the question of the meaning of the word ‘public’ in the expression ‘public theatre’ usually referred to the legal form of the given institution. ‘It usually recurred in discussions on ways of funding theatre institutions and in subsequent attempts at censorship, either direct or economic’ – she notes (Keil, 2021).

The situation in Zabrze could serve as a good example of the homology between the fields of power and art as described by Pierre Bourdieu. It is a fact that specific factions or groups within the social elite are strongly linked to specific areas of theatre life, and specific stages (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 250).

Going further, one could also refer to Grzegorz Niziołek’s reflection on how the institution of Polish theatre, using mechanisms of ‘displacement, resistance and exclusion, built a model of a sublimated audience, perceiving itself as a representation of the community’ (Niziołek, 2016, p. 256).

Following Niziołek’s view, also in Zabrze the audience becomes identified

with 'the public', i.e. the participants of the local public sphere. Coming back to the question of ownership of the theatre posed by Keil: deconstructing subsequent conceptualisations of the public sphere, she points out how the privileged speak in the name of the 'public'. In Zabrze they were attorneys, entrepreneurs, the clergy, and finally the city's president. Keil writes that the public sphere 'was shaped [...] depending on power and property relations in a political struggle for dominance, finally won by the rich bourgeoisie' (Keil, 2021). In Zabrze it can be seen how the theatre becomes declaratively a matter of the whole 'city', even though in practice it is all up to a particularly understood elite able to determine what should not be shown on the city stage, referring to, among others, very broadly conceived 'religious feelings'.

Niziołek's and Keil's reflection should be complemented with the question of the whole network of informal local connections. The clientelist relationship between the local government and the theatre directors has already been mentioned, but the media accounts do not feature voices of, among others, the Catholic clergy. In spite of that, the press wrote about signatures gathered under petitions against the show in the local parishes, and the director, Ula Kijak, talked to the journalists about the deputy director of Nowy Teatr, Jerzy Stryj: 'The artistic director suggested that after the changes have been introduced, he would go to the parish priests gathering the signatures and explain everything' (Mrozek, 2012). Director Makselon also confirmed that local parishes were gathering signatures under a petition against the performance, but have not been able to reach the petition itself. The following years would bring many such petitions and reactions on the highest level, often issued by bishops.

In 2017, Grzegorz Niziołek pointed out 'a feeble presence of criticism

towards the Catholic church in Polish theatre', writing about a 'paralysis' of discourse critical towards the Catholic church in the Polish public debates and noting that the reasons for this lie not only in theatre itself, 'but also in mechanisms governing the public sphere' (Niziołek, 2018, p. 57).

In texts from the time of the controversy, the question of the local authorities was much more present than that of the pressure from the Catholic church – yet the church pressure was mentioned in the background. Furthermore, some secular parties to the conflict were connected to the institution of the church. The author of one of the emails sent to the theatre, attorney Woryna, wrote in his biographical note on the website of his law office that he for many years he had been 'involved in the family formation of the Light and Life Movement [a prominent Polish religious organisation]'. Mańka-Szulik, on the other hand, had initiated the Metropolitan Family Festival for which she was rewarded by the General Chapter of the Catholic Association of the Republic of Poland and the Silesian Juliusz Ligoń Award, given by the Catholic Association Civitas Christiana.² In 2012 she also received the honorary Badge of Merit for Polish Culture from the Minister of Culture, Bogdan Zdrojewski.

To sum up: a closed show of *Nieskończona historia* for the president of Zabrze never took place – as Makselon told the media and the creators of the performance noted in their open letter – because the politician herself did not want it. In the matter of *Nieskończona historia* president Mańka-Szulik initially wanted some explanation from the theatre, basing the request on, among others, the action in the local parishes, which director Makselon saw as, in his words for the press, 'an expression of the organiser's interest and care for the activities of the artistic institution (Mrozek, 2012). Later, however, the politician distanced herself from the whole matter. In their

enquiries about the changes in the performance, the media (not only local, but also nationwide) which wrote about the controversies surrounding *Nieskończona historia* focused only on the theatre directors, leaving the city authorities alone.

This confirms Hübner's opinion – in *Polityka i teatr* he writes about theatre directors as 'buffers' for censorship, taking upon themselves the tasks that would be 'shameful' for the authorities. As examples of such an attitude, Hübner mentions himself in 1968, when he was the director of Stary Teatr in Kraków and postponed the premiere of a performance based on Tadeusz Różewicz's text to two months after March, to avoid a potential ban in the most politically heated period, and Samuel Lane, the director of Britannia Theatre, 'who, in 1848, cancelled a performance on the French Revolution in accordance with the censors' suggestion, and received a letter from the Lord Chamberlain's office, thanking him for his responsibility, wisdom and right mindedness' (Hübner, 2009, p. 65). In the case of the director of Nowy Teatr in Zabrze there was no official 'reward', but neither were there any clear messages from the authorities regarding his practices. Apparently the way in which Jerzy Maskelon led the institution and cooperated with the artists was not in any way objectionable to the local government, as his tenure was prolonged for subsequent terms – on September 3, 2018, president Mańka-Szulik appointed him as the director of Nowy Teatr for another five years, until August 31, 2023. At the same time, in the situation surrounding *Nieskończona historia*, Mańka-Szulik worked to improve her image in the eyes of the artists. In a video interview for the local news service 24gliwice.pl, published on April 15, 2012, i.e. two weeks after the premiere, Kijak mentioned that the creators of the performance ultimately met with the president. The director summed the meeting up as follows: 'Ms President's stance is clear and it makes us very happy. It is as it should be. Ms President

does not intend to influence the shape of the performance' (Jezierski, 2012).

Censorship in the case of *Nieskończona historia* works in ways described by the theoreticians from the circle of new censorship theory – it is dispersed and involves a number of social actors, such as religious communities, local politicians, authorities and the media, as well as the cultural institution itself, which internalises the mechanism of censorship. At the same time, like in 'old', liberal theory of censorship, the censor's decision, even one ultimately retracted, had an authoritative, visible nature, which, additionally, was something external from the creators' perspective.

The unfinished story of systemic mechanisms

Ultimately, *Unfinished Story* was not removed from the repertoire or changed, but the attempt to censor it revealed a number of mechanisms characteristic for the operation of cultural institutions in Poland. The thesis of Joanna Derkaczew's text in *Gazeta Wyborcza* summing up, among other things, the Zabrze affair, seems premature: 'the decisions of the "offended" are not backed up by any system, but merely banal, individual inanity' (Derkaczew, 2012b). By all means, the affair had a systemic nature: it resulted, firstly, from a system of clientelist relations in public cultural institutions, and secondly, from a growing fear of offending 'religious feelings', which would, in the following years, lead to a flurry of attempts at limiting creative freedom, coming both from the bottom up and from the top down. Analysing the consequences of cancelling the premiere of Oliver Frlić's *Nie-Boska komedia. Szczątki* at the Stary Theatre in Kraków in 2013, Magdalena Rewerenda claimed that 'the offense of religious feelings has become a performative in itself, which changes a performance meant for a

small interested group into an ideological battlefield involving a large part of society' (Rewerenda, 2020, p. 192). It is striking that a legal regulation becomes a 'performative', effective inasmuch as – following Rewerenda – religious feelings are 'ambiguous and unverifiable', 'they are used as a weapon and escalate the emotional register of the discussion, thus excluding substantive arguments' (Rewerenda, 2020, p. 192); this is in agreement with Grzegorz Niziołek's thesis about the link between censorship and the circulation of social affects, mentioned at the beginning of this text. When one refers to earlier attempts at censorship in Polish art after 1989, both in actions of local governments and grassroots initiatives, one can see that on a local scale such attempts at using 'religious feelings' to 'change' censored works of art and 'broaden' the groups involved had happened earlier as well.

For the author of *Nieskończona historia*, Artur Pałyga, in April 2012 attempts at censorship were already – or still – a common phenomenon. 'Why am I writing about this? Because theatre is a public matter. Because such and similar things happen all over Poland in more or less clever or camouflaged ways. And they happen in silence' (Pałyga, 2012) – he wrote at the end of his text.

How common was the phenomenon Pałyga spoke about? In his book *Cenzura w sztuce polskiej po 1989. Artyści, sztuka, polityka* (Censorship in Polish art after 1989. Artists, art, politics), in the chapter 'Spis wypadków cenzorskich 1989-2012' ('A list of censorship incidents 1989-2012'), Jakub Dąbrowski lists a number of documented attempts at censorship from the field of theatre, in part referring to a similar list presented earlier by Jarosław Minałto in *Notatnik Teatralny* (Minałto, 2006). They were, among others:

- an attempt to cancel the subsidy for the Malta Festival, because

the French theatre Turbo Cacahuete walked around Poznań with a coffin on June 30, 1994;

- an attempt made in the city council of Tarnów to remove the performance of Aleksander Fredro's *Revenge*, directed by Stanisław Świder, the director of the theatre, due to the strap covering Papkin's buttocks being too narrow (April 1999);

- an attempt to remove Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* from the repertoire of Warsaw's Teatr Rozmaitości made by two Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność councilwomen - Joanna Fabisiak and Julia Pitera (April 1999);

- attempt at economic censorship at the Musical Theatre in Gdynia made by the members of the city council family committee, concerning the performance of *Hair* (November 1999);

- cancelling the International Theatre Festival Zdarzenie in Kłodzko due to the plans of performing the performance *Judasze* (Judases) at the main square on the day of a city council session;

- request made by councilman Krzysztof Mączkowski to remove the directors of the Polish Theatre in Poznań, Paweł Wodziński and Paweł Łysak, after a guest performance of *Shopping and Fucking* from Warsaw's Teatr Rozmaitości (April 2001);

- removing *Moralność Pani Dulskiej* (The Morality of Mrs Dulski) from the repertoire by the new director of Teatr Węgierka in Białystok, because 'it encourages premarital sex';

- termination of cooperation with the Warsaw club M25 by the mayor of the Praga Południe district, Tomasz Koziński (PiS - the right-wing Law and Justice party) after a performance of *Flesh Forms 013* by Suka Off Theatre, which was removed from the programme of the 14th Łódź Theatre Meetings, with no reason given

(November 2005); half a year later the local government in Katowice lowered the subsidy for the A PART festival for the performance of Suka Off (June 2006);

- a change in the conditions of the competition while it was already on in order to make it impossible to give Wojtek Klemm another term as the director of Teatr Norwida in Zielona Góra (Dąbrowski, 2014, pp. 690-737).

This list could confirm Jakub Dąbrowski's claim that during the aforementioned period (1989-2010, and definitely in the following years as well) the local environment played a key role in shaping artistic freedom. Dąbrowski concludes:

It became a tradition that most interventions were procured by local government politicians, who, especially after the local government reform in 1998 gained real influence over the operation of cultural institutions and had better insight into the repertoire of cinemas, theatres, galleries and museums, and their activity as censors drew the attention of the local voters (Dąbrowski, 2014, pp. 214-215).

However, later years were to show that censorship does not necessarily prefer silence. Peculiarly understood 'social sense' and 'knowledge of the city' - arguments given in 2012 by Makselon for the idea of consulting the shape of Kijak's performance with the Zabrze local government - were to return quickly, and from the lips of local politicians themselves, for example in the case of the cancellation of Rodrigo García's *Golgotha Picnic*, finally not shown at the 2014 Malta Festival. In a highly publicised statement from

June 17, 2014, president Ryszard Grobelny said that even though he cannot, and does not want to, censor the festival, he still hopes the organisers will show 'responsibility' for the city and block the performance³.

Combined with the statements from the Poznań police and bishops, Grobelny's appeal proved effective – on June 20, 2014, the director of the Malta Festival, Michał Merczyński, cancelled the performance of *Golgotha Picnic*.

The authorities of Lower Silesia showed that acceptance of such practices remained undiminished among local politicians in 2015, when they tried to cancel the premiere of *Śmierć i Dziewczyna* (Death and the Maiden), directed by Ewelina Marciniak, at Teatr Polski in Wrocław. The voivodship council members from Platforma Obywatelska spoke even before the freshly appointed Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliński from PiS, whose ministry requested the cancellation of the rehearsals in a letter from November 20, 2015. 'The Polish Theatre is supposed to fulfil its public mission, not show pornography. This has gone too far. Together, we have to think how to protest against this performance and remove him [sic!] from the repertoire' – said Janusz Marszałek, head of the committee of culture at the regional council, member of Platforma Obywatelska (Kozioł, Piekarska 2015). 'We cannot agree that such performances be shown for public money. There are limits one cannot ignore' – said Michał Bobowiec, president of the PO faction in the Lower Silesian regional council. Alongside these politicians from Platforma Obywatelska and PiS councilmen Roman Kowalczyk and Piotr Sosiński, who campaigned, among other things, for lowering the subsidy for the theatre, another voice against Krzysztof Mieszkowski and Ewelina Marciniak came from Patryk Wild from the Bezpartyjni Samorządowcy faction, expecting the voivodship marshal to take an 'immediate personal

decision', i.e. remove Mieszkowski from the post of the director of the Polish Theatre (Protocol of the 16th session of the Fifth Term Lower Silesia Regional Council 2015).

Later attempts at limiting creative freedom, already at the central level – such as the actions against Oliver Frlić's *Our Violence and Your Violence* (2016) or *Klątwa* (The Curse, 2017), and the resulting cancellation of the subsidy for the Malta Festival because of Frlić acting as a curator – beg the question to what extent Hübner's thesis on the shyness of censorship remains accurate in a reality where one of the basic tools of politics is based on 'culture wars'. This means, among others, fighting against art which, according to politicians or influential figures, ostentatiously attacks values.

Adam Bodnar, the Polish Ombudsman in the years 2015-2021 described this way as follows, on the example of the 'Rainbow Virgin Mary' and the activist Elżbieta Podleśna:

Now political effect is achieved through coordinated actions of the police, prosecutors and public media. This consists of an accusation, use of direct coercive measures, such as an arrest, and then – an interrogation. All this allows to represent a given person as an enemy, a danger – both in the public media and in media 'friendly' towards the authorities. It also has another purpose, to show the politician who decides about such methods as a good sheriff. This or that minister can say how indignant they are. At the same time, they are aware that the charges won't be upheld in the court. But further interest from the media does not matter – nobody follows the case anyway. Except for institutions such as the Ombudsman's Office, NGOs or specialised journalists (Mrozek,

2020).

In the case of Zabrze and Ula Kijak there were no official investigations or police interventions. There was no campaign in right-wing media, either. The attempt at censorship was not meant to be a political spectacle, but rather an example of political practice that is the business as usual in the theatre, remaining within the 'stage family', normalised and conducted according to custom.

Translated by Paweł Schreiber

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Footnotes

1. Even though in cancelling the premiere of *Nie-Boska komedia. Szczątki* Stary Teatr referred, in its statement from November 26, 2013, to 'care for the actors' safety' and 'good

working conditions', in an interview given several weeks later, theatre director Jan Kłata mentioned the conception of the performance as a second reason: 'Another thing is that Frljić's strategy which worked great in the Balkan context, unfortunately did not work in the Polish context. It was visible in the fragments of the performance I saw during the rehearsals. I have a basis for my decision, and the creators of the performance have the right to feel bitter about it' (cf. Pawłowski, 2014).

2. <http://mszulik.pl/o-sobie> [accessed: 15.02.2021].

3. Grobelny wrote: 'As the President I do not possess the legal instruments which would administratively force any organiser of an artistic event, or protest, to cancel it. And even though I am deeply convinced that the artists' right to free speech and freedom of assembly are great achievements of the Polish democracy, there is - in my opinion - a value that stands above them. It is the life and security of the inhabitants and their goods. That is why I think that the organisers of artistic and social events have a duty, not only legal, but also moral, to predict the results of their actions. That is why I hope that both the leaders of the Malta Foundation and the organisers of the potential protests will prove responsible and consider these dangers. At the same time I want to emphasise that the local government and its organs are not entitled to review artistic events or apply preventive censorship' (Grobelny, 2014).

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HERSTORY

‘They were devouring her with their eyes’

Some remarks on the Warsaw experience in the life and work of Helena Modrzejewska

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Abstract

This article concerns the Warsaw period in the life and work of Helena Modrzejewska. The years 1869-1876 are the least researched and described period in the entire career of this actress. The article refers to Zbigniew Raszewski's essay 'Modrzejewska-warszawianka' ('Modrzejewska the Varsavian'), debating the significance of the experience of the Krakow theatre in Modrzejewska's work. In the light of a factual analysis, he presents the actress as a Drama Artist of Warsaw theatres, posing questions about the evaluation of the experience of working on the Warsaw stage in the context of her career. The methodological framework of the article is an attempt to see the principles of realistic idealism, i.e. the model style of the art of acting in the nineteenth century, not only in the actress's stage performance, but also in social life and the iconographic material based on Jan Mieczkowski's photographs.

Keywords: Helena Modrzejewska; 19th century; Krakow theatre; Warsaw theatres; realistic idealism; acting style; nineteenth-century theatre photography; Jan Mieczkowski; code of conduct

Whenever Helena Modrzejewska is mentioned, most people involved in theatre history reach, as by reflex, for Zbigniew Raszewski's *Weryfikacje czarodzieja i inne szkice o teatrze* from 1998 and his text 'Modrzejewska-warszawianka' ('Modrzejewska the Varsavian'). It first appeared in

Pamiętnik Teatralny in 1996 (pp. 133-143), four years after Raszewski's death, as one of his last texts.

This small addition to Modrzejewska's biography, devoted to her Warsaw flats, was sent to Anna Krajewska-Wieczorek, living in Los Angeles, in two parts, on April 2 and May 1, 1992. It stemmed from Krajewska-Wieczorek's questions concerning Modrzejewska's stay in Warsaw. In his letter from April 2, a slightly embarrassed Raszewski wrote:

Dear Anna,

A terrible thing happened. My whole reply to your questions about Modrzejewska's flats [...] has proven to be wrong. She never lived at Senatorska Str. It was the film¹ that put her there, and I, a miserable parochial schoolmaster was deceived by it. [...] In order to atone, at least in part, I have written an article for you. Especially for you. [...]

In the letter accompanying the second part, containing additional remarks and further clarification, sent four weeks later, on May 1, 1992, Zbigniew Raszewski reacted to the proposal of a film about Warsaw in the years 1869-1876, i.e. the years when Modrzejewska lived there permanently. The film was to feature Raszewski as a guide to Warsaw from that period.

In the summer I'll try to look for photos of the four streets in

question from before 1944. Maybe I could even find some from the 19th century. The station, the town hall, the theatre, the Saxon Garden, the Alleys. Perhaps I will write a short introduction. Can the text in the street be improvised? Will it be audible in the traffic?

During her stay in Warsaw, Anna Krajewska-Wieczorek recorded Zbigniew Raszewski's narrative, but ultimately the film never came into being (Raszewski, 1996, p. 133).

The above was a fragment of the introduction by the editors of *Pamiętnik Teatralny*. It is uncertain if the recorded material still exists, but we know that this story gave rise to a text which begins as follows:

The title of this sketch sounds provocative. Modrzejewska was a Cracovian, body and soul. Her art can also be said to have been born in Krakow. No reasonable person would deny it.

However, the problem of Modrzejewska in Warsaw prevails. The city received so much from her that it could not possibly deny her, even if it wanted to. She also owed much to Warsaw; it was the city that gave her acting career a countrywide renown (Raszewski, 1996, p. 134).

In the following paragraphs Raszewski expresses his surprise concerning the lack of any books on Modrzejewska's links to Warsaw and the course of her travels. We still lack such publications², but in November 2020 students from

the Theatre Studies Student Research Group at the Theatre Academy in Warsaw organised the conference 'Fenomen. Helena Modrzejewska' ('Helena Modrzejewska. The Phenomenon'), bringing back the issue of Modrzejewska in Warsaw.

Indeed, there is a problem with recognising the Warsaw theatre experience in the work of 'a Krakow resident, body and soul'. Modrzejewska is normally discussed through the focus of Krakow, and then her spectacular career in the United States. Her acting craft, as noted by Raszewski, is usually associated with her stage experience in Krakow. Narodowy Stary Teatr im. Heleny Modrzejewskiej (the Helena Modrzejewska National Stary Theatre) in Krakow sealed her links to the theatre of her home city. In this article I will not be able to exhaust a subject as broad as the Warsaw period of Modrzejewska's life, but I would like to share a few remarks which could prove useful for future research. I also intend to be a bit 'unreasonable'.

Dates and numbers

I decided to start by looking at dates and numbers³. Modrzejewska's stage career took place between two dates: July 1961, her debut in Bochnia, and March 1907, when she finished her last, 26th American tour. These two dates, the beginning and the end, lacking specific days, are very mysterious. We know little about the debut of 21-year-old Helena Misel, who took the stage name Modrzejewska in order to appear on a provisional stage in a small Galician town. We do not know the place and exact date of the last performance by Helena Modjeska, 77 years old at that time, regarded as a great star on two continents. There are two alternative dates we could accept for the beginning and ending of her career: October 7, 1865 was the date of her debut in Krakow, on the stage of what is now Narodowy Stary

Teatr im. Heleny Modrzejewskiej (the Helena Modrzejewska National Stary Theatre) in Krakow, and May 2, 1905 is when the famous *testimonial* took place at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, a homage and farewell to the great American actress applauded by an audience of four thousand. Both events are very well documented, and it is easy to find their traces in reviews, memoirs, posters and photographs. I chose the first version, looking at the actress' career between 1861 and 1907. In all these years she had only a year's break, between June 1876, when she left Warsaw, and August 1877, when she performed for the first time in front of an American audience.

These forty-five years of her stage career can be divided into several shorter periods. The first four years (1861-1865) of work on provincial stages in Galicia, including a short period of working as a vaudeville artist at Teatr Skarbkowski (the Skarbek theatre) in Lviv, from November 1862 to February 1863, the following four years (1865-1869) of acting in Krakow, seven years in the state Teatry Warszawskie (Warsaw Theatres; 1869-1876), and thirty years (1877-1907) of work on American stages and in numerous guest performances in Europe, including cities in Polish lands. This brief summary shows that most of Modrzejewska's professional life, comprising the experience of provincial stages in Galicia, tours of America and guest performances, took the shape of a life on the road – a journey spanning thirty-four years. The seven years spent in Warsaw can seem a brief stage in comparison. Before I get to the Warsaw period, it is worth to focus on 1865 and ask how Teatry Warszawskie were perceived at that time. What could the Warsaw stage been for Modrzejewska from the perspective of Krakow? The actress came to Krakow from Czerniowce probably already in July 1865, with a specific purpose. A new age was beginning in Teatr Krakowski (the Krakow Theatre). The wealthy citizens gathered suitable funds devoted to

help the ailing theatre and to give it a new dimension, a vital social significance. At the head of this enterprise stood count Adam Skorupka, who was not a professional, but was well known for his love of theatre. It was decided that a practitioner and expert on theatre should be brought from Warsaw – it was Jan Tomasz Seweryn Jasiński. Then 61 years old, Jasiński had been in well-deserved retirement since 1862. He was greatly respected in the theatre world. Associated with Teatry Warszawskie since 1824, he went through all possible posts – an actor, playwright, translator, director, head of a theatre, a teacher at the School of Drama. He educated almost five hundred students, of whom over a hundred performed in Warsaw, and about seventy in provincial theatres. He shaped the tradition of the Warsaw stage for several decades, respected the most as a director and teacher. Despite his retirement, he still gave advice to actors and directors, close to his beloved stage (Cf. Wanicka, 2007, pp. 132-137). Building his new ensemble at Teatr Krakowski, Jasiński flawlessly recognised Modrzejewska's talent and, furthermore, gave her the most important *emploi* of the main protagonist and a suitable range of roles. Modrzejewska, participating in the inauguration of the theatre under new leadership, and the viewers, sitting in the audience of Teatr Krakowski on Sunday, October 1, 1865, could all read the poster, carrying the number 1, and informing that 'The opening of the spectacles' would take place under the 'stage direction' of Jan Seweryn Jasiński, 'A. D. [Dramatic Artist], former Director of Teatry Warszawskie'.

A similar abbreviation was used with the name of the director Władysław Świeszewski 'A.D.T.W. [Dramatic Artist of Teatry Warszawskie]'.

Emphasising that the artists represent the Warsaw stages added prestige to the event and warranted a new beginning for Teatr Krakowski.

In 1865 Modrzejewska knew that Teatry Warszawskie were the most

important place and goal for an actress. She achieved it three years later, on October 4, 1868, starting a series of guest performances, lasting until November 28⁴. On September 13, 1869, she signed a contract as a Dramatic Artist of Teatry Warszawskie and moved to the capital of the Kingdom. During my lecture on Modrzejewska's life and work I love the moment when I show two photographs, one representing Teatr Krakowski at Szczepański square, and the other – Teatr Wielki (the Grand Theatre) building at Warsaw's Theatre Square.

I wonder what the actress could have felt, standing for the first time before the imposing building on a huge square, which back then was the centre of urban life in Warsaw. The challenge lay not only in the difference in terms of size, so visible in the photographs, but also the significance and tradition, never questioned by the people living in the second half of the nineteenth century. Here, I would like to refer to Stanisław Koźmian's words from 1875, valuable on many levels. Koźmian started his work in the theatre without any practical experience. He came there from the world of politics and took his post of the artistic director over from Jasiński, who, after completing his work in Krakow, returned home, to Warsaw, in January 1866. Koźmian's independent directorship began only in 1871, gradually shaping a new age in the history of Teatr Krakowski. Koźmian valued the strength of the tradition of the Warsaw stage, which he saw in the continuation of directorial thought and the structure of the work on performances, enabling the development of the actors' talents. This tradition continued since the times of

Bogusławski, Osiński, to Jasiński, a good theatre director and informer, Królikowski, Rychter, and Chęciński, who directed performances. This tradition has served, at least until now, to look

conscientiously, seriously, sometimes even pedantically, at the duties of the actor and the theatre. Hence the great exactness not only in learning, but also studying roles; a great number of rehearsals, usually good and very thorough (Koźmian, 1959, p. 308).

The growing legend of Koźmian's age (he led the theatre until 1885) overshadowed the beginnings of Teatr Krakowski in 1865. However, when researching Modrzejewska's life and work, it is necessary to remember that her work in Krakow happened during the first seasons of a nascent theatre, which would become associated with the legendary director and the 'Krakow school' (also called the 'Koźmian school') only later, in the 1880s and 1890s. In 1903, Karol Chłapowski wrote a letter to Feliks Koneczny, pointing out the inaccuracies in the latter's biographical article on Modrzejewska. Chłapowski emphasised that Jasiński was 'Ms Modrzejewska's first and only teacher and supervisor in her dramatic profession,' and added:

It is peculiar that in many mentions of the great age of Teatr Krakowski in the years 1865-1869, when this stage shone with such exceptional brilliance, one so rarely encounters the name of the Director J. S. Jasiński. It is true that good fortune gave the theatre many young talents with a great zeal for work, it is true that count Skorupka as the organiser, and Mr Koźmian as an artistic instructor (specialising in modern plays) have contributed greatly to the development of the organisation – but the most important credit goes to Jasiński, who set the whole machine in motion and put it on the right track – gave suitable ranges to particular actors – and, in a manner of speaking, set the first foundation for the tradition of

Krakow theatre (Chłapowski, 2015, p. 481).

After Jasiński returned home, the director and the actress wrote letters to each other, and when Modrzejewska arrived in Warsaw, their friendship continued, later also in epistolary form. In her letters from America Modrzejewska addressed her former director as 'Dear Father' or 'Daddy' (Cf. Jędrzejczyk 2020). Being Jasiński's student put Modrzejewska, who never finished the School of Drama in Warsaw (unlike many of her peers in the Warsaw theatre), among his famous pupils – Dramatic Artists of Teatry Warszawskie.

Coming back to the numbers – Modrzejewska became a Dramatic Artist of Teatry Warszawskie, as has already been stated, on September 13, 1869, and worked in the drama and comedy ensemble until June 21, 1876, when she gave her farewell performance on the stage of Teatr Letni (the Summer Theatre)⁵. How can the seven-year-long Warsaw period be judged in the context of her entire career? Thanks to Józef Szczublewski, who summed up all of her performances, we can state the following. 'The tally of her performances shows that she worked the most in Warsaw, giving almost 740 performances. Following these: New York (with Brooklyn) 520, Krakow 390 [...]' (Szczublewski, 1975, p. 668). 740 performances in Warsaw is over two hundred more than the performances in 'Modrzejewska's cities' of New York and Krakow. How should we understand these numbers, how should we read them? The large number of performances at Teatry Warszawskie are evidence of the particularities of this stage and its traditions. Referring to Koźmian's words, quoted above, the Warsaw stage gave the artists a long time for work on the role, followed by numerous opportunities to perform the same role. This principle is easy to grasp when comparing Modrzejewska's first seasons at Teatr Krakowski and Teatry Warszawskie. In Krakow, from

October 1865 until July 1866 (i.e. including guest performances of Teatr Krakowski in Poznań), she had to prepare forty-two new roles, and in her first season in Warsaw, from September 1869 to March 1870 only... four. Additionally, she repeated five roles, including Shakespeare's Juliet, which she had already tried in Poznań (in a different translation). Working on this role for the Warsaw stage, she had time to work on it, and an opportunity to put it in her repertoire for much longer. It has to be noted that the audiences watched Modrzejewska's Juliet in Poznań (in guest performances) only twice, while in Warsaw, only in the first season, 1869/70, she gave nineteen performances. Another good example of such a comparison is Ophelia, Modrzejewska's legendary role from Teatr Krakowski. It has to be remembered, however, that as an actress in Krakow, she performed it... three times in the 1867/1868 season, including an extra time during the guest appearances in Poznań. At Teatry Warszawskie, on the other hand, she performed it twelve times during the premiere season of 1870/1871, and thirty-five times altogether until 1876. It was on the Warsaw stage that her famous roles developed, refined in every detail and then tested in numerous performances, often entering the actress' stable repertoire, repeated during her American tours and numerous guest appearances in Europe. Conscientious work on the role had been a tradition of the Warsaw stage long before she came there and long after she left. It was a foundation for the great acting talents of the age of the great stars, such as Agnieszka Truskolaska, Józefa Ledóchowska, Leontyna Halpertowa, Ignacy Werowski, Wojciech Piasecki, Alojzy Żółkowski, Jan Królikowski, Wiktoryna Bakałowiczowa and many others. Since 1869 – also Helena Modrzejewska, and numerous actors and actresses after her.

‘The artist should regard nature from the beautiful side’

Researching the ensemble of Teatry Warszawskie under the leadership of Sergei Mukhanov (1868-1880) I came to the following conclusions about the characteristics of the style of the acting craft, including Modrzejewska’s work. I wrote that the style

Could not be credited to the head of Teatry Warszawskie or the newly arrived actors of the Krakow and Lviv theatres, but stemmed from a long tradition and respected standards. The greatness of Modrzejewska’s acting lay not in her innovation, but in a perfect realisation of requirements. The presence of a continuing line in Modrzejewska’s art is emphasised by the words of Leontyna Halpertowa who was reported to have said ‘She has started where I have finished’ after Modrzejewska’s performance in the role of Adrienne [in 1868] (Wanicka, 2011, p. 203).

Modrzejewska must have been very familiar with *Teoria sztuki dramatycznej* (The Theory of Dramatic Art) by her teacher and ‘father’ Jan Jasiński, a textbook finished in 1865, stemming from years of his teaching and directing experience. Nineteenth-century acting was based on the principle of realistic idealism, explained and described recently by Dariusz Kosiński (Cf. Kosiński, 2003; Kosiński, 2005). Realistic idealism was expressed in the following fragment from *Teoria sztuki dramatycznej*:

The whole world is the actor’s school, a world in which all passions,

all states, all characters are in motion; however, because most of the patterns lack nobility and refinement, the artist should enlighten their choices with science. It is not enough to wear a costume according to nature. One must, additionally, learn to know what is really beautiful, and be able to add suitable colour to the selected patterns, show people with their faults, passions and characters in a light required by art (Jasiński, 2007, p. 207).

These words can be summed up in a specific rule:

The artist should regard nature from the beautiful side, and avoid, even at the expense of the truth, everything that could give rise to disgust instead of pleasure. Nature has to contain everything, because everything is needed and necessary, but on the stage one should present only that which could please and engage (Jasiński, 2007, p. 197).

Thinking about the life and work of Helena Modrzejewska, I have the impression that, as a model disciple of Jasiński, she perfectly realised this rule both in her private life and on the stage. The seven years of her stay in Warsaw can be regarded as a time of a masterful performance of the rules of realistic idealism. I think that the phenomenon of Modrzejewska's popularity did not consist in her exceptionality, but, on the contrary, in the fact that she was typical, that she followed late nineteenth-century rules of personal life and theatre art, and – it has to be emphasised – she did so brilliantly. I am aware that such a statement needs to be backed by reliable arguments and examples. At this point I would only like to present several leads which could be developed in the future.

Let us return to the scene when the actress stood for the first time in the Theatre Square in Warsaw, looking at the Teatr Wielki building, designed by Antonio Corrazzi. An important detail should be added here: she was probably accompanied by her husband, Karol Chłapowski. They probably looked at the theatre building on September 16, 1868, on the day of their arrival in Warsaw. The flat they rented was nearby, according to Raszewski, at Bielańska street or 'at the corner of Bielańska and Senatorska streets, or at the corner of Bielańska and the Theatre Square' (Raszewski, 1998, p. 75). Their wedding had taken place four days earlier, on September 12, at the church of St. Anne in Krakow. A marriage act had been issued for Karol Chłapowski – bachelor, and Helena Jadwiga Misel-Modrzejewska – widow (Cf. Lesiak-Przybysz, Warzecha, 2009, p. 40). 'Killing' Gustaw Zimajer with whom she had a son, Rudolf, out of wedlock, was the first consciously shaped change in her biography, according to the principle of 'avoiding, even at the expense of the truth, everything that could incite disgust instead of pleasure'. At that time Zimajer took care of her seven-year-old son, kidnapped against the actress' will and returned only several years later, for a considerable sum of money.

In Warsaw Modrzejewska began a new life as a lawful spouse of an aristocrat, descended from the respected Chłapowski family. Today it is difficult to imagine the social advancement which accompanied a marriage with someone from the higher spheres of society in the nineteenth century. Franciszek Siedlecki, the author of the first monograph devoted to Modrzejewska, published in 1927, wrote: 'Gaining social status through her marriage to the descendant of an old aristocratic family facilitated her later career and helped to realise her artistic plans' (Siedlecki, 1927, p. 47). The spectacular lifestyle she adopted in Warsaw, made possible by her high wages in a state theatre, as well as yearly charity events and guest

performances during the holiday season, suited the lifestyle of the higher spheres of society. It was evidenced by her subsequent flats, which she rented and decorated, a 'big and expensive' one at Miodowa street, then at Trębacka, Królewska, and finally Graniczna; the silver tray on which a valet brought the letter from her brother, which, as Raszewski noted, she described to him 'not without pleasure' (Raszewski, 1998, p. 84); a private carriage and numerous balls which she attended; an open salon and the famous Tuesdays at Modrzejewska's, or the elegance of her outfits, which became her trademark sign. It has to be remembered that Modrzejewska represented the most prestigious *emploi* of the main protagonist and love interest, acting mostly in tragedies, dramas and melodramas on the stage of Teatr Wielki, devoted primarily to opera and ballet performances. It was the most representative hall in the city, with elegant boxes filled with representatives of the aristocracy and rich financiers. The theatre auditoria of the nineteenth century were an excellent reflection of the social structure – the poorest, including workers and students, were crowded in the stalls the ground floor was a space for the intelligentsia, but everybody was looking at the boxes – the people sitting there dictated the rules of fashion and manners. Modrzejewska was one of them, she was a member of the social elite. The immensely popular *Kodeks światowy*, describing the rules of social life in the second half of the nineteenth century, based on the work of Louise Alquié de Rieuepeyroux, which the actress might have read in the original version (it was published in Polish only in 1881) said that: 'Life consists of a thousand small facts which take on the most varied guises, which cannot be described in detail. Once one knows the world, one should use it to become liked, to assume a position of honour. That should be everybody's aim' (Lubowski, 1881, pp. 163-164).

Modrzejewska found herself in a city that particularly valued the form,

external beauty, elegant attire, sophisticated movement and charm. The German reporter Fritz Wernick described the Poles he met during his stay in Warsaw as follows:

In Warsaw you are taken in from the very beginning by numerous pleasant external traits. Poles are almost without exception well-mannered, they are famous for their politeness and civility, they are brilliant, hospitable and obliging. The ladies' beauty is not calm, classical or monumental. They are exceptionally attractive due to the harmonious build of their bodies, their lively dark eyes, the delicate colour of their skin as well as innate charm and elegant movement. The men of the Warsaw social elite are characterised by their genuine handsomeness, undiminished by the paleness of their faces and the expression of ennui, contradicted by their lively, shining eyes. Warsaw dresses elegantly, richly and tastefully. Apart from the refined taste, impeccable style and excellent fabrics, the clothes also exhibit a certain finesse, which suits the graceful silhouettes of the people (Wernick, 1970, p. 331).

Most of the features mentioned by Wernick, such as the harmonious build of the body, grace and sophistication of movement were emphasised in almost every recollection of Modrzejewska and in her reviews. It is worth noting that Anna Leo, writing from the perspective of 1929, was well aware that the past ideal would probably not stand the test of time.

I ask myself whether this artist, so much loved during her lifetime [...] would enjoy an equally enthusiastic acclaim now. Her classical, regal beauty, her voice, full of pathos, her harmonious gesture,

everything that dazzled and charmed us – would for you perhaps be something insincere, rigid, artificial (Leo, 1929, pp. 220-221).

Remembering Modrzejewska's majestic appearance, contrasting with the style fashionable in the 1920s, she also added: 'Not to mention the polished metal of the voice, the dignity of the line and movement!' (Leo, 1929, p. 221).

I saw her at my parents' home, and in our private salon she seemed to me equally distant, miraculous, regal and inaccessible, as when she played the unfortunate Scottish queen. Each movement she made, each pose, was so utterly beautiful that it was difficult to believe they were spontaneous. She laughed after somebody's witty remark, and as soon as her low, strangely melodious laughter had sounded, she said: 'I laughed like the Princess Georges, didn't I?' All those around [...] devoured her with their eyes. Everybody in Warsaw was in love with her: the young, the old, the artists and the industrialists, the pensioners and the pupils! (Leo, 1929, p. 221)

Modrzejewska realised the same ideal of 'utter beauty' – in accordance with Jasiński's *Theory of the Dramatic Art* – on the stage. Her acting style emphasised, in accordance with the manners of the time, the need to be liked. Adam Grzymała-Siedlecki noted an interesting remark made by Karol Estreicher: 'She loves getting on the stage when she is certain the audience will fall in love with her' (Grzymała-Siedlecki, 1957, p. 83). When searching for the secret of Modrzejewska's acting, Franciszek Siedlecki astutely began by quoting her own comment, showing her attitude towards the characters she represented.

‘The leading note, which dominated all else when apprehending all the characters I create, has been the love of humanity, and a continuing effort to bring to light the better sides of the characters, those which could redeem their faults and weaknesses.’

In this sentence, written at the end of her life, Modrzejewska revealed the whole secret of her acting art. She had a spirit glowing with love, and out of this love created artistic form. Some called it her innate charm, others – charm emanating from her person; two generations listened attentively to her voice, looking at the harmonious movements of her figure and her controlled gestures, and left the temple of art better, nobler, as if reborn by means of her art (Siedlecki, 1927, p. 117).

It has to be emphasised that although Modrzejewska belonged to an age which valued the word and the sound of the human voice, the strength of her talent lay in her ability to work with the visual form. The author of *Świat aktorski moich czasów* wrote: ‘As a theatre artist she felt the viewers see more than they hear, and the true inclination of her talent preferred to look for visual communication with the spectators’ (Grzymała-Siedlecki, 1957, p. 87). This sense in Modrzejewska’s acting can be traced throughout her career, but I think the Warsaw period was particularly important. It was here, on the stage of Teatr Wielki, with mostly aristocrats in the audience, she regularly encountered viewers sensitive to the beauty of external form. In Warsaw she also met an artist capable of recording in photography the beauty and charm of the actress ‘devoured with eyes’ in life and on the stage.

It was Jan Mieczkowski, working in Warsaw in the second half of the nineteenth century. Between 1861 and 1880 he owned the biggest and most

fashionable photographic studio in the city, situated at 5, Miodowa street (the palace of the bishop of Krakow).

It was the first studio in Warsaw with a well-equipped atelier and waiting rooms, and an iron photographic gazebo. Mieczkowski also had a great shop with chemicals and photographic equipment, a training centre for photographers, and a framing and bookbinding workshop (Garztecki, 1975, p. 728).

The scale of the enterprise can also be seen in the number of employees, about twenty. The photographer's fame went beyond Warsaw, 'he sent his works to many international exhibitions in cities such as London (1862, 1867), Moscow, Vienna (1873) and Philadelphia (1876), as well as Paris, at least three times (1864, 1867, 1870)' (Grąbczewska, 2009, p. 82). It is no wonder that this became Modrzejewska's favourite photographic studio. Mieczkowski was, above all, a respected portrait photographer. In 1868 he introduced photo negative retouching, as the first one in Poland. In accordance with the rules of the time, through careful posing and excellent use of lighting, he could bring to the fore the beauty of the model. All his photos of Modrzejewska in her famous Warsaw roles, such as Adrienne Lecouvreur, Delilah, Donna Diana, Frou-frou, Ophelia or Cleopatra⁶ can serve as material evidence accompanying the recollections and reviews, emphasising the grace and beauty of each pose, the extraordinary ability to create harmonious images, remaining in the audience's memories.

This talent was discussed many times by, among others, Wacław Szymanowski, for example in his review of *Hamlet*, recollecting the scene of Ophelia's madness: - 'all of this executed with such incomparable charm,

that when Ophelia exited the stage, anyone would want to etch her image in their memory and keep it there forever' (Szymanowski, 1871, after: Got, Szczublewski, 1958, p. 161). This is how he described the scene of fainting in *Adrienne Lecouvreur* – 'When she faints, she seems to float onto the ground, and her figure forms such beautiful shapes that a talented painter facing this model would find nothing he could correct.' (Szymanowski, 1868, after: Got, Szczublewski, 1958, p. 171). Stanisław Koźmian's review of Modrzejewska's guest performance at Teatr Krakowski, where he quoted a letter sent to the editors of *Czas*, is a good summary of the impression made by the actress. An anonymous reader wrote: 'I had great pleasure looking at Modrzejewska, I am delighted by her beauty almost as much as by her acting. She is a charming phenomenon and an actress who became an artist in good taste' (Koźmian, 1879, after: Got, Szczublewski, 1958, p. 171).

Further research on the Warsaw period in Modrzejewska's life and work should include a thorough analysis of Mieczkowski's photographs⁷. Here I will only present one of Modrzejewska's roles, showing the interpretative possibilities opened by the juxtaposition of reviews and visual material. I was interested in the figure of Yolanda, which was quickly forgotten – the actress never returned to the character. Only Mieczkowski's photos remained, and they can still charm with the way they grasped the actress' harmonious movements, her facial expressions, poses and a characteristic charm, emphasised by the soft light, the trademark sign of the great portraitist. Yolanda is the main character in Henrik Hertz's five-act play *King René's Daughter*, performed in Teatr Letni on June 10, 1873, and repeated, which was rare, only two times – on June 10 and 13. The performance was criticised because of the showcase aspect of the role, made for a soloist, barring the development of the less significant roles by the other actors, as well as an improbable plot, lack of action, lengthiness and boredom. The

protagonist here is a royal daughter unaware of her own blindness. The play has two crucial points: one, in which Yolanda realises she is blind, and the other when – because of a nascent feeling of love – she is healed.

Władysław Bogusławski wrote in *Kurier Warszawski* (1873 no. 120)

Ms. Modrzejewska had to carry the burden of the inconsistency of the idea and its clumsy execution. It took brilliant work on the external aspect of the role, and diligent study on what influences our senses directly in the disability of blindness, to distract the viewer from the internal psychological falsehood on which the author built the character of Yolanda.

Delighted by Modrzejewska's acting, the reviewer from *Dziennik Warszawski* emphasised that:

An actress herself, no matter how great, will not be enough to recreate such a character; it also has to be a woman with a lofty heart and an excellent mind, one who is able not only to understand, but also feel such exceedingly noble and subtle emotions (Bogusławski, 1873 after Got, Szczublewski, 1958, p. 166).

The role enabled the use of a whole spectrum of poses and gestures in representing the woman's tragedy and her transformations, which, luckily for us, has been described and photographed.

I have heard talk among the audience, and even among the

reviewers present at the performance of *King René's Daughter*, that Yolanda is a showcase role. I could agree, on condition, however, that the actress showcasing her abilities will be Ms. Modrzejewska. Among all the excellent dramatic heroines the artist has presented on the Warsaw stage, Yolanda is perhaps the most beautiful of her creations, and at the same time the most difficult. The blind Yolanda must, in her every movement, in every twitch of her features, be indeed blind even for the most perceptive viewer – otherwise the impact of the role would be immediately lost. Her eyes, with their glassy stare, as if directed not at the world outside, but into the depths of her own spirit, must retain this symbolic expression, and then suddenly, after the return of sight, brighten with all the fire of the soul and the loving heart looking out through them, yet even then they must darken from time to time, still terrified with this altogether too new and hurting impact of the light. This, however, is only one aspect of the difficulty of the role. Beyond it lies another one, contained, in a manner of speaking, in pantomime and pose. Whenever Yolanda is on the stage, she experiences things of a lofty nature: she expresses her feelings for her father, or her idea of nature, or examines her heart, waking up for the first time to the sympathetic sound of a beloved voice [...], and finally, all these emotions, doubled by seeing the objects which evoked them, have to illuminate with the colour of life her face, transformed in its psychological expression. Thus, it involves constantly changing facial expressions and constantly changing poses (Bogusławski, 1873 after Got, Szczublewski, 1958, pp. 165-166).

Bogusławski, emphasising the 'excellent work on the external aspect of the role' mentioned only one gesture. 'The gesture with which the actress covers her eyes, as if ashamed at the sight of her beloved, is evidence of a deep artistic insight into the essence of the feeling born in such particular circumstances' (*Kurier Warszawski*, 1873 no. 120).

Mieczkowski's photographs were used in the first monograph devoted to the artist. Siedlecki gave them titles and described four selected photographs.

The waiting⁸

Looking into the distance, her deep eyes extended sideways due to a slight closure of the lids, and the mouth, focused, closed into a peaceful line. She raised her left hand to the eyes, as if protecting herself from shafts of light, and her right hand, raised at the breast, expressed waiting in preparation to shake hands as a sign of making peace.

Moved by a message

[...] We learn she has received a message which moved her deeply. She closed her eyes, focused on her inner being, shut her mouth tight so that it became small and narrow. She raised her right hand towards her eyes and wants to avoid crying, and her left hand she

raised just slightly, as if she wanted to keep some danger at bay.

Sadness

[...] Her head is heavy with sad thoughts, she supports it delicately with her left hand. In her eyes – sadness, on her mouth – signs of pain. The smile of contentment has fled, and what remains is a barely visible painful smile, guessing the answer to a question before it was fully uttered. In her eyes, looking with a slight remorse, one can see the resignation of a soul that already understands everything, and forgives. The right hand, in turn, with its palm extended, prepares to bless all that will grow out of the ground before it.

A painful forgiveness

[...] The soul flies into otherworldly lands filled with longing, the raised eyes look up, towards an escape from suffering. The smile has disappeared altogether and the lips have the expression of an otherworldly serenity. The hands slightly raised and pointing in a direction other than the head, speak of a departure and show a direction. It is a farewell to that which has passed, which happened, and though it was sad and tragic, still, because it did happen, can be regretted, and in this regret can be seen a reproach towards

humanity and existence, not fierce and implacable, but forgiving (Siedlecki, 1927, pp. 133-134).

The title of Zbigniew Raszewski's text 'Modrzejewska – the Varsovian' proved to be as accurate as it was provocative. Taking into account the facts and numbers mentioned here, one has to see Modrzejewska as one of the greatest representatives of the "Warsaw school", brilliantly executing the rules contained in *Theory of Dramatic Art* by her teacher, Jan Tomasz Seweryn Jasiński. A *tableau* by Mieczkowski, added as a present for the subscribers of *Kurier Poranny I Antrakt* in 1877, shows an ensemble that never existed in this form.

At the time Helena Modrzejewska, in the middle of the bottom row, had already left for America, and Jasiński, in the centre, had been retired for fifteen years. Jasiński's presence emphasises the tradition of the Warsaw stage, with its most important employ occupied by Helena Modrzejewska, a Dramatic Artist of Teatry Warszawskie. The seven years spent in Warsaw were the most stable period in her career. Warsaw was a space which gave her opportunities to develop her acting talents and lead a social life suiting her ambitions. Researching her masterful execution of the rules of realistic idealism, one can also look for the cracks and fissures, allowing the inconvenient truth. However, I am more and more convinced, perhaps unjustly, that the rule of representing people and the world only from their beautiful sides stemmed from Modrzejewska's authentic emotions and needs. She was born and died in an era consistent with her internal conviction and it was in this consistency that I would – still thinking on the subject – look for the secret of her talent, as well as her social and theatrical phenomenon.

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Footnotes

1. A television series directed by Jan Łomnicki – footnote from *Pamiętnik Teatralny*.
2. Maria Olga Bieńka's 2009 article should also be noted here. The author recalls Modrzejewska's most important roles in classic drama, mostly Schiller, Shakespeare and Słowacki, in the context of the Warsaw ensemble and repertoire.
3. I based the dates and calculations on Got; Szczublewski, 1958 and *Wykaz premier (i wznowień) w sezonach 1868/1869 – 1879/1880* (in: Wanicka, 2011, pp. 299-308).
4. On November 29, 1868, the actress still performer at a concert consisting of recitation and music at the Redutowe Rooms, meant to support Stanisław Moniuszko. A thorough repertoire listing including all of Modrzejewska's guest performances in Poland was prepared by Barbara Maresz (2009).
5. She later performed in the state theatres as an American guest star: December 4, 1879-February 15, 1880, March 1, 1880; January 19-March 14, 1882, January 7-February 11 and February 22, 1885; February 2-March 9, and March 11-22, as well as May 10, 1891. See also footnote 4.
6. The roles mentioned here come from the following plays: *Adrienne Lecouvreur* by E.

Scribe and E. Legouv , *Delilah* by O. Feuillet, *Donna Diana* by A. Moreto, *Frou-frou* by H. Meilhac and L. Hal vy, as well as *Hamlet* and *Antony and Cleopatra* by Shakespeare.
7. It is worth noting the most recent publications dealing with the part of Mieczkowski's work devoted to the theatre. Cf. Maresz, 2009; K dziora, 2021.
8. The titles follow the *Table of figures* (cf. Siedlecki, 1927, p. 170).

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