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90.*, (*Body and power. Polish critical art  
of the 90s*), Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa  
2002; *Niebezpieczne związki sztuki*

*z ciałem*, (*Dangerous connections between  
art and the body*), Galeria Miejska  
Arsenał, Poznań 2002; *W poszukiwaniu*

*małej dziewczynki*, (*Looking for a little  
girl*), red. wraz z E. Zierkiewicz, Konsola,  
Poznań-Wrocław, 2003; *Kobiety, feminizm  
i media*, (*Women, feminist and media*), red.

wraz z E. Zierkiewicz, Konsola, Poznań-  
Wrocław 2005; *Matki-Polki, Chłopcy  
i Cyborgi. Sztuka i feminizm w Polsce*,

(*Polish-Mothers, Boys and Cyborgs.  
Art and Feminism in Poland*), Galeria  
Miejska Arsenal, Poznań 2010; *Podróż  
do przeszłości. Interpretacje najnowszej  
historii w polskiej sztuce krytycznej*,

(*Journey to the Past: interpretations of  
the latest history in Polish Critical Art*,  
Wydawnictwo Academica, Warszawa  
2010; *Mikroutopie codzienności*, (*Micro-  
utopias of everydayness*), Centrum Sztuki  
Współczesnej Znaki Czasu, Toruń 2013.

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# **Art exhibitions in the context of civic education – case studies of own selected curatorial concepts**

In this text, I intend to show that art exhibitions can play an influential role in civic education. This is because they are a kind of framework of art and are expressive of how art can be read and interpreted in a host of new ways. This framework embeds artworks in the context of specific issues, themes or social problems. Thus, an exhibition can become a framework that updates the potential inherent in creativity and at the same time can thematise issues from both the field of art and reality. An exhibition can therefore lead to a reconfiguration of the visual order, which I will discuss later on in this text in reference to Jacques Rancière's ideas. While preparing art exhibitions, it is also worth remembering to attract the audience and make them interested in the presented material. This is especially important since in countries such as Poland, visual arts are still underestimated, and contemporary art works are often considered to be merely excesses of blasé artists. It is a cliché to affirm that schools do not teach students how to experience and receive contemporary art. It is only when visiting exhibitions, interacting with artworks and participating in curatorial tours and workshops related to a given exhibition that the audience can understand not only art but also the problems it raises. Therefore, exhibitions play an important educational role and, ideally, they should refer to socially important, topical issues, taking into account the "here and now" of the viewers themselves. This does not mean, however, that they should be unambiguous in their message, nor should they spell out precisely what the exhibited works are all about. Rather, they should trigger an affect between the audience and the works on display, as well

as between the individual works, as suggested by Mieke Bal in her text “Exhibition as Film”<sup>1</sup>.

Curating exhibitions can therefore play an important role in the process of art education, but also in civic education understood as raising people to live in a civil society and sensitising them to important social issues, especially to various injustices and exclusions which must be opposed. Civic education should also sensitise one to differences and to various views existing in a given society and should teach respect for these differences rather than impose a single vision of the world.

I do not think that the absolute goal is to organize exhibitions that are supposed to activate the audience, although of course it may be one of the more important curatorial strategies. Naturally, participatory art has a great potential to attract and interest audiences in the possibilities of concrete actions. However, it is worth remembering Claire Bishop’s objections to some elements of participatory art. In her essay “Viewers as Producers”, the author mentions Jacques Rancière’s unpublished essay “The Emancipated Spectator” (2004), where the philosopher addresses the passivity of theatre spectators. Rancière believes that the opposition between “active” and “passive” viewers is based on presuppositions between looking and knowing, watching and acting, appearance and reality. This is because the binary of active / passive invariably divides the public into the part who have a capacity for reception and those who do not. In other words, the division line is marked by the recipients’ cultural competence. This creates an allegory of inequality. “Drawing analogies with the history of education, Rancière argues that emancipation should rather be the presupposition of equality: the assumption that everyone has the same capacity for intelligent response to a book, a play or a work of art”<sup>2</sup>. Adopting this perspective, as Bishop stresses, we all are equally capable of coming up with our own interpretations. We should therefore follow a principle which would not divide audiences into active and passive, capable and incapable, but instead would invite us all to appropriate works for ourselves and make use of these in ways that their authors might never have dreamed possible<sup>3</sup>.

I likewise support Mieke Bal’s assumption when she writes: “the primary task of exhibition should be to encourage visitors to stop, suspend action, let affect invade us, and then, *quietly*, in temporary respite,

» 1 Mieke Bal, “Exhibition as Film”, [in:] *(Re)Visualizing National History. Museums and National Identities in Europe in the New Millennium*, ed. R. Ostrov, Totonto, Buffalo, London 2008, p. 15-43..

» 2 C. Bishop, “Introduction/Viewers as Producers”, [in:] *Participation (Documents in Contemporary Art)*, ed. C. Bishop, London, Massachusetts 2006, p. 16.

» 3 *Ibidem*.

*think*”<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, the exhibition should provide the viewers with an opportunity to find their own space, perspective and methods of reading art. This is possible only when curators try to construct the exhibition as a narrative recommended by Bal: as an invitation to a debate which does not impose a one-sided reception. Thus, the exhibition may become a kind of public forum where important issues are taken up and discussed.

In many cases contemporary art not only adopts a critical attitude towards stereotypes rooted in our mentality, but also creates situations in which we can learn about something that is only seemingly unimportant. It can draw attention to the contradictions present in our reality and allows us to think without offering obvious solutions. In this way, it can help us to better grasp at least a fragment of our reality, e.g. by asking difficult questions about social issues. Above all, it shows that we do not need to think the same or agree with one another to still be able to have a meaningful dialogue that will not be aimed at showing that we are ultimately right, but rather will bring out a polysemy of different meanings and views. The critical curatorial strategy that I advocate in this text should, above all, bring out the critical potential of art.

This potential is connected with making comments on the world around us, showing the conflicts that our reality is full of, as well as pointing to various possible interpretations. Thus, art shows that there are no unambiguous decisions, even if art itself is socially or politically engaged. Moreover, critical art often reveals and lays bare what is unobvious, “subcutaneous”, unclear, and marginalised<sup>5</sup>. After all, “to perform criticism means to make easy gestures difficult”<sup>6</sup>.

A critical curatorial strategy should examine the institution of democracy, eliminate the boundaries of identity that are strictly defined by social order, and strive to reconfigure the visual order, transforming it from a monolithic to a varied one. According to the French philosopher Jacques Rancière,<sup>7</sup> artistic activity can become political only through the transformation of the visual order and its perception. Rancière is involved in politics within the imagery because, as he says, aesthetics has its own politics. Politics within aesthetics determines the visibility or invisibility of certain phenomena, presupposes a certain hierarchy of themes or democratises the aesthetic order. In the light of these considerations, art has political power when it sows ferment, destroys a given order of represen-

» 4 Bal, op. cit., p. 40.

» 5 See my reflection on critical art in the book *Ciało i władza. Polska sztuka krytyczna lat 90.*, Warszawa 2002.

» 6 Quoted after: Z. Bauman, “O znaczeniu sztuki i sztuce znaczenia”, [in:] *Awangarda w perspektywie postmodernizmu*, ed. G. Dziamski, Poznań 1996, p. 137.

» 7 J. Rancière, *Estetyka jako polityka*, introduction A. Żmijewski, afterword S. Žižek, transl. J. Kutyla and P. Mościcki, Warszawa 2007.

tation and undermines the conventions of imagery. This political subversiveness is a “departure from the frame”, a rupture with conventions, a loss of structure, a touch of the uncanny. In the case of art exhibitions, the point would be to present topics from the margins, but also those that may cause controversy and the aforementioned affect. This could be, for example, showing gender hierarchies, which in the art world have usually remained transparent, pointing to marginalised social issues or revealing hidden power relations. What is of major interest is what happens at the junction of art and reality, and I think that pointing to this area can lead to a reconfiguration of the visual order, which contemporary art often strives for.

The curatorial practice of such a reconfiguration may mean working with multiple identities, identifying links between different types of exclusions as well as recognising the “others” of our own discourses. It is in order at this point to recall the suggestion of Krzysztof Pomian, who wrote about the relations between contemporary art and democracy: the former, though not exclusively, is underpinned by an awareness that democracy requires differences: collective, political, ideological, religious, etc., and that disputes and debates are its prerequisite. “The strength of democracy lies in its unique ability to transform its conflicts from a threat to collective coexistence into a source of cultural, social and economic dynamism”<sup>8</sup>.

In this text I will try to show these issues in relation to the exhibitions I have curated or co-authored in order to determine where I myself stand and indicate the convergence of the theoretical assumptions I espouse with my curatorial practice. My primary interest is contemporary art in Poland and Central Europe. My research focuses on such issues as: feminist art, critical art and art related to recent history, including the Holocaust. I attempt to include these problems in my curatorial activities.

I have curated a dozen or so exhibitions, including the following ones: *Dangerous Liaisons* in Arsenal Municipal Gallery in Poznań, 2002, *The Allure of Power (on dispersed power, ideology and seeing)*, Arsenal Municipal Gallery, Poznań, 2009, *Microutopias of Everyday*, an exhibition of works from the collection of the Centre for Contemporary Art in Toruń, 2013 - 2014. I took part in the preparation of the show *Gender Check / Sprawdzam płęć: kobiecość i męskość w sztuce Europy Wschodniej* (Vienna, Warsaw, chief curator: Bojana Pejić, 2009, 2010), 2008, 2009. I moreover collaborated with Janina Hobgarska, the main curator of the exhibition *It's a Bitter Fate - Polishness*, held in BWA Art Gallery in Jelenia Góra in September 2014. In September 2017, I curated the show *Polish Women, Patriots, Rebels*, hosted by the Arsenal Municipal Gallery. Important for all these exhibitions are references to social issues

» 8 K. Pomian, “Sztuka nowoczesna i demokracja”, *Kultura współczesna*, No. 2 (40) 2004, p. 35-43, typescript made available by the Author.

(e.g. gender), the concept of democracy and the different mechanisms of power affecting us. When creating an exhibition, I always try to ask about the “here and now” and at the same time try to “unfreeze” the existing reality. I strive to address topics that are “uncomfortable”, controversial, and sometimes even considered “non-artistic”. I also address topics from the margin of art history or excluded from it.

The objective of changing the dominant discourse was important also for Bojana Pejić during her work on the *Gender Check show*<sup>9</sup>. She wished to rewrite the history of contemporary art in Eastern Europe in the context of gender issues. As the curator herself observed:

In general it all started because I was angry because of non-visibility of art of this part of the world. The other important thing is that there are many publications about art of Eastern Europe of socialist and post-socialist period, but none is about gender or the gender in art. On the other hand, there is sociological literature on gender in communism and post-communism, but they don't deal with art. So I thought maybe in this exhibition we could try to put together these two things<sup>10</sup>.

The *Gender Check* show allowed me to compare avant-garde art with works of socialist realism and trace in them the construction of gender, fields of limitations, exclusions, and subversions. The exhibition offered an opportunity to interpret this art according to such dichotomies as: private / public; communist / capitalist; democratic / nationalist, active / passive; watching / being seen, freedom / enslavement, and submission / subversion. Moreover, it was an attempt to deconstruct these dichotomies. The exhibition not only posed questions about the construction of gender, but also about the construction of communist and post-communist reality and the construction of identity in these systems.

I myself addressed the demand of transforming the visual order into an exhibition during the 2009 show held in Poznań titled *The Allure of Power (on disperse power, ideology and seeing)*<sup>11</sup>. The works on display brought out covert interconnections and implicit activities of all kinds of power, shunning at the same time any didacticism. They were to provoke

» 9 *Gender Check. Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, MUMOK Vienna (13.11.2009 - 14.02.2010), *Płeć? Sprawdzam. Kobiecość i męskość w sztuce Europy Wschodniej*, Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, Warsaw (19.03 - 13.06.2010).

» 10 I. Kowalczyk, D. Łagodźka, E. Zierkiewicz, “Anger of Bojana Pejić. An interview by the occasion of Gender Check Exhibition at the Warsaw's Zacheta Gallery”, *Artmix*, No. 24 (14), “Gender Europy Środkowej”, 24.08.2010, <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/artmix/18402>, [access: 23.03.2018].

» 11 The show gathered the following works: *Chronicle* by Bogna Burska, *Mandalas* by Maurycy Gomulicki, *She-Ona* by Izabella Gustowska, *Charms of Power* by Elżbieta Jabłońska, *Negroisation – Exhumation of a Certain Metaphor* by Tomek Kozak, *Patterns* by Zofia Kulik, *The Gay, Innocent and Heartless* by Zbigniew Libera, *Bestiary* by Aleka Polis, and *The Charm of Rebellion* by Mariola Przyjemka. See also *The Allure of Power (on dispersed power, ideology and seeing)*, ed. I. Kowalczyk, Poznań 2009.

to the following questions: To what extent can power work through pleasure? How does it enslave us and make us lose our vigilance? How do the actions of dispersed power manifest themselves in the visual area? What can enter the area of visibility and what is excluded from it? What is the power of the artists? What are the links between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics?

The installation entitled *She-Ona* by Izabella Gustowska is a perfect example of references to the above questions. The artist invoked José Carlos Somoza's book *Clara y la penumbra (The Art of Murder)*<sup>12</sup>. The novel tells the story of an art world in which there is a current called hyper-dramatism, where living people become works of art. The artist in the novel instructs his models on how to act as works of art. The voice of the narrator in Gustowska's work, imposing certain orders on the girls, is a voice that does not take "no" for an answer. The relationship between the author and the woman transformed into a work of art replicates the traditional relationship between the artist and his model as described by Lynda Nead<sup>13</sup>. The posing model confirms the status of the artist as simultaneously a creator, judge and owner. By choosing an excerpt from Somoza's novel, Gustowska came up with a visual metaphor of the artist (creator and owner of the woman's body) and of the model, who is subordinated to him. Gustowska's work can be interpreted in more general terms, too, as an indication of how easily we succumb to the dictates of culture, losing our own identity at the same time. Moreover, the artist depicts a world where all is processed, digitised, transformed into images and presented to the public.

Another example is provided by the photographs from the series *Gay, Innocent and Heartless* by Zbigniew Libera. Here masculinity appears as a kind of game, played by big boys in uniforms, who dream of great adventures. Masculinity is shown here as a convention. Libera's partisans, although they try to be "real men", are in fact their opposites; they are eternal boys who only play war. They show emotions and mutual attachment, are carefree, innocent, delicate, and sensitive. They are beautiful and Libera's photographs could be presented as an example of military fashion in a lifestyle magazine. Thus, even in its military version, masculinity is becoming more and more subordinated to the rules of popular culture.

The aim of the exhibition was to confront the "frozen" reality (in which the status quo, including social and gender roles, are never questioned) with the artists' critical and ambiguous interpretations. They pointed to: the institutionalisation of contemporary art, the links between

» 12 J.C. Somoza, *Klara i półmrok*, Warszawa, 2004.

» 13 L. Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London 1992.

art and popular culture, the consent to neoliberal rules governing the contemporary world (the work of Mariola Przyjemaska), the sexual relations of power as part and parcel of the art world (Gustowska), unwritten rules that determine what can be shown and what is lost sight of (e.g. the racist imagination revealed in Tomek Kozak's work).

Similar themes were likewise important for the show *Microutopias of Everyday*, a selection of works from the collection of the Centre for Contemporary Art in Toruń, held from October 2013 until January 2014. I tried to construct it as a kind of post-feminist and post-humanistic narrative with a strong emphasis on the importance of the private sphere, which is most often excluded or marginalized in museum discourse. It was also important for me to point out the relations between different spheres of life and art, as well as between particular works of art, between works of art and the audience, as well as between theory and art. During the organisation of this exhibition I had on my mind Nicolas Bourriaud's idea that art does not aim at saving the world, nor can it be identified with politics, but it still embraces ethical issues and is marked by a "democratic concern"<sup>14</sup>. I actually owed the titled of the exhibition to this author; microutopias of everyday can be understood as activities aimed at new and better models of reality, which include a conscious, creative formation of one's environment, caring for one's own place and for everyone and everything we deal with as well as striving to improve relations with others - people, animals and the whole natural world.

The works exhibited were divided according to seven categories. The "Private is Political", where the works touched upon the private sphere and everyday activities, was the "heart" and most crucial part of the exhibit. Contemporary artists (e.g. Elżbieta Podlaska, Oskar Dawicki, Marcelina Gunia, Marek Sobczyk, Józef Robakowski, Marian Stępak, Maciej Kurak, and Max Skorwider) use everyday reality, play with it and give it new meanings. They try to elevate the simplest, most ordinary activities or they only indicate what has remained unnoticed for centuries. One of the most interesting works in this context was the painting by Marek Sobczyk recalling the figure of Katarzyna Kobro, who throughout her life lived at the crossroads of art and reality. The point was to emphasize the meaning of everyday life, which, as Jolanta Brach-Czaina wrote, is the basis of our existence and provides the background of what is exceptional and extraordinary. Therefore, without everydayness, although it is unnoticeable in itself, we would not be able to appreciate unusual and great things<sup>15</sup>. It therefore seems so important to regain everyday reality and the private zone for art.

» 14 N. Bourriaud, *Estetyka relacyjna*, transl. Ł. Białkowski, Kraków 2012, p. 91.

» 15 J. Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, Kraków 1998, p. 55.



The other parts of the exhibition were: “Art is the Weapon of the Defenceless”, “Organic Life”, “Posthumanism”, “Art in the Peripheries”, “Genius Loci”, “Is Art a Lie? These categories referred to various overlapping aspects of life and activity and the division into these spheres was arbitrary. The individual parts of the exhibition carried out a kind of dialogue. The aim was to reveal the arbitrariness and conventionality of the categories according to which we function and through which we perceive art, such as: private – public, individual – community, aesthetic – political, organic – artificial, life – death, nature – culture, global – local, artistic – everyday. I wanted the audience to reflect on the above categories but also to choose their own ways of reading this art. The viewers were given the freedom to choose the direction of visiting the exhibition, and the sections of the exhibition located around its central part enabled the visitors to move around freely.

The next show I want to mention here is *It's a Bitter Fate – Polishness* in Jelena Góra in 2014. In this case of prime importance was the question about different models of patriotism. Patriotism and patriotic symbols have been appropriated in Poland by right-wing politics, the Catholic Church and football fans. If we want to talk about patriotism in a different way, we should try to change the way we think about it, taking into account the visual order itself. Therefore, when working on an exhibition, proposing specific works for it and writing a text for the catalogue<sup>16</sup>, I put forth the notion of critical patriotism. In Poland there are two traditions of defining patriotism, both dating back to the 19th century. There is the romantic tradition, connected mainly with Adam Mickiewicz's ideas, related to the independence struggle, inclination for armed struggle and the elevation of the status of victims. There is also the civic tradition that focuses on civic attitudes, concern for the state and responsibility for others, which can be connected with the thought of Kamil Cyprian Norwid, who, although linked to Polish romanticism, is also sometimes referred to as its greatest critic<sup>17</sup>. Norwid aptly described the Polish nation, for instance indicating that “We know how to argue with and how to love one another but are incapable of differing with one another in a beautiful and nice manner”<sup>18</sup>. He also pointed out the lack of thinking during national uprisings meant to bring back independence (“[...] all the reading community is in ruins in a nation, [...] where energy always precedes intelligence, and

» 16 I. Kowalczyk, “Two Patriotisms, Two Traditions”, [in:] *Gorzki to chleb jest polskość/ It's a Bitter Fate – Polishness*, ed. J. Hobgarska, Jelena Góra 2014, p. 110-118.

» 17 M. Janion, *Literatura polska. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, vol. II, Warszawa 1985, p. 302. I am thankful for attracting my attention to this book to Prof. Przemysław Czapliński.

» 18 B. Stelmaszczyk-Świontek, “Norwid. O powołaniu artysty i człowieka”, [in:] C.K. Norwid, *Wybór poezji*, introduction and commentary: B. Stelmaszczyk-Świontek, Łódź 1988, p. 24. I am indebted to Jacek Zwierzyński for his assistance in pinpointing the source texts.

every generation suffers a bloodshed<sup>19</sup>). He noticed that the Polish bread is indeed bitter and observed poignantly: “We are no society. We are a huge national banner<sup>20</sup>. Thus, the poet censured his compatriots for their lack of collective feelings and actions connected with caring for others and for the entire society. It is precisely this concern and sensitivity to harm to others that can be described as critical patriotism, which is one of the main tasks of civic education.

Most of the artists presenting their works at the exhibition *It's a Bitter Fate – Polishness*<sup>21</sup> shared a critical approach to Polishness and related myths, depicting what was overlooked in the heroic tradition of Romanticism. At the same time, their artistic activities showed a civic concern for their country and responsibility for others. Poland has not been and is not a national monolith, as our native patriots want to believe. For example, the work *This Last Sunday* (2011) by Dorota Podlaska showed the old National Stadium in Warsaw as one of the areas of multiculturalism, where the Vietnamese minority, one of the biggest ethnic minorities in Poland, was especially active. Ideas unpopular in the context of the Romantic paradigm were invoked likewise by Aleka Polis in her work *Milk and Honey*, with quotes from Erich Fromm, e.g. “Love the other”, “I am loved since I love”, “What counts is faith in your own love, in its ability to awaken love in others, and in its permanence”. Both Aleka Polis and Monika Drożyńska (*I Admire Her. She Is Right Here*) refer to self-love, love towards others as well as frivolous love, at variance with the romantic ideals of unrequited love or a self-sacrificial love for one's homeland.

In the context of artistic criticism of Polishness, one should quote Norwid's words: *Is this bird ill that fouls its own nest? / Or is it one who lets not talk of that? (Czy ten ptak swoje gniazdo kala, co je kala, czy ten, co mówić o tym nie pozwala)*<sup>22</sup>. No doubt, artists in a way “foul their own nest” by referring to what is evil, small-minded and xenophobic, ironically presenting excessive attachment to tradition and heroicising our past. This ironic approach is at variance with the aggressive and hateful statements of so-called true Poles. In fact, however, the latter are the denial of well understood patriotism and yet they reveal themselves with such force (e.g. during the Equality March in Białystok in 2019) that more and more

» 19 C.K. Norwid, *Myśli o Polsce i Polakach*, selection: M. Dobrosielski, Białystok 1985, p. 36.

» 20 *Ibidem*, p. 52.

» 21 The authors participating in the exhibition were: Adam Adach, Hubert Czerepok, Monika Drożyńska, Wojciech Duda, Paweł Hajncel, Władysław Hasior, Paweł Jarodzki, Grzegorz Klaman, Jerzy Kosalka, Tomasz Kozak, Kamil Kuskowski, Karolina Mełnicka, Anna Molska, Dorota Podlaska, Aleka Polis (Aleksandra Polisieicz), Marek Sobczyk, Zbigniew Szumski, Ewa Świdzińska, Przemysław “Trust” Truściński, Antek Wajda, and Marek Wasilewski.

» 22 “Czy ten ptak kala gniazdo, co je kala” (1856), [in:] Norwid, *Dzieła zebrane*, ed. J. W. Gomulicki, vol. II, PIW, Warszawa 1966, p. 101.

often there is talk of a cultural war. Right-wing patriotism transforms into hate speech and can lead to violence, which shows how difficult it is for the Polish right-wing supporters to cope with differences within society and how much we all need civic education. It is art that can be the area of reflection on such conflicts, pointing to different competing positions. Art can be a warning and an encouragement to think critically and it can provoke reflection on whether we can finally learn to “differ beautifully”. The aim of this exhibition was, first of all, to try to re-evaluate our thinking about patriotism and to show that patriotism also means civic attitudes and caring for others.

Speaking of contemporary Polishness, one cannot ignore the gender issue. Disenfranchising women, depriving them of rights, including the freedom of speech, was shown in the exhibition in Karolina Melnicka’s video *Polish Burkha* (2013): a woman wearing a white-and-red burka sits by herself in a stadium amidst sports fans’ aggressive shouting. Inclusion of the female body into the national symbolism was moreover indicated by Ewa Świdzińska’s work *Emblem* showing the female crotch in red lingerie, against which is shown a white embroidered figure of a butterfly, bringing to mind the eagle, the Polish emblem.

I included the two last works also in the exhibition *Polish Women, Patriots, Rebels*, held at Arsenal Municipal Gallery in 2017<sup>23</sup>. In this case I wanted to change the perception within the exhibition discourse, where women’s issues were most often shown as belonging in the private zone, less often from the perspective of public space. Moreover, if the subject of Polishness is addressed in art, the issues related to women appear rather marginally. I wanted to change this by proposing to look at women’s issues from the perspective of public space, social protests and patriotism. I wanted to inspire reflection on the visibility of women and issues concerning them in the public sphere, as well as to ask questions about the strategies of action for women’s rights - on the one hand to emphasize the importance of community and relativity, but on the other hand - to bring out what can be described as the contemporary “feminism of power”. According to Naomi Wolf, it means, among other things, rejecting one’s own phantoms of politeness, respect for diversity within women’s groups, gaining strength, independence, and power<sup>24</sup>. I believe that art, through its sym-

» 23 With the participation of: Chór Czarownic, Iwona Demko, Monika Drożyńska, Marta Frej, Irena Kalicka, Kolaborantki, Kolektyw Złote Rączki, Zofia Kuligowska, Dawid Marszewski, Karolina Melnicka, Ewa Partum, Liliana Piskorska, Jadwiga Sawicka, Ewa Świdzińska, and the photographers: Mateusz Budzisz, Barbara Sinica and Radosław Sto.

» 24 N. Wolf, *Klin klinem*, transl. B. Limanowska, (fragment of the book *Fire with Fire. The New Female Power And How it Will Change 21st Century*, Chatto & Windus, London 1993), [in:] *Spotkania feministyczne*, ed. B. Limanowska and T. Oleszczuk, Warszawa 1994/1995, p. 40-53.

bolic power, is able to convey such ideas and thus strengthen the social message and the feminist agenda.

The main aim of this show was to reflect on the situation and problems of contemporary Polish women as citizens, participants of public life, patriots and demonstrators taking part in 2016 during the so-called “Black Protests” against attempts to make more stringent the anti-abortion law. The rallies, which gathered thousands of people, were accompanied by anger and outrage, and the vast number of protests throughout Poland showed the government that a single spark was enough to turn the masses against them. In the case of protests, activism intertwined with creative activities, and the art of female artists involved in the Black Protest movement became a commentary on it and a way to strengthen the message. To my mind, the strength of these protests, their vocal symbolism and their diversity deserved a comment in the form of an exhibition.

One of the symbols of the manifestations were black umbrellas, a reference to which was made in Ewa Partum’s work *Feminist Quotes*; she depicted these symbolic black umbrellas and showed the slogan “You deprive us of the freedom of decision, we will deprive you of power”, transcribed literally from a Black Protest banner. The work, placed at the start of the exhibition, presenting mainly the younger generation of artists, was also a symbolic combination of different generations of feminist artists - the oldest and the youngest ones. Some of the works on display referred directly to the protests, such as the recordings of Chór Czarownic [Choir of Witches] (their song “Your Power” was the anthem of the Poznań manifestations); the banner of Kolektyw Złote Rączki [Golden Hands Collective] from Krakow “I think, I feel, I decide”; a series of memes by Marta Frej describing women’s activism (*I Took Part in the Black Protest Because...*); a work by Iwona Demko *408,223 Hikes of the Skirt, or My Dream About Black Protests*. Other works subverted patriotic symbolism: Polish Burkha by Karolina Melnicka and Agata Zbylut’s Caviar Patriot (a dress made of football fans’ scarves), and a photo by Lilianna Piskorska, showing herself in bed with a “real Pole” in bedclothes bearing the Polish national emblem (*Self-Portrait with a Borrowed Man, aka I am a Pole so I Have Polish Duties*, 2016). There were also works that stressed community aspect and collective action (Choir of Witches, Golden Hands Collective).

In the case of this exhibition, just as in the context of the Bitter is this Polish Bread show, I wanted to emphasize critical patriotism, which is revealed through, among other things, concern for women’s rights, including the right to legal and safe abortion. On the one hand, this exhibition recalled the power of the Black Protests. On the other hand, it wished to ironically appropriate national symbols, which today seem to belong unequivocally to one option, as well as to point to the terror inherent in

the national conservative discourse (the work of Monika Drożyńska), i.e. decisive opposition to any differences. However, it was also about emphasising the community aspect, the power of protesting women, their heritage remembered *Once in a While* (Jadwiga Sawicka), solidarity with others (including the non-human ones - Irena Kalicka), as well as the reflection on Polish hostility (Dawid Marszewski). The exhibition of *Polish Women, Patriots and Rebels* caused a stir, aroused emotions and triggered heated discussions, which took place long after its conclusion<sup>25</sup>.

As I pointed out at the beginning of the text, I believe that exhibitions can play an important role in the process of civic education, understood as education for living in a civil society and sensitising to important social issues, especially the problem of exclusion. They can therefore shape civic attitudes towards caring for the environment and for others, especially those vulnerable. The exhibitions selected for this review were aimed at drawing attention to the problem of constricting neoliberal rules and rigid social and gender roles assigned to individuals (*Allures of Power*); they likewise pointed to the need of caring for all that surrounds us, of bringing out the significance of the private zone, of the local community and of cooperation (*Microutopias of Everyday*), to critical patriotism (*It's a Bitter Fate – Polishness*), and to women's rights (*Gender Check and Polish Women, Patriots, Rebels*). Naturally, there are many more questions that can be addressed in art exhibitions embracing the demand of civic education. Suffice it to mention the issues of sexual minorities tackled by exhibitions designed e.g. by Paweł Leszkowicz (e.g. *Love and Democracy*, Łaźnia Centre for Contemporary Art, 2006 and *Ars Homo Erotica*, National Museum in Warsaw, 2010). One other topic can be sensitising the public to the question of illness and its cultural contexts, as in the case of the show held at the National Museum in Poznań: *Disease as a Source of Art* (2019). Today, in turn, the issue of the threat to the life of our planet and of the destroyed environment is particularly pressing.

The critical curatorial stance I am advocating here is therefore founded on a commitment to protecting the rights of the excluded, women, minorities, emigrants, animals, and the entire planet. One must not forget today how closely these individual issues are interlinked. Our participation in the global circulation of goods affects both the people used as cheap labour and the quality of the entire environment. "The modern world is a system of interconnected vessels, where everything affects everything else and nothing happens in a vacuum",<sup>26</sup> argues Margaret Atwood, while

» 25 See a text on this topic: A. Araszkievicz, "Szczenie śmiechem Meduzy?", [in:] *Polki, patriotki, rebeliantki*, ed. I. Kowalczyk, Poznań 2018, p. 52-70.

» 26 "Margaret Atwood: Końca świata nie będzie, czeka nas koniec człowieka", an interview by M. Nogaś, *Wysokie Obcasy*, 27.05.2017, <http://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/7,127763,21846737,margaret-atwood-konca-swiate-nie-bedzie-czeka-nas-koniec.html>

Rosi Braidotti says: “It is crucial for instance to see the interconnections among the greenhouse effect, the status of women and LGBTQ+, racism and xenophobia and frantic consumerism”<sup>27</sup>. Exhibitions that do not shun these problems and that address contemporary exclusions and threats are primarily to sensitize the audience to these issues, to provoke debate, but also to draw attention to the fact that there are no clear decisions, that our diagnoses concerning the contemporary world are mixed, that we are different and that we should respect each other’s differences. Although exhibitions may seek to raise awareness of the issues of exclusion, they should refrain from being unambiguous and one-sided. When constructing any exhibition, one should remember about the ambiguity of art and its openness to a wide variety of interpretations. Thus, it may happen that an exhibition or the works presented will be interpreted against the intentions of its authors, but at the same time may allow us to see the problems that the curator did not think about when preparing the show. In this way, Claire Bishop’s demand to open up to the public and assume that they are an equal partner in the discussion is implemented. In order for the exhibition to be a part of the process of civic education, arouse emotions and provoke discussion and critical reflection, it should first of all show the relations between art and the contemporary world, our life and important problems of the contemporary world. In such a case, it is not possible for the audience to remain indifferent to it. ●

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