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O poszukiwaniu (bez)sensu na podstawie książki Janusza Bohdziewiczza *Osiem Pochwał*" in *KartoTeka Gdańska*.



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The Body as a Medium of Experiencing the Other. Posthumanism and Postsecular Spirituality in the Art of Performance – a Case Study of Teresa Murak's Work *The Grain*

In her text *The Performative Turn in Contemporary Humanities*, Ewa Domańska claims that a new paradigm is arising in the postmodern Western culture, determined by the dynamic shifts and the need for a sense of agency which is absent from traditional and postmodern art¹. She refers to the eponymous turn towards the performative and the activating in art, which stems from an increased need for exerting real impact on reality.

» 1 Ewa Domańska, "Zwrot performatywny' we współczesnej humanistyce," *Teksty Drugie*, no. 5 (2007): 52.

Indeed, today performance serves both art and political and social struggle for emancipation, also of non-human subjects.

Thus, if a new paradigm has emerged, it is worth considering what qualities specific to contemporary Western culture it involves and how it corresponds with other currently relevant philosophical discourses. This will illuminate some of the essential functions of performance, such as, for example, the postmodern dialogue with spirituality or the construction of anti-anthropocentric relations with the Other. This, in turn, will lead to the key argument to be defended here, namely that artistic performance can be seen as a post-secular mystical experience, which will be illustrated through the example of Teresa Murak's land-art work entitled *The Grain*. It is therefore useful to review Domańska's above publication, in which one can find an essential starting point for reflections on the issue under consideration here.

The author looks at culture through the lens of the vision of reality that it filled. She divides the history of art in a *sui generis* dialectic manner, as if inspired by Hegel's triad: thesis-antithesis-synthesis. It then acquires a traditional period, a postmodern period and a performative period, each distinguished by a different view of the ontology of the work, the means of expression used and the impact on the audience.

Classical art offered the audience a finished artefact, encapsulated in its form, presenting what the author wanted to communicate. The artwork constituted a "grand narrative", which the recipients were expected to read correctly. Postmodernism already represents a shift away from contemplation to a reflection on the structure of the cultural text and its deconstruction². It unmask the conventionality of signs, which actually means the possibility of a play with convention and the schematic nature of representations. The period was dominated by a pastiche of old formulas and an emphasis on form rather than content. The performative turn, on the other hand, is geared towards overcoming the impasse of empty parodies. Artists constantly question and challenge their work, trying to develop new values and transcend existing horizons in contact with the audience. The paradigm shift, according to Domańska, is mainly contingent on the fact that "language not only represents reality, but also causes changes in it, and furthermore that certain phenomena exist only in the act of their performance and that they must be repeated in order to exist"³.

Domańska explicitly notes that performative solutions in art can be interpreted as a creative transmission of the posthumanist idea⁴. Following this line of thought, it can be noted that the three aesthetic strategies

» 2 Domańska, "'Zwrot performatywny'...", 54.

» 3 Domańska, "'Zwrot performatywny'...", 49.

» 4 Domańska, "'Zwrot performatywny'...", 57.

described by the author are historically and conceptually linked to the evolution of the philosophy of the subject, described e.g. by Rosi Braidotti. These are humanism, anti-humanism and posthumanism.

Braidotti sees the history of humanism as the foundation of the Western world in all its aspects, such as politics, ethics and legislation. She concludes that this project for the secular salvation of humanity is intrinsically driven by a dialectic of norm and exclusion⁵. This is due to the binary logic and linear metaphysics favoured in this paradigm, which treats humans as the highest entities on the ladder of beings, due to their ability to think rationally⁶. These beliefs lead to the identification of an axiological framework that divides reality according to “human” and “animal” or “barbarian” standards. Despite the emancipatory aspirations within humanism itself, this narrative has proved inadequate, as it is based on erroneous theories assuming an abstract, sterile human being, most specifically in the guise of the white, heterosexual Western male⁷. Braidotti analyses the postmodern collapse of cultural homeostasis triggered by the leftist philosophers of the 1968 generation. Their revolutionary and critical stance resulted in new ideological currents debating anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism, masculinism and other oppressive systems of thought generated on the basis of a humanist worldview. Deconstruction, second-wave feminism and postmodernism are but a few of the proposals that Braidotti encapsulates in a collective anti-humanist paradigm. This antithesis of Enlightenment values exposes their illusory nature and their conventionalism and proclaims that the ideal human being of humanism has never existed. However, as the philosopher points out, apart from the decomposition of the discourse, society gains virtually nothing new⁸. Braidotti thus argues for a third path, which runs across the aforementioned oppositions. She has in mind posthumanism, i.e. a progressive, egalitarian system, based on processual ontology and paraconsistent logic, which is an extension of the framework of humanist discourse. Its fundamental assumptions include the belief in the equality and causality of all entities, not only human beings; the negation of the unique status of human beings; and anti-dialecticism, resulting from the mutual impact of all spheres of life. Under this perspective, the hierarchy within human society is an abuse, and equality is to be shared by a holistically conceived material reality in which the division between the animate and the inanimate no longer obtains. The radical polycentrism of the new paradigm rec-

» 5 Rosi Braidotti, *Po człowieku*, transl. Joanna Bednarek, Agnieszka Kowalczyk (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2014), 64.

» 6 Braidotti, *Po człowieku*, 64-65.

» 7 Braidotti, *Po człowieku*, 78.

» 8 Braidotti, *Po człowieku*, 87.

ognises human beings, animal beings, plant beings, artefacts, and ecofacts as absolutely identical in essence. Although it is now a very broad term, which also includes numerous sub-groups that do not always agree with one another, the above description of the basic features around which the posthumanist view focuses is sufficient for the problems discussed here. How does one recognise that the periods in art as defined by Domańska represent different stages in the development of humanism? The “grand narrative” of anthropocentrism manifested itself through enduring artefacts of culture conveying truths considered objective and indisputable. At the centre of the work stood the human-artist, usually male, who was the „measure of all things”, endowing reality with its expected framework. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is an anti-humanist negation of enduring truths, expressing itself in the belief that art has become exhausted and that it is impossible to create anything genuine and authentic because one does not know what this could mean. Hence the deconstruction of the old discourse, which did not lead to a new one.

The new interpretation of causality proposed by the performative turn also makes the entire non-human world, such as animals, artefacts or eco-facts, i.e. natural products, the object of interest. The essence of this phenomenon derives from the postmodern philosophy of the subject, i.e. posthumanism, according to which the human being cannot be considered in isolation from the rest of the Universe, as there is no coherent, sterile entity that is not dependent on other actors and actants transcendent to it. The heterogeneous structure of the cosmos, in which it is impossible to “segregate” inbred subjects, brings about an inseparable merger of all areas of life, where all dualities are obliterated.

Citing the philosopher of science Andrew Pickering, Domańska shows that in the performative idiom it is necessary to take posthuman ontology into account, as it captures non-human influences on the totality of matter and postulates a new vision of science as drawing on the performative turn and moving away from the research analytical apparatus towards a processual and transformative approach. In a broader perspective, this would result in interdisciplinarity, arising from the inadequacy of epistemically homogeneous disciplines, in a diverse and fluid universe⁹. Reconstructing this perspective in the arts, it should be noted that the multidisciplinary is one of the most essential trends in contemporary art, as a determinant of the basic assumptions of interactivity, conceptualism or precisely performance. The transmedia encoding of content and the wide range of techniques used within a single work or larger project burst the framework of classical conventions and produce space for the development of surprising assemblages.

» 9 Domańska, “Zwrot performatywny...”, 58-59.

Performance is closely linked to posthumanism and can artistically express its principal claims. There is, however, another important current of thought to be introduced into these reflections. It is post-secularism, which according to Rosi Braidotti occupies a very important position in posthumanist reflection. The turn towards spirituality did not seem to be of interest and significance to philosophers and philosophers of both humanism and anti-humanism.

The author of *The Posthuman* draws attention to secularity as one of the hallmarks of humanism. On the one hand, she appreciates the rupture with religious dogmatism as one of the ideals guiding the new paradigm and the shift in emphasis from obedience and trust in the divine will to a more critical and rational self-improvement. The philosopher notes that humanism, born of a move away from doctrinaire thinking, elevates those cultural and scientific developments that lead to the expansion of practical and theoretical knowledge and the creation of a field for discussion, which is extremely valuable¹⁰. Many of the solidarity aspirations of excluded social groups acted on behalf of secular values inspired by humanism. This was due to hostile attitudes towards religion, which arbitrarily placed certain minorities lower in the hierarchy, producing their low status in community life, rituals or even devaluing them morally. A case in point are the hierarchical monotheistic institutions in which only males make decisions. The struggle for gender equality was thus also a struggle against established traditions based on thinking according to religious norms¹¹.

Feminism and other emancipatory movements are supported by secular foundations, an escape from orthodoxy and, above all, by rationality and political entrepreneurship. Despite the undoubted value of the actions of male and female activists, their invocation of a universal and objective axiology again evokes the hegemonic tendencies of the West and highlights further dichotomies: between the rational and the irrational; the secular and the spiritual; the public (political) and the private. The secularisation of advanced civilised countries in relation to non-Western and poorer ones may result in a return to the self-exaltation of countries adhering to “liberal standards” as opposed to “backward” countries and attempts at military intervention, as exemplified e.g. by the destabilisation of the Middle East by the United States. Questioning the imperialist aspirations of the West should also entail a consideration of secularism and the question of whether the separation of human beings from spirituality and the culture built on it is the right tactic.

» 10 Braidotti, *Po człowieku*, 88.

» 11 Braidotti, *Po człowieku*, 92-93.

Braidotti indicates that a return to being rooted in the faith is frequent during the time of receding humanism¹². While anti-humanism still attempts to deal with the trauma of the previous tradition of thought and fails to address questions about religious life or even deconstruct belief systems as oppressive and perpetuating the conservative and abusive status quo, posthumanism, according to this philosopher, has the greatest potential to accommodate the post-secular turn. Attempts to rationally conceptualise the order of reality turn out to glorify once again this contingent feature of the human species, ignoring the perception of the Other and alternative, paraconsistent forms of discourse. The multiplicity of narratives drawing on non-Western spirituality, the awareness of equivalent identities existing also outside the realm of the ratio, is a space in which diverse forms of realisation of subjects can develop, none of which claims to be objective. Secularisation, in Braidotti's view, is a failed project. She notes how many of the new post-human theories show a strong spiritualist provenance that invokes associations with animism or pantheism. One can conclude from this that a relational community of solidary and liberated organic and inorganic entities can be freely found at the level of various beliefs, or even inspire them.

The above argumentation leads us to believe that reading performance through the lens of post-secular posthumanism is legitimate. Not every performance of this type will convey this idea, but by its very nature this field of art has a greater potential for this than others, as Domańska clearly demonstrates. At this point, it is worth considering what conditions the presentation of an act must meet in order for it to be seen as fitting into the discourse outlined, and which qualities testify to this.

The body is the essential medium of the performer. It is the body that constitutes the tool of artistic expression, of contact with the audience, as well as with the other entities that jointly create the event. As Monika Bakke notes, posthumanist discourse problematises this subject matter in the context of the interrelationship of human and non-human, in the sense of living organisms and technological bodies¹³. In posthumanist artistic activity, creative subjects open up their bodies to contact with the Other as eco- or artefact. Any posthumanist art form therefore takes an intrinsically self-reflexive approach to the relationship established between the artist and the medium at the level of their bodily communication. This issue is relevant to posthumanist art, which explicitly emphasises the polycentrism of the reality of bodies. One of the constitutive elements typical of this current is the authentic construction of a sensual relationship between both

» 12 Braidotti, *Po człowieku*, 90-100.

» 13 Monika Bakke, *Bio-transfiguracje. Sztuka i estetyka posthumanizmu* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2015), 233-236.

the artist and the Other, who is here part of the performance, as well as the recipients, or the exposure of one's own body to the stream of events.

The post-secular dimension of performance is also revealed in the phenomenon of embodiment. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, life takes place within the body, which always functions as fluid, taking in and giving out at the same time. One body is intrinsically a conglomerate of many others, transforming itself with every contact, equally affecting the Other¹⁴. For the philosopher, each opening of the body, oriented towards a union, a relationship with the not-I, is an ontological event, the very root cause of all things¹⁵. There is no meaning, either immanent or transcendent, without the body¹⁶. This interpretation may provide an appropriate interpretative key for modern art forms that are part of the narrative of post-secular posthumanism. In this paradigm, the body becomes a medium and a gateway to contacting the surrounding reality, which is performative in nature, typical of contemporary media. Nancy claims that in the gesture of touching the world, the body captures meaning, while meaning becomes embodied. This sets in motion a circular symbiosis which links the transcendent and the immanent, thus making all meaning trans-immanent¹⁷.

This proposition is completed in the work of art, which is always an embodiment, as it cannot be realised without the body. Contemporary artists seem to understand this more profoundly than in the past, when the traditionally understood process of producing the object of aesthetic experience seemed irrelevant and the public had the opportunity to get acquainted with the already finished work by contemplating it. The material and corporeal layer of the work was irrelevant to its evaluation and did not inspire interest. Performance is a genre whose most essential component is the unveiling of the act in its source, and thus of the body making meaning present. Such creative performances present a model of trans-immanence; the ideas that transcend the very immediacy of the process that is currently taking place are at the same time grounded in it and expressed in an existential leap by the artist. This leap always turns towards the Other, who, in the above perspective, does not have to be human. A kind of union of the senses takes place here, in which the human being does not appropriate the Other, but in a kenotic gesture descends towards the Other in order to meet Them in a space of mutual, affective understanding¹⁸.

» 14 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, transl. Małgorzata Kwietniewska (Gdańsk: słowo/ obraz terytoria, 2002), 25-27.

» 15 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, 28-30.

» 16 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, 56-58.

» 17 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, 66-68, 80.

» 18 Joanna Sarbiewska, "Wszystko co straszne, pragnie naszej miłości": 'Inny' posthumanizmu w ujęciu (post)sekularnym (przyczynek)," *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 101-102, year XL (wiosna-lato 2018): 198. In this text, the author coined the term "kenotic posthumanism", deriving it from

Another important aspect is the creation of opportunities for participation in the work. Following Eric Zimmerman, Ryszard W. Kluszczyński distinguishes several ways of defining the category of interactivity, vital for clarifying the basic concepts within the framework of consideration¹⁹. The first is cognitive interactivity, determined by the psychological involvement of the audience taking place at the level of mental operations which are responsible for the processes of interpretation, understanding or emotional reactions. The second type is referred to as functional and concerns the set of operations that the audience can perform on the matter of the artefact. The explicative type of participation allows choices to be made and freely branches out the structure of the work. This can be called intrinsic interactivity, as it develops the hypertextuality of the universe. The final way of defining this phenomenon is meta-interactivity, which consists in the occurrence of motifs in a transmedia space which unfolds extensive narrative universes.

The category of cognitive interactivity seems vague insofar as it can comprise any cultural text with at least one recipient or one viewer. The understanding of the content and the psychological reaction to it seem to show the general characteristics of participation in discourse. This understanding of participation is not a novelty and does not define the specificity of postmodernity. Other definitions are much clearer descriptions, which capture the essence of contemporary phenomena. These will include various forms of artistic intervention, activism or publicist and critical statements aimed at effecting concrete change, as well as immersive works.

When considering the art of posthuman post-secularism, the interactivity of the other types must be taken into account because of their potential to engender real change in physical and technical space (in the case of the explicative type, the possibility of different narrative paths can also be reinterpreted within performance, body-art and other event-type works that loosely rely on a scenario) and the transmedial repetition of successive incarnations of a given paradigm, which becomes relevant for transcultural concepts and has a non-dogmatic ritualistic dimension.

Thus understood, interactive aesthetics is clearly part of the project of non-institutional spirituality, as it expresses the fundamental ontological propositions and philosophy of the subject belonging to this semantic field. Above all, participatory art is not a closed representation of the artist's chosen vision, which is then performed in front of an audience in

kenosis, i.e. Christ's emptying of divinity and becoming human. Sarbiewska believes that in posthumanist ethics it is the duty of human beings to empty themselves of human hubris and to empathise with the non-human Other.

» 19 Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, *Sztuka interaktywna: Od dzieła-instrumentu do interaktywnego spektaklu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2010), 161-163.

a predetermined shape. The phenomenon described by Kluszczyński articulates the essence of a fluctuating, vital matter, rhizomatic and entangled in a network of interrelations. This omnipotent flux relies on intelligible projections. Adopting the metaphysical assumptions of processualism shifts the emphasis in art from the production of the artefact to the very dynamics of the act, which entails ecstasy towards the Unknown. The aesthetics of the “here and now” gesture, divested of strict narrative structure, resonates with the postulate of purging discourse of dialectics and normativity. The division between the artist and his or her work is lifted in this case. The fluidity and openness of participatory discourse fits perfectly with the new needs of spirituality, which, on the basis of this tendency, can reveal itself in contact with the Other, human or non-human, an awareness of the causality of all entities in the Universe and a critical analysis of the myths of humanism, which can lead to an ethical-intellectual upheaval and an opening up of perspectives on post-human issues.

One more type of interactivity, unnoticed by Kluszczyński, should be introduced into the discourse. It concerns building a relationship with both the human subject who is part and parcel of the work and the non-human one. This demand permeates conceptual art on many levels. Artists are aware of being part of bio-relationships and, metaphorically speaking, they step down from the pedestal of humanity as the yardstick of all things, exposing themselves in their work to the responsiveness of the Other. For example, the proposals in the field of land-art (Earth art) consist of using only natural materials. Land-art projects therefore employ processes resulting from the movements of organic entities, such as decay, the growth of plants, changes in state of matter, etc. The performance may invite a human audience to participate, however, turning to non-human actors and actresses will have a bio-egalitarian dimension.

Concluding the theoretical considerations, it is fitting to use an analysis of a specific work that illustrates the philosophy outlined above. We are talking here about a land-art performance *The Grain* by Teresa Murak, whose interpretation will be offered within the theses put forth here. It was recreated a number of times, in 1976, 1989, 1991, and 2014. The artist, naked, enters a tub filled with water and cress seeds. She stays there for as long as it takes for them to swell and for the plant to germinate. Eventually, after a few days, the artist finds herself in a muddy mass of green shoots which coat her body. This performance, although simple in its execution, carries a great deal of relevance to the subject matter built up over the course of this work. First and foremost, the body is the medium here. It is through her body that Murak interacts with the non-human Other, i.e. the seed and the cress that grows out of it. It is through her body that she experiences a vital flow and it is her body that she exposes to

the audience as a means of communication. Therefore, locating this event in the matter of the body calls for an in-depth analysis.

For Jean-Luc Nancy, bodies are constantly spreading out in an anti-dialectical movement of accepting and surrendering oneself to the Other²⁰. It is a process of perpetual fluctuation, of relationality, of being a message and a transmitter at the same time. By touching the water and the sprouting plants with her naked body, the artist makes an existential leap, releasing an ontological event that is always a form of embodiment. She embodies meaning present in the tangibility of this gesture, and the gesture becomes meaningful by making it sensual. The hermeneutic circle comes full circle. At the same time, Murak gives herself away, surrendering her warmth and space to the growth of organisms, herself also becoming part of the biological cycle. She allows the power of the earth, of plants, of non-human energy to flow through her, revealing itself in a multiplicity of sprouts teeming with life. The author of the performance expropriates herself from the coherence of her own Self and becomes depersonalised in the act of becoming a plant. Opening up towards the external, the multiplied and the transforming delineates the fluid framework of the nomadic body.

In her performance, Murak sanctifies nature itself in a very primal way, which helps to situate her work in a post-humanist horizon. The artist chooses to deal with the cress in *statu nascendi*, as seed. This evokes an animistic cult of fertility and a turn towards ancient cultures that worship primordial matter. Murak freezes motionless and allows physis to organise itself spontaneously with its own rhythm. What is determined by the laws of nature must fulfil itself in a specific time and cannot be controlled. The human being of humanism, equipped with *hybris*, has always tried to interfere in the realm of the Other in order to adapt it to his needs. The artist departs from this pattern and removes her Ego from the space of the unfolding process. The time of her performance is measured by the growth of the plant rather than by anthropocentric projections. The coexistence of the artist and the other non-human actor is constituted solely by virtue of ecstatic affirmation on the affective plane. Murak decentralises her position as the author. It is not she who determines how long and in what way the performance will proceed. She negates her claims to the Other and enters the realm of ignorance, where she allows nature to manifest itself in its rhythm and exposes herself to the arbitrariness of events.

All the above contexts revealed in the work *The Grain* fully correspond to the project described in the pages of this work. Clearly, the artist walks the path of post-secular post-humanism. In mystical loss, she escapes from the humanist construct of the Self and roots the relationality of the post-human in her own body, opening herself to and accepting the

» 20 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, 15-18.

pre-determined laws of the Universe. Her performance highlights liminality, one of the key categories of postmodern discourse. She overcomes ossified dichotomies, situating herself on the periphery of the descriptive. It sanctifies Earth and the body, puts the creator and her material on an equal footing, both transcends the natural order of physiology and reasserts it.

Summing up the theoretical concerns taken up here and the analysis of practical artistic action, it should be said that performativity is a quality that makes it possible to elevate contemporary social transformations and, at the same time, a quality that seems to return to more primordial forms of communion with matter, closely linked to animistic or pantheistic spirituality. In the light of the arguments presented, it is reasonable to consider that an interactive performance, centred around corporeality and contacting the non-human Other, can have the character of a mystical union with the Absolute which is manifested in every single being. Such an approach to art can prove immensely valuable for a deeper reflection on transient anthropocentrism. The non-dogmatic sanctification of the terrestrial cosmos should lead towards openness, bio-egalitarianism and the affirmation of the Universe as the new foundations of an interspecies community. This is a necessity especially at a time of climate crisis, as humans must become aware of their responsibility for the Other. Ultimately, it opens up the possibility for posthumanist ethics to become a universal concern and a respect for each individual being, which inherently contains an irreducible spiritual value. ●

Abstract

The topic of this article is posthumanism and postsecular spirituality in performance art, shown on the example of Teresa Murak's work *The Grain*. I wish to show that nowadays performance may play the role of a non-dogmatic ritual which evokes discourse that sanctifies matter. I take the position that, contemporarily, this idea is visible in posthumanism, which – according to Rosi Braidotti – often reaches for reflections of a spiritualistic character and, thanks to them, moves to a postsecular position. Posthumanism abolishes anthropocentrism and, in a spiritual way, turns to the equality of all beings, therefore becoming a postmodern form of mysticism. In Ewa Domańska's works there is the definition of the performative turn, which is a new and extremely popular paradigm in cultural studies. The performative turn clearly reflects the theses of posthumanism and can be used as an optic to understand this phenomenon. I put forward the thesis that if, according to Domańska, performance is connected with posthumanism – and Braidotti shows that posthumanism may be postsecular – this may indicate the existence of postsecular posthumanism within the performative turn. Therefore, I consider which qualities in performance may prove the existence of the tendency to celebrate nature in the manner of rituals. First of all, I contemplate being rooted in one's body and turning it into a medium for contact with the non-human Other through interactive approaches. Furthermore, I wish to show that the determinants of this new paradigm's art are its potential for intervention, its publicistic tone, and its impact on reality. All the above considerations are finalised with an analysis of Teresa Murak's *The Grain*. This is a performance from the land-art

trend in which the artist submerges herself naked in a tub filled with water and watercress seeds. I wish to propose an interpretation which shows that this work reveals the hallmarks of postsecular ritual.

Keywords:

performance, pantheism, posthumanism, postsecularism, performative turn, Teresa Murak, Ewa Domańska, ritual

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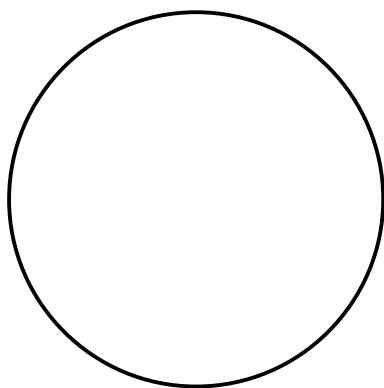
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