

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

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Voicing the Archive. Marysia Lewandowska in Conversation with Magdalena Ziółkowska on the absence of female representation in institutional histories

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abstract:

Conversation between artist Marysia Lewandowska and curator Magdalena Ziółkowska, revisiting Lewandowska's early practice and formative years in London, including the Women Audio Archive, as well as archival several projects devoted to recontextualization and displacements of institutional practices and narratives, and the most current installation and performance *Welcome* (2023), commissioned by Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover.

Marysia Lewandowska - London-based artist who has been exploring the public functions of archives, museums, and exhibitions, focusing on the missing voices of women. Projects include the Women's Audio Archive (2009); *Undoing Property?* (co-edited with Laurel Ptak) (2013); *It's About Time*, for the 58th Venice Biennale (2019); *Enthusiasts Archive* (with Neil Cummings) (2019); and *Dismantling the Faculty of Law* (2021). She was also the inaugural Artist-in-Residence at the Cosmic House, London, resulting in the sound installation *how to pass through a door* (2022). Other voice-based works include *Welcome* (2023) at the Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover; and *Recording_1989* at the Kunsthalle, Baden Baden (2023). She recently published *Ewa Mikina. Teksty z lat 1991 - 2012* (co-edited with Jakub Gawkowski) (2023). She served as Professor of Art in the Public Realm at Konstfack, Stockholm (2003–2013), and is a member of Tate Modern Advisory Group.

Magdalena Ziółkowska - Art historian, critic, curator, academic lecturer, and mediator. She has a PhD from the School of Social Research in Warsaw, and the Curatorial Training Programme (de Appel arts centre, Amsterdam, 2006–2007). From 2006–2010 she was guest curator at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, later the custodian of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (2008–2014). From 2015 to 2018 she was director of the Bunkier Sztuki

Contemporary Art Gallery in Kraków and head of the Department of Textile Art at the Central Museum of Textiles, Łódź (2020–2022). In 2012 she became a co-founder and vice-president of the Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation, and is an initiator and co-curator of all the foundation's projects. Her most recent projects include *Bownik. Undercoat*, accompanied by the artist's monograph (Central Museum of Textiles, Łódź 2022; Manggha Museum, Kraków 2023) and *The Tatras. Wróblewski, Karłowicz, Wyczółkowski* (Manggha Museum, Kraków 2023; Museum Brukenthal, Sibiu 2024). She is a board member of AICA Poland and a member of the International Catalogue Raisonné Associations ICRA in London. Currently, she is also a lecturer in Curatorial Studies at the Academy of Art in Szczecin and the School of Form in Warsaw.

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Magdalena Ziółkowska: Today, we are here in London, nearly seventeen years after our first conversation, which took place not far from the CCA Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, an important institution in your professional biography – it was there in 2004 that you and your then collaborator Neil Cummings launched the *Enthusiasts. Films from Amateur Film Clubs* project.¹ When I think of your artistic strategies, it is clear that the presence of voice and its role in shaping subjectivity has, over the years, been fundamental to your practice. But let's start by looking at how your own voice became part of the contemporary art field and what factors contributed to its formation.

Marysia Lewandowska: The most important part of my education as an artist was participation in the early 1980s in the activities of Pracownia Dziekanka in Warsaw,² at the time when it was led by Tomasz Sikorski and Jerzy Onuch. Both the structure and the community assembled around it was invested in probing the limits of political thinking, through critical artistic experimentation and understanding the social role of art. It was there that I understood the importance of keeping records and self-archiving. Thinking about it now, it is clear that the activity of self-archiving should, more widely, be associated with the histories of art in Eastern Europe



AKF Klaps, Chybie. From left to right: Franciszek Dzida, Marysia Lewandowska, Jan Dzida, Józef Orawiec, July 2002. Photo: Neil Cummings / Breakfast honoring former members of Amateur Film Clubs with Franciszek Dzida from AKF Klaps, Chybie speaking, the opening of the *Enthusiasts* project at the Center for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, June 26, 2004.

under communism. Perhaps it could be seen as a symptom of distrust in the narratives officially sanctioned by public institutions. There was a strong desire to hold on to one's own version of events, making sure it more accurately reflected the time in which one lived. One way of doing that was through notation, seen as a process and a form of participation. The multimedia practice of artists Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek as KwieKulik opened up new ways of situating other artists' activities as part of their social experiment. A commitment to "capturing" the artistic gestures of others through text, audio, photography, and film was a conscious decision feeding their pioneering project of The Workshop of Activities, Documentation, and Dissemination, a self-instituted domain operating from their private apartment in Warsaw. This kind of self-awareness had a decisive impact on my understanding of what it means to be an artist, with an emphasis on practice not production, and further on the role of dissemination in relation to nourishing the public domain. In 1986, four years after moving to London, I recorded a conversation with Zofia Kulik in her new studio in Dąbrowa. She reflected on a moment of transition in her collaborative practice, speaking about endings without having a clear sense of how to proceed next. This resonated with me, as I was also considering my own situation, having moved from Warsaw to London in 1982, and shortly after began practicing by recording conversations and public events there. Much later those recordings became a foundation for the project known as the Women's Audio Archive.³

MZ: Were you already keen on the idea of creating an archive of voices belonging to women – critics, artists, curators, writers – "an audio testimony" within the art field and its current discourses, which would at some point become public? Or were

you creating these recordings for yourself, so that you could return to them, listen again, and reflect?

ML: At the very beginning, I wasn't planning to include the recordings as part of my ongoing practice. But then a very early decision to give a name to such an activity presented a form of empowerment, taking it out of my individual concerns; I saw it as an emancipatory gesture. By naming it the Women's Audio Archive an institutional frame was established, which seemed to open doors when approaching people I was hoping to record a conversation with. Self-instituting was more than a transitional tactic; it allowed me to actively reconsider the more conventional idea of artist-as-producer, which seemed too limiting and too prescriptive. Don't forget, I was coming from a much more rebellious cultural environment, so was not easily seduced by the vague notion of "freedom of expression." What was of interest already then was to maintain independence from any particular set of conditions, especially those commercially driven. The emphasis fell on a discursive practice, and on finding a community with which I could bond through intellectual kinship. Embarking on recording conversations with a wide range of practitioners helped to better understand the cultural context to which I was beginning to contribute; it was an element in my conceptual toolbox and not yet a dedicated art project. From today's perspective, you could call it research, addiction, and a remedy against isolation. In 2009, after turning this private collection into an online public resource, following the invitation of the curator Maria Lind, the status of the project changed; it filled the gap in the collective memory related to the decade marked by postmodernism, feminism, and post-



Cassette tape from the original *Women's Audio Archive* collection, 2009. Photo: Marysia Lewandowska.

structuralism. Gregor Muir, the then director of the ICA in London (2011–2016) realized that I made recordings of many of the 1980s lectures which were missing from their institutional archives, so a shared link was enabled between the two sites.

MZ: I imagine that many of the women you were speaking with welcomed the opportunity of a recorded conversation. How did you approach them and prepare yourself? How have you seen your own role when meeting artists such as Nancy Spero, Nan Goldin, or Susan Hiller? Did they experience a lack of representation in male-dominated institutions? How in this constellation of two women talking did you position yourself?

ML: The 1980s was a particular time, dominated by the white American male artists. Women were largely invisible, marginalized, and squeezed out. Among the women I was meeting or approaching in live situations were feminists who themselves were interested in the politics of representation, who welcomed my interest and the opportunity of speaking privately without any particular pressure associated with being part of a public event. In our conversations they were able to narrate, in a relaxed and informal way, how life's concerns, economic conditions, and politics affected their practices. They felt free to self-analyze but also to voice discontent. These recordings often happened spontaneously, so my own preparation was quite minimal. I was mainly aware of their contributions through publications and exhibitions.

Remember, this was happening before the existence of Google searches on the internet. I was more interested in what often remains left out, has been considered marginal, unimportant, and therefore remained unacknowledged in existing accounts – daily routines, intimate details, friendships, support networks, and personal struggles, and how those might have manifested themselves critically in their / our practices. Such an approach was quite far from an interview format relying on a prepared set of questions. Driven by curiosity and a sense of unspoken

solidarity, we interrogated each other as women, as artists, as intellectuals, looking for common strategies while occupying an uncertain ground between privacy and public contribution. I will give you a couple of examples.

In 1985, at the end of my scholarship in Canada, I was introduced to the wonderful Marlene NourbeSe Philip, a poet and novelist based in Toronto. At the time she had just published her first volume of poetry, exploring the idea of the father-tongue understood as the language imposed by the colonizer. Her sensitivity and deep reflection regarding the role language plays in seeking justice for historical oppression resonated

within a wider context closer to my own understanding of the system I grew up with. Listening to how much attention she gave to the articulation of each word, its origin, and subsequent political expediency was a deeply moving experience. Before leaving Warsaw in 1982, I myself published a small book of poetry. Writing at the time seemed to me the most accessible, stable, and uncontaminated medium. Whether it was spoken or written, language offered immediacy and accommodated vulnerability, which I experienced as a young woman. When literary critic Marian Stala reviewed the collection, his encouragement gave me a confidence boost. We met while both studying at the Jagiellonian University in 1975. Language became central again when I moved to London and began functioning as an artist in a foreign tongue. It was no longer a refuge but a place of contestation.



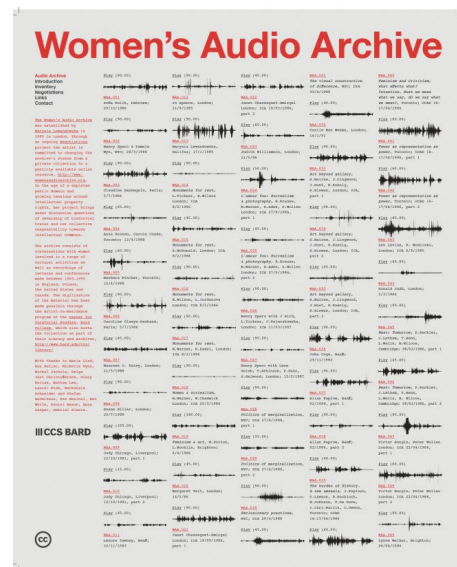
Marysia Lewandowska in her studio in Warsaw, 1981. Photo: Mel Someroski.

In 1988, I was in New York making a recording with the artist Nancy Spero. We met a year before during her retrospective exhibition at the ICA in London. She then unexpectedly suggested and helped to arrange a visit to Nan Goldin, who had recently become known for photographs presented in a 1986 slideshow called *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Her studio was located on the Bowery. It was early in her career, so she wasn't surrounded by agents, dealers, or gallerists but rather by a group of friends, many of them transgender, many of whom were dying of AIDS. During the 1980s, her own life experiences were intimately entangled with the artwork. I knew very little about that world, but didn't feel intimidated by an artist who embraced it as part of her emotional support. During an evening laced with red wine, she introduced the subject of antisemitism in Poland, putting me right on the spot. I didn't feel particularly well equipped to answer for that shameful chapter in Polish history, especially related to the events of 1968. But this encounter allowed me, for the first time, to reflect on the impact it had far beyond the immediate Jewish community. It was quite clear that we were both using this opportunity to interrogate the "suppressed" layers of our own heritage, openly challenging respective preconceptions on gender and identity politics. This was the kind of conversation you could neither script nor prepare yourself for, but the meeting was foundational in helping assert my voice as an artist.

MZ: As you mentioned, the collection grew, and around 1990 you decided to pack the cassettes into boxes and store them. Why? When did the moment for publicly sharing all the recorded voices emerge? And did you ever imagine giving access to such an intimate conversation as the one with Nan Goldin? I understand that Maria Lind – who in 2008 became Director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in upstate New

York – played a pivotal role in ensuring that the recordings were made public. How did you meet each other?

ML: There is a long history to my professional relationship with Maria Lind, having first met her during the symposium *Polyphony of Voices* organized by Adam Budak at Bunkier Sztuki in Kraków in 2002, and later through a number of collaborations in Stockholm, while she was Director of IASPIS and Tensta Konsthall at the time when I became professor at the Art Department at Konstfack College of Art and Design. She visited my London studio in 2008, and noticed the boxes labelled the Women's Audio Archive; her curatorial instinct led her to find out what kind of materials they contained. Once I provided the inventory of the collection, she recognized its cultural importance and persuaded me to spend a semester at CCS Bard the following year. The invitation created appropriate conditions intellectually and financially, allowing time to think through this material in historical terms, twenty-five years after the recordings had been assembled. The initial reason for making the recordings as a form of support system for myself, acting as cultural orientation, expired at the time this unique opportunity of turning them into a publicly accessible online archive presented itself. Its relevance wasn't just due to the content of the material, but equally important at this time was a question of "use," and the ability of nourishing the public realm through non-proprietary protocols. Clearing the rights required permissions from everyone whose voice had been recorded. Once funding was secured and the material digitized, a small group of



Poster announcing the launch of the Women's Audio Archive at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, NY, 2009. Design: Stefan Andersson.

CCS students – Michelle Y. Hyun, Laurel Ptak, Michał Jachufa, Nathan Lee, and Mackenzie Schneider – joined the project, helping not only with the long process of tracing everyone involved, but also discursively shaping a dedicated website designed by Stefan Andersson, where all of the recordings were made available under Creative Commons licenses.

MZ: These recordings are far beyond simple voice notation; I mean, you've recorded a full soundscape of that time and place, not only the personality of the speaker.

ML: I found affinity with anthropologist Michael Taussig, who in his description of indigenous rituals, provocatively shifts the emphasis from the event itself and dwells upon the weather conditions and other ephemeral qualities such as smell and the surrounding sounds. Bringing attention to these marginal and overlooked elements of human experience engages the imagination, creating a more direct emotional connection with the people. This kind of approach guided me while digitizing the Women's Audio Archive cassette tapes. I decided to preserve the background noise, which belonged to the situations in which the recordings were made. So nothing has been cleaned up, enhanced, edited out, or erased. Their value belongs to what artist and activist Lawrence Abu Hamdan named "ear witness." A sensation of overcoming adversity in order to be heard through drowning noise signals not only the sound conditions but also the cultural conditions, especially for those who continue to struggle to find an appropriate context from which to speak. Through correspondence with the speakers and their agents related to clearing copyrights, we realized that most artists in 2009 still had control over their own voice, and were willing to release it into the public domain. Until that moment, the tapes represented private research, but with the launch of an online archive it was possible for them to attain a cultural value. Following my own experience that the more you share, the more you make your ideas available and retain a say in how the work is

disseminated, you are more likely to reach a community of interest without dependence on gallery representation. The choices made at a time of professional “obscurity” or “innocence” associated with risk-taking led me to embrace a mixed economy supporting a particular kind of practice without compromising the work’s integrity. During the last forty years, I have held professorship positions, worked directly with museum curators, developed public commissions, and engaged in collaborations through long-term relationships based on trust and mutual respect. Many of them contributed to realizing projects through the inventive use of resources and networks, leading to unusual institutional collaborations – you may remember *Capital* at Tate Modern.⁴

MZ: Let’s look more closely at *Welcome*, one of your most recent installations, which I visited at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover last year.⁵ You presented a structure, consisting of a four-meter-high, five-meter-wide vertical blind made out of narrow slats in a color gradient from black to white with a small section in red. This “soft wall” closed off one side of a triangular room while allowing access to its interior. Inside, we find two audio recordings, a silent film projection, and a small leporello publication to take away. We learn that the voice belongs to Sophie Küppers, as she is making a speech which we hear in German with a simultaneous projection of the text in English; you also included the sound of a man coughing, which appears as something with a very precise purpose. Tell me more about this specific commission.



Marysia Lewandowska, *Welcome*, installation, part of *The New Man, the Announcer, the Constructor*. *El-Lissitzky: The Self-Portrait as the Kestner Gesellschaft*, Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover, 2023. Photo: Marysia Lewandowska.

ML: Speaking and listening are linked through a shared experience, but in an exhibition context one tends to privilege one over the other. Gallery and museum installations often consider the white cube to be an ideal, non-distracting space, while I prefer to contaminate such spaces with affect, adjusting not only their physical but also discursive potential. Each time addressing a specific set of architectural histories, such as the Arsenale in Venice or a former swimming pool of Kestner Gesellschaft, the architectural elements contextualize those histories to secure the necessary conditions for the appreciation of the voice.

MZ: With this installation, you started with the concern of the missing female contribution and her cultural absence. So, in this case, it's the absence that determines the shape of the exhibition, but how did you mediate that absence to construct a presence in its place? The architecture of the room has a strong identity that helps to experience the voice, because other elements – the sound and the light of the projection – are immaterial. You are transforming the gallery into a state of mind. When Frederick Kiesler was designing the 1942 Surrealist exhibition for the Peggy Guggenheim Gallery in New York (this show has often been compared to Marcel Duchamp's string installation), he designed a space to allow the Surrealists, who left Europe during World War II and ended up in the United States, to find a new home in exile. And I have the impression that the voices which remained forgotten and therefore unheard, and which you constructed through research, have been rescued from cultural exile to resonate and take a position within a revised historical narrative. This was exactly my feeling when visiting the Kestner Gesellschaft exhibition.

ML: Recovering the voice of Sophie Küppers, a German art historian and collector, and the wife of El Lissitzky, serves as an example of someone whose professional competence could not have been acknowledged at the time. Being a mother was deemed incompatible with the role of Kestner Gesellschaft director, which she had a chance of becoming after the sudden death of her husband, who had held the position until then. So in a gesture of “critical fabulation” and a bold performative move, I bestowed such a function upon her. Bringing her into being through a prepared speech with which she would have welcomed the audience at the opening of El Lissitzky’s exhibition in 1923, I confirmed her cultural contribution. What she said was of course important, but equally important was the fact that a thousand visitors who gathered at the opening of the 2023 commemorative exhibition when *Welcome* was performed live were confronted with a different narrative, which challenged our collective ability to properly acknowledge and to remember. Invisibility is not a natural condition in which women or others simply find themselves; it has been socially constructed over a long period of time, persisting like a recurring social injury. The project, to an extent, helped to suture this historical injustice.

MZ: Was the decision of having a performative part already there from the very beginning?

ML: Yes, the speech was meant to be performed live during the two opening evenings, which caused some confusion when an elegantly dressed woman introduced herself as the newly appointed Kestner Gesellschaft director. The installation



Marysia Lewandowska, *Welcome*, performance with Medea Stabbert as Sophie Küppers, opening of *The New Man, the Announcer, the Constructor. El-Lissitzky: The Self-Portrait as the Kestner Gesellschaft*, Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover, July 7, 2023. Photo: Marysia Lewandowska.

inside the gallery, which you described earlier, builds on the live performance – adding new elements, making the encounter visually and spatially coherent, allowing the voice to resonate beyond its original context.

MZ: Across many of your projects you are reinstating voices, recuperating them, creating conditions, both cultural and spatial, in which they can resonate today. What I find interesting is that the women whose voices we become aware of as a result of your interventions played secondary roles historically, while in your account someone like Sophie Küppers or Urszula Czartoryska are the main protagonists. How was your approach or attitude developed during those early years in London?

ML: I turned to publishing, which to me serves as a site of articulation as well as an agent in constituting a public. Between 1988 and 1993 I published *Sight Works*, a series of three volumes, including texts and specially commissioned projects by artists and others. Exploring a dynamic between exhibition making, live events, and publication consolidated my interest in examining institutional practices through critique. These were concurrent activities satisfying a collaborative urge and participation in distributive processes beyond the gallery context. At the same time I turned to questions of representation through photography. I began making large-scale black-and-white images printed on transparent film, with the source of light often expressing the self-referential nature of the photograph. My very first installation, curated by David Thorp, took place at Chisenhale Gallery in 1986. There, the images were projected and reflected in a pool of water as the industrial space of the gallery was regularly flooded during the show. The new work for the Riverside Studios exhibition in 1990, with the original invitation by Greg Hilty, explored contradictions between the representation of women and the situated condition of the public institution. Central to the show was an elaboration on a silenced

scream of Jeanne d'Arc signaling rebellion, female resilience, and heresy as ideological constructions.

Some of the same concerns were explored further in the 1992 Photographers' Gallery exhibition *Strip Light*, curated by David Chandler. There, I continued earlier explorations, using the building as a legitimate agent helping to reorganize existing hierarchies by pointing to photography's limits of representation. Images of wall cracks, holes, light fixtures, tangles of electric cable – in other words, the mundane and the overlooked – were seeking re-evaluation. The images exploited the double meaning of transparency, as holding the image and rendering it visible while looking through. Concurrent with this show was a small exhibition in the newly opened Cabinet Gallery, a private initiative of Martin McGeown located in a Brixton tenement block. Both shows benefited from prolonged conversations with their curators, something that was carried further in a 1993 group exhibition called *Wonderful Life* at the Lisson Gallery. This was a moment requiring decisions regarding the nature of practice. Starting a relationship with a commercial gallery presented both an opportunity and a dilemma.

If you want your labor to be appreciated as well as financially rewarded, you need to follow the rules of the game, you need to appease its main players. Opting out of the gallery system means risking marginalization at best, and erasure at worst. Tying oneself to an intricate set of relationships and the whims of the market felt highly risky and limiting. I valued my independence and wasn't prepared to fulfil certain expectations present within that world. It was also around that time I realized that it wasn't enough to simply continue producing objects and making exhibitions; something more fundamental was at stake. In 1993, I began what turned out to be an incredibly rewarding period lasting for the next fifteen years, a collaboration with artist Neil Cummings. We moved our attention from sites of production – studio / manufactory – to sites of negotiation – the institution

itself, which radically changed the effects of our practice. Those shared interests resulted in a book, *The Value of Things*.⁶ Having spent five years researching and photographing inside two emblematic institutions, The British Museum and Selfridges department store, we set out to trace contemporary cultural habits of accumulation, consumption, and display, through systems which mirrored one another to secure very different outcomes.

MZ: I remember well when in 2004 I borrowed *The Value of Things* and made a photocopy on a xerox machine – this was my first encounter with your work and your artistic approach

toward investigating institutional histories. It was a starting point for the project *Working Title:*

Archive at the Muzeum Sztuki in

Łódź when I joined the team in January 2008 – to confront the institution, exposing muted voices from its archive. You responded to my invitation with the *Tender Museum* project, which somehow initiated a series of installations in which you took care of both the artwork and the conditions of presentation. We can call them “rooms,” and I would like to refer to Lissitzky’s name given to this kind of space – *Raum or die Demonstrationsraum*. In German, the word *Demonstration* has a double meaning referring to presentation, to making public, but it also carries political connotations. In the *Tender Museum* conceived in 2009, which occupied seven consecutive rooms at the Poznański Palace, you proposed a similar methodology. By introducing the voice of curator and critic Urszula Czartoryska, wife of Muzeum Sztuki director Ryszard Stanisławski, whose contribution remained largely unacknowledged, you were able to evoke her presence through a very particular encounter. You



Marysia Lewandowska, *Tender Museum* project, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2009. Photo: Marysia Lewandowska.

constructed a recording studio based on the one where the original radio interview with her would have taken place. By making several spatial and temporal dislocations, Czartoryska's presence in the museum was re-established. This leads me to ask you now about the role of architecture in your work with voice.

ML: My interest in researching the museum was facilitated by your invitation to address the institution's archive, opened up to artists for the first time, something that until then had not been encouraged or considered worthy by either curators, artists, or visitors. For me, the museum itself was part of a constellation of other cultural institutions, so, if you

remember, I contacted both the Radio and Television archives in Łódź, looking for materials which helped to focus the project around the idea of media and mediation, but also considering the audio-visual experience in a museum context. Using visitors' movement from one room to another punctuated the narrative and was reminiscent of composing a score. The first room was occupied by references to television, with footage of several women performing a screen test for the role of a newsreader. The walls were painted with stripes of the TV color bars. In the next room, the architecture changes to a radio recording studio, turning a gallery space into a usable space, anticipating active listening taking place there. You heard a pre-recorded interview partly based on an archival recording from 1998, from which I edited out the journalist's original questions and inserted my own. Originally, Czartoryska talked about the relationship between critic and artist; in the new iteration I placed myself – the artist – in the role of a critic. As part of a strategic role reversal, both technology and architecture contributed to the



Marysia Lewandowska, *A Recovered Conversation 2009 – 1991* installation, part of the *Tender Museum* project, Kolekcja Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2009. Photo: Marysia Lewandowska.

staging of this intimate exchange. Inhabiting the real space of the museum, the imaginary encounter implicates the visitor as a witness. The gesture of recovery brought attention to the institutional hierarchies. Czartoryska's professional contribution was until that moment never properly acknowledged, and her archive remained with Olga Stanisławska, her daughter. One of the unforeseen outcomes of the exhibition was not only restoring her presence in public consciousness but also digitizing many of the photographs, making the privately restricted archive publicly available. Indicative in our culture is a tendency of omission in remembering the contributions of the wife, the female partner, or supporter who remains unacknowledged, disappears from the credits and becomes an unspecified shadow – or a “wife-shaped void.”

MZ: Ten years later, for the Venice Biennale you engaged several collaborators, both as part of the conceptual process and the production of the exhibition environment. In this project, in place of a single female protagonist you proposed a paradigm shift by adding women's contributions to the history of the oldest art biennale. Tell me more about the invitation made to you by Ralph Rugoff, curator of the 58th edition, who commissioned the Special Project for the Pavilion of Applied Arts located in the Arsenale.

ML: My approach acknowledges the importance of archives as a speculative force, where marginalized voices are given the chance to be constructed anew. The *It's About Time*⁷ project was a response to the invitation from Ralph Rugoff, whose interest in my practice dates to the *Enthusiasts* project while he was heading the CCA Wattis Institute in San Francisco. Later, as the director of the Hayward Gallery in London, he was aware of my contribution to the celebration of the gallery's 50th anniversary, called *Millions Will Thank You*. What emerged from my research in the Biennale archive was the revelation not of what I was able to find but rather what was not there. The Pavilion itself was created in 2016 as a joint initiative of Paulo Barratta, a long-serving president of the Biennale, and Martin Roth, the then director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. This was probably one of the most challenging undertakings; I was invited with only four months for research and production before the opening. Having researched archival materials of both institutions I set out to examine the apparent absence of women from the historical narratives of exhibitions and museums. The project focused on records of meetings held by the Mayor of Venice, Riccardo Selvatico, beginning in 1893, which led to the creation of La Biennale two years later.



Marysia Lewandowska, *It's About Time*, work in progress, sound design by Robert Jack, London, March 2019. Photo: Marysia Lewandowska.

There are many documents in the Biennale's archive recording the process, with detailed notes and minutes made by those participating in the meetings preceding the exhibition's inaugural opening on April 22, 1895. What remains unclear, however, is whether these were all written by men, as they have been recorded by family name only and therefore not explicitly gendered. Focusing on this ambiguity, I began working through the existing texts to compose a new script, speculating on how differently the event might have been shaped if women were involved. While working on the script I brought together Italian feminist art historians and artists living in London and Venice.⁸ Together, we developed a scenario in which the conceptual foundations of La Biennale were erected by women, allowing the sound of their unknown voices to be encountered for the first time.

We held a number of workshops with each of the women taking charge of the different aspects of the research findings, which I initially shared with them. My interest lay in turning this collectively conceived text into a live speech. Finally, we met in a recording studio, where each of the nine contributors performed her part, to be mixed later into the final track. Staging the debate offered a "corrective fiction" representing women of late-1890s Venice, suggesting their engagement in public life in a place where no written records were available. The debate refers to accomplishments of the duchess Felicita Bevilacqua La Masa, who was highly critical of the Biennale selection process aimed at presenting well-known names, and in response established a residency program for young artists, which still exists to this day. Her palazzo, Ca' Pesaro, houses the modern art



Marysia Lewandowska, *It's About Time*, Special Project, 58th La Biennale di Venezia with the Victoria and Albert Museum, Pavilion of Applied Arts, 2019. Photo: Xavier Ribas.

collection built from acquisitions she made during the early editions of the Biennale.

MZ: Tell me more about how you approached the spatial relationships of the project.

ML: The vast and slightly awkwardly shaped warehouse where the work was placed was not conducive to an intimate encounter, which might have originally occurred in a Venetian palazzo.

I invited London-based architectural practice Studio Abroad – Summer Islam and George Massoud – to develop a scheme that would reflect the duality of my proposal: a sound-based installation exploring the history of the Biennale, and a film edited from the rushes of a 1978 BBC documentary looking behind the scenes at the V&A Museum. We started thinking together of how to create an elegant and simple set of interiors with their own identity, in contrast to the roughness of the iconic Arsenale space dominated by bricks and columns. The strongest part of the architects' design was a free-standing S-shaped structure, providing two separate but interlinked small-room-sized enclosures. That allowed for an element of surprise, as you couldn't see everything at once from one vantage point.

A soundtrack reminiscent of a 35 mm projector accompanied the film screened directly onto the canvas-covered wall inside one of the two enclaves, while the adjacent space was filled with the sound of women's voices. What propelled my decision to carefully consider the exhibition architecture was the belief that if you don't have a body, if you don't see a person addressing you, you will not pay attention to their voice. In the experience of any space, our own presence fulfils the function of that missing body through listening, so the visitors become part of the mediation. The conditions that create intimacy between the listening body and the speaking voice lacking a body are met by architecture which locates and embeds the experience of the voice, allowing the listening to become its legitimate extension.

MZ: To the other women that you have already mentioned, I would add Maggie Keswick Jencks, the designer and writer who died in 1995, a central figure in the project commissioned by the Jencks Foundation, now permanently installed at The Cosmic House⁹ in London. And most recently the Polish art critic and translator Ewa Mikina, who died in 2012. Her writing, which you collected and edited last year with Jakub Gawkowski,¹⁰ has been published after many years of your efforts to ensure that her pioneering voice regarding artists, new media, and cyberspace, critically addressing the first decades of political transformation in Poland, will not disappear and therefore have a chance to resonate with the younger generation.

ML: Many of these projects concern women who are no longer with us – who have passed away and whose voices have not survived. You need the living to make the sound, to form the voice, to hear their cry. As an artist, I symbolically choose to breathe life into the collapsed “cultural lungs” by creating the conditions of remembering the person and their contribution without memorializing or moralizing. I think what happened during the *Tender Museum* project, when Olga Stanisławska offered a copy of all the photographs from her parents’ private archive and granted unconditional access to use this material in whatever way I deemed appropriate, tested the boundaries of mutual trust. Such attitudes create examples that encourage others to open their archives instead of erecting legal fences protecting or monetizing their contents. The most secure protection of other people’s ideas comes with trust. And once trust has been broken, it means you can never again use materials which have been entrusted with you.

1 *Enthusiasts Archive*, available online, is the result of extensive research among the remnants of the amateur film clubs in Poland under communism. It is a critical archive assembled and made available through exhibitions, screenings, and an online archive, which had its first presentation, titled *Enthusiasts. Films from Amateur Film Clubs*, at the Center for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, June 26 – August 29,

- 2004, curated by Łukasz Ronduda, with further iterations under the title *Enthusiasm: Films of Love, Longing and Labour* at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, April 1 – May 22, 2005, curated by Anthony Spira; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, June 5 – September 4, 2005, curated by Anselm Franke; and Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, October 27, 2005 – January 15, 2006, curated by Nuria Enguita.
- 2 Pracownia Dziekanka (orig. as Students Center for Artistic Circle) was established in 1972 at Krakowskie Przedmieście 56 in Warsaw, occupying the former students' dormitory, adapted by a group of artists (among them Ryszard Kryski and Zygmunt Piotrowski) as a gallery and interdisciplinary space for workshops, performances, and later projects in public space, a meeting place between avant-garde artists and performance artists.
 - 3 Women's Audio Archive available [here](#).
 - 4 Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, *Capital*, Tate Modern and the Bank of England Museum, London, May 11 – September 1, 2001, curated by Frances Morris.
 - 5 *The New Man, the Announcer, the Constructor. El Lissitzky: The Self-Portrait as the Kestner Gesellschaft*, Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover, July 8 – October 1, 2023, curated by Adam Budak in collaboration with Robert Knoke and Alexander Wilmschen, marking the centenary of Lissitzky's exhibition staged there in 1923.
 - 6 Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, *The Value of Things*, August / Birkhäuser, London, 2000.
 - 7 *It's About Time*, special project for 58. La Biennale di Venezia, *May You Live in Interesting Times*. Pavilion of Applied Arts, with the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, May 11 – November 24, 2019, curated by Ralph Rugoff.
 - 8 Lucia Cavorsi, Giulia Damiani, Valeria Facchin, Alice Ongaro, Carlotta Pierleoni, Flora Pitrolo, Clarissa Ricci, Silvia Tanzini, and Francesca Tarocco.
 - 9 *how to pass through a door*, The Cosmic House, London, 2022, curated by Eszter Steierhoffer.
 - 10 Ewa Mikina, *Słów Brak. Teksty z lat 1991 - 2012*, eds. Marysia Lewandowska and Jakub Gawkowski (Poznań–Łódź: Galeria Miejska Arsenał, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2023).

