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A commentary to two artstic projects presented in Viewpoint

- Katarzyna Kalwat's, Maria Klassenberg. Ecstasies

  Aneta Grzeszykowska, Maria Klassenberg's Archive 1970–1980
- Anna Baumgart, The Woman Question in Poland 2018

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Performing Genealogy: The Revolutionary Community of Bodies

- **Katarzyna Kalwat,** *Maria Klassenberg. Ecstasies*
  Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Maria Klassenberg's Archive 1970–1980*
- **Anna Baumgart,** *The Women's Cause in Poland 2018*

The development of feminist awareness was from the start related to the search for ancestors and sisters – other women, and sometimes men – who would create a community of ideas and practices. Paulina Kuczalska-Reinschmit, the spiritual leader of Polish pre-feminists, ran the periodical *Ster*, where she called on (no. 1/1907) all people "who work towards freedom in general to intensify their efforts to overcome the gender barriers to freedom and liberty." This process not only had a positive, constructive dimension, but also a polemical and critical one – facing up to dominant narratives. Herstory is not only a story about women, but is also a proposal to rewrite so-called universal history. Herstory's critical aspect is also seen in the fact that it is always unfinished and incomplete; it is not cast in bronze, made into monuments – it is constantly reworked, updated, and filled in.

The performative dimension is of key significance in this process today, enabling as it does meeting, as well as direct, physical, bodily practices and the action of the community. This in turn requires the creation of a "space of appearance." Here, I am taking a concept that Nicholas Mirzoeff takes from Judith Butler (who in turn was working from a conception of Hannah Arendt) to describe, in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, "the doubled experience of revealed police violence and subsequent protests in the same or similar spaces."[1] Mirzoeff is most indebted to Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly.* He emphasizes the direct character of

this appearance – in contrast to Arendt, where the focus is on a representative voice, political representation which in turn is based, as Butler writes, on norms of recognition that are hierarchical and exclusive.[2] In this conception, the protests of the last decade in diverse locations across the world have created anarchist moments, reclaiming the right to public space in an as yet uncodified and essentially uncodifiable way.[3] The received order is suspended and a new order emerges as a possibility, one including the right to appearance for hitherto excluded people and groups.

The women's "black protests" in Poland (against the proposed tightening of anti-abortion laws) can be viewed as such anarchist moments, seeking to overturn social roles and rebuild the public arena. Butler stresses the need to build this collective subject of emancipation as a community of bodies that is essentially changeable, dynamic, and based on constant exchange. Following Arendt, she assumes that "Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or indeed, among us."[4]

However, the performative dimension of assembly must also find its place in the representative sphere – the symbolic sphere also needs to be reclaimed. Before we again take to the streets to fight, body beside body, for the rights of women and a new society, we become part of the cooperating spectacle that seeks ancestors, symbols, and manifestos supporting the development of a sense of belonging. Anna Baumgart is realizing a series of assemblies of women, gathered at a round table (recently on 18 October in Lublin ["revolution-is-not-supper-but-then-again-maybe-it-is"]). Katarzyna Kalwat invites you to a retrospective exhibition of the noted artist Maria Klassenberg. Despite the differences between these two offerings, they share the goal of

women encountering each other in the course of their lives.

Genealogies I: WE

Votes for Women, Chastity for Men!
English suffragette slogan

When it comes down to it, what does "the woman question" actually mean today?

The Woman Question in Poland 2018 is the name given by Anna Baumgart to her performance, prepared for the Four Cultures Festival in Łódź in September 2018. This is a reference to the appearance of the Polish delegation at the International Women's Conference in Geneva in 1920, a little-known moment in the history of Polish feminism. In the performance's accompanying materials, the artist placed this title in a vignette, stylized as if from the 19th century. Yet this is not an anachronism or escape into the past, but a lighter and shorter version of the sentence: "I cannot believe that I have to protest again and again about the same question." This "question" – the fight for political equality, the right to one's body, and the right to representation – begins from the creation of an alliance based on strong bonds, from the search for mutual understanding with other women, those around us and those who have come before us.

Anna Baumgart invited women to a round table, recalling the historic events of 1989 but reversing their meaning. At the earlier meeting that is broadly regarded as the symbolic beginning of the democratization of Poland, there were 54 participants, including just two women: Grażyna Staniszewska on the opposition side and Anna Przecławska representing the government.[5] In *The Woman Question* this ratio is reversed. One of the purposes of the gathering is for the participants to present key figures for them, women who have achieved much, though frequently remaining unknown, forgotten, or holding a merely

marginal place in history.

Subsequent participants in the performance – themselves active in various ways in public life today – offer more names of women rebels and academics, artists and politicians, at the same time explaining their choices. Among these symbolic mothers and sisters are the first activists for women's issues and the first women researchers, such as Kazimiera Bujwidowa, Maria Grzegorzewska, and Józefa Joteyko; figures like Maria Janion and Marta Madejska, the author of a book about weavers in Łódź; or another local activist, out trans woman Katarzyna Gauza.[6]

Before this list is presented, however, a manifesto is delivered, first of all by Agata Araszkiewicz, heading the round table talks, and then by the actors Anna Kłos and Klara Bielawka. In their respective presentations they recount their experience, on the one hand of motherhood and on the other of acting, and of the ambiguous, frequently objectified position of actresses. At the same time, they step into the roles of Katarzyna Kobro and Róża Luksemburg, two distinguished figures who nevertheless have not taken their places in Polish culture, being doubly excluded as women and as "foreign" – precisely why they may be able to bring a new energy for transformation. The actresses also use discursive and poetic texts,[7] creating a polyphonic statement rooted in their own bodies and tradition – both analytic and rebellious at the same time. They are followed by Katarzyna Lewandowska with a text about body and art.

Anna Baumgart therefore attempts to provoke the appearance of a genealogy and the creation of a kindred spirit. This is not only a corrective to history, but an action to find a sense of closeness here and now. The dominant image of the historical process is based on the alibi of "universal and transpersonal aspects of humanity," as Anna Kłos says, reminding us at the same time that this "humanity" is a contingent and changing historical construct. The phrase "a

woman is not a human being" begins to take on a new meaning. On the one hand, it is about the exclusion of women from the universal; on the other, it emphasizes that the universal itself is an abstraction, detached from the body and from experience, essentially lacking a subject. Therefore, the intention is not so much to recognize the humanity of women but to recognize woman in humanity.

Genealogies II: I

> *One finds, as usual, that almost nothing is known about her*.
> Virginia Woolf, 1929

In her second book about existence, *Błony umysłu* [*Membranes of the Mind*] (2003), Jolanta Brach-Czaina consistently described the world from a female perspective – experienced, lived, and considered by a woman. The presentation of her authorship empowered her manifesto: on the cover she introduced herself as Jolanta, the daughter of Irena, granddaughter of Bronisława, great-granddaughter of Ludwika. Her philosophical work in the book, as well as in the earlier *Szczelinach istnienia* [*Cracks in Existence*] was also the work of research into everyday and bodily experience. Such work is not possible without putting yourself into personal relations with other women – above all with mothers and sisters.

Jolanta Brach-Czaina points to the therapeutic effects of genealogy, but also reveals a hidden fact: that these genealogical bonds may themselves require therapy. Motherhood, the relationship with your mother, and with your daughter, and work on them are essential in the context of a possible community of women. This dimension of "the woman question" appears during the meetings of Anna Baumgart in the statements of women-mothers. Pola Dwurnik presents herself as the daughter of Teresa Gierzyńska, who lives and works in her husband's shadow – essentially living alone. Anna Kłos's young

daughter says to her "You are not a human being, you're a mother." Can this "human" identity be regained? Or, on the contrary, as I wrote above, is it not worth fighting for this allegedly universal recognition, which does not really exist beyond a network of roles and particular constraints, functioning in a dynamic network of tension and mirror-images?

"*Silence* – Mum's loudest work," says Maria Klassenberg's daughter. *Silence* is a performance from the penultimate creative period of the artist, described by critics as a "collapse" before her falling into complete silence. For three weeks she lay on the floor at home, naked, face down, motionless, kept alive by her daughter, a teenager at the time. The interpretative machine created by critics, but also by the structures of power and supervision, fell silent too. Yet this act contained in itself the deepest ambiguity in the relationship of mother and daughter. "I thought she had died," her daughter says and hides in this horror. At the same time, it is she who takes on the role of the one who feeds, reversing their roles from her childhood. In the analysis of the performance in the *Dwutygodnik* periodical, Agata Adamiecka invokes Lucy Irigaray's formula about mother-daughter relationship – "and the one doesn't stir without the other." Conversely, Katarzyna Kalwat sees a critical moment here preceding any possible understanding, a moment of silence of the closest person but extended for many years. Public silence is always an intimate silence here. Maria Klassenberg also keeps silent consistently during the performance-vernissage, until its construction is revealed at the end.

Silence is only paradoxically loud because it screams with a double silence – Klassenberg fell silent and was passed over in silence before; this time, however, she gets lost and finds herself in a radical gesture of self-destruction. She turns her own biography, the biography of an absent woman, or one poorly or differently present, into art. Yet this is the biography of every

woman: the material here is one's life, one's body, and the place is one's home. Domestic space is the appropriate domain for her creative expression – her vernissages are house parties, her mess is "a form of spatial installation." But it is also, as Kalwat reminds us, the dinners that are missing because Mum is an artist, as well as some guy she treats instrumentally. The woman artist risks being doubly invisible, both as an artist and as a woman, and is always doubly condemned.

Genealogies III: ARTIST

I've had enough of that
Slogan from a poster, Poland, 2019

Reversal becomes the persistent strategy of Maria Klassenberg – or perhaps the strategy of Katarzyna Kalwat, who has dramatized her life. The critic and curator (played by Anda Rottenberg) inscribes the creative work of the artist in subsequent decades and describes it in terms of "periods," each of which anticipates great changes in art. Klassenberg is never there – she cannot be "encapsulated": in the 80s, when one's strength of declaration is key, she withdraws; in the 90s, when everyone is selling, she refuses. Today, she is an old woman whom no one wants on the market.

And she remains silent. At the same time, this whole process of introducing Klassenberg into the art world – of critics, of the market – has become a critique and parody of that world. More labels, the serious voice of the interpreter, a vernissage, and her daughter's statements – confession and demonstration in one – all of this reveals the absurdity of any purported goal. The artist's voice is multiply mediated – by the curator, by her daughter (and then translated). And also by the visual artist Aneta Grzeszykowską, who prepared the archive of Klassenberg's work, but herself remains invisible, only sharing

her name with Maria's daughter.

And yet Maria Klassenberg does not exist. Not only because she is fictional, but because she is in ecstasy – in a state outside herself. This is the result of being unrecognized and not recognizing oneself. Urszula Kiebzak, who plays Klassenberg, is an actress of the Stary Teatr in Kraków. With a note of bitterness, she emphasizes that she was able to play Maria Klassenberg only because no one knows her either. The multidimensional performance, like a Russian doll, unveils successive layers of feminine involvement in biography and art, at the same time undermining the possibility of easy solutions. We would like to see and hear Maria Klassenberg. What would that mean? Katarzyna Kalwat displays a nonexistent biography, but also the risk of emerging presence as long as the visibility system remains unchanged.

This line of thought is also present in Anna Baumgart's gathering. She also writes her work on memory into the work of memory in art. She not only invokes the 1989 Round Table Talks, but also Judy Chicago's performance *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979), and Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant's *The Famous Women Dinner Service* (1932–1934). This feminine genealogy also has gaps and demands a critical reaction, above all taking account of Western colonialism and paternalism towards Central Europe. In both of these works that make reference to women artists there are no representatives from this part of the world.

In her report-commentary on Anna Baumgart's performance, Agata Araszkiewicz writes about diffusion as a basic concept.[8] This can be interpreted as a proposal for multi-voiced and multi-bodied work, including subjects from the past and the present, developing a shared representation, but also exposing cultural tensions. Change requires the revolution postulated by Baumgart, her heroine, and her performers – today's active women. The stakes are not, however, a transformation in the circulation of art, but in the cultural structures of power and the

visible.

"We are here to show our fangs – to break the silence," say the performers in the actor's part. In the video fragments, they follow the poet Tishani Doshi:

> Girls are coming out of the woods, wrapped in cloaks and hoods, carrying iron bars and candles and a multitude of scars, collected on acres of premature grass and city buses, in temples and bars. [...] Is the world speaking too?

The search for a genealogy and the creation of a community of bodies are revolutionary actions. They require that the borders of visibility be shifted. The invisible girl becomes more and more visible and – exactly as in Tove Jansson's story – worse and worse, ever more ready to fight and to laugh in defense of the community of women.

1 "I am appropriating Hannah Arendt's evocative phrase 'the space of appearance' [from *The Human Condition* – I. K.] to describe the doubled experience of revealed police violence and subsequent protests in the same or similar spaces. But I will be using it in a very different way." Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter* (Miami: NAME Publications, 2017), 19, downloadable from: https://namepublications.org/item/2017/the-appearance-of-black-lives-matter/ (accessed November 1, 2019).

2 Cf. Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). See also the article referring to Butler by Marcin Stachowicz, "Kruche ciała: o widzialności działania politycznego" [Fragile Bodies: On the Visibility of Political Action], *Widok. Teorie i Praktyki Kultury Wizualnej* no. 17 (2017), http://www.pismowidok.org/pl/archiwum/2017/protest-obrazow/kruche-ciala-o-widzialnosci-dzialania-politycznego (accessed November 1, 2019).

3 Ibid., 83.

4 Ibid., 88.

5 Altogether 717 people took part in all the round tables and "sub-tables," including 55 women. The power of symbols is such that we usually only remember those who discussed at the main table. Cf. the material of Video Studio Gdańsk from 1989 ("The

Role of Women at the Round Table"): https://ninateka.pl/film/rola-kobiet-przy-okraglym-stole (accessed November 4, 2019).

6 In this context, it is worth recalling a similar genealogical project, the film *Siłaczki* [*Strongwomen*] (2018) by Marta Dzido and Piotr Śliwiński, about Polish suffragettes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

7 Texts prepared by: Agata Araszkiewicz, Anna Baumgart, Katarzyna Bojarska, and Wiktor Rusin.

8 Agata Araszkiewicz, "Okrągły stół kobiet. O interwencji Anny Baumgart Sprawa kobieca w Polsce 2018" [A Round Table of Women: On Anna Baumgart's Intervention 'The Woman Question in Poland 2018'], *Nowa Orgia Myśli*, http://nowaorgiamysli.pl/index.php/2019/06/05/okragly-stol-kobiet/ (accessed October 27, 2019).