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A critical commentary on Liliana Piskorska's work in progress project Sourcebook/Książka źródeł.

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Useful Ties: Liliana Piskorska's "Sourcebook / Książka źródeł"

At a time when systemic discrimination is being harnessed for political goals, art that addresses topics concerning the life of the LGBT+ community in Poland has acquired special importance. In her latest project, *Sourcebook / Książka źródeł*, Liliana Piskorska works towards restoring, understanding and preserving in her personal and the collective memory a number of (un)known Polish lesbians and feminists: Sławomira Walczewska, Władysława Habichtówna, Maria Konopnicka, Maria Dulębianka, Maria Rodziewiczówna, Helena Weychert, Jadwiga Skirmunttówna and Narcyza Żmichowska. Piskorska describes *Sourcebook* as "a catalog in the form of photographs, drawings, texts and objects", which seeks to grasp the "Polish-lesbian / national-queer" identity.[1] In her previous projects Piskorska often referred to the Western feminist and queer tradition. This time, she attempts to address the local women's movement, track down its progenitors and research its sources. She describes the course of her investigations and their personal dimension in a text that forms an integral part of the catalog.

In Ann Snitow's book, *The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary*, Piskorska came across Sławomira Walczewska, a feminist activist from Krakow. In 1974, while still a teenager, Walczewska wrote a letter to Kate Millet, one of the main theorists of American feminism. Despite her poor command of English, she attempted to make contact as she was intrigued by an article published in the Polish press that reported (in a tone of mockery) a speech by Millet calling



Fig. 1. *Wiecha* ("Topping Out"). "From the soil here beneath this house"

for women, black people and workers to unite. In reply to her letter, Walczewska received feminist brochures, including *The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook: Another Woman-made Book*. It gathered together information about American feminist initiatives: groups, publishing houses, clinics, etc. Its form inspired Piskorska to create a catalog-cum-dictionary to introduce the experience of "Polish-lesbian" identity. The collection of works described in this article forms the first part of the project, which the artist has announced she will continue. Piskorska draws from history and literature, but she fills in numerous gaps in women's biographies and contexts with her own associations – she invents and imagines how the lives of her protagonists looked, seeking to empathize with them and resurrect them. She thus tries to make lesbian stories stick in our memory in spite of the fact that the dominant historical narrative constantly erases them or relegates them to the distant margins.

Hidden

The homosexuality of the protagonists of Piskorska's project remains a matter of speculation, since the traces that could have confirmed it were systematically erased. Often under the guise of protecting their good name, this was done by their heirs, the custodians of their oeuvres, and researchers of their work. Not a single letter has been preserved from the presumably abundant correspondence between Narcyza Żmichowska and her lover Paulina Zbyszewska. Other letters by Żmichowska, the author of *The Heathen*, were censored by the editors when they were first published.[2] Maria Dulębianka was initially buried in the same grave as Maria Konopnicka at the Lychakiv Cemetery in

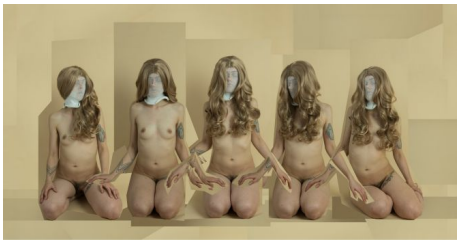


Fig. 3. *The Misses Borówczanka*
Fig. 9. Portrait of Narcyza Żmichowska
Fig. 24. *Wahlverwandtschaft*

Lviv, but the painter's body was moved after eight years to the Cemetery of the Defenders of Lviv. We can only guess at the reasons behind the decision – Krzysztof Tomasik, the author of *Homobiografie* ("Homobiographies"), suggests that "their close relationship was initially respected, but in the course of time it was realized that the common burial of two women without ties of blood was too telling and invited speculations about their relationship."[3] A significant example of how Maria Rodziewiczówna's gender expression was falsified is the cover of the second edition of her biography by Jana Głuszenia. A well-known photograph of "the guard of Easter Borderland watchtowers" in male attire was altered so that the writer appeared in a lace dress and her hair was lengthened.[4] The authors of *Krakowski Szlak Kobiet* ("Krakow Women's Trail"), meanwhile, were denied permission to publish in their book an image of Władysława Habichtówna, the founder of the Association of Women Postal Workers in Galicia, due to a mention of her relationship with the pianist Elżbieta Ciechanowska.[5]

The history of Polish lesbianism is vestigial and founded on rumors – it is a history of households, long-term relationships finding refuge behind closed doors and keeping the erotic aspects of life under wraps. Visibility risked exclusion. Already marginalized because of their gender, lesbians stayed in tactical hiding in order to avoid ostracism. This was their way of fighting to preserve their agency and a position from which they could fulfil their potential, for example as writers, as was the case with Narcyza Żmichowska, Maria Konopnicka and Maria Rodziewiczówna. The method used by Piskorska, which consists in covering – veiling or schematically sketching (figs 3, 9, 19, 24) – the faces of *Sourcebook's* protagonists can be interpreted as a reference to the gestures of erasing their memory and their sexual identity. It conveys a perspective of masked visibility – the

only one available to them.

In *The Feminism of Uncertainty*, Snitow analyzes the problem of women being forgotten – she asks: how does it happen that subsequent generations of feminists must continuously search anew, and with difficulty, for knowledge about their predecessors, as if it were never possible to preserve it for longer in the collective memory? To explain this state of affairs, the scholar taps into the term "stickiness," proposed by the psychologist and theorist of memory William Hirst: for political reasons, some memories turn out to be "stickier" than others. Women's activism (and homosexuality) is less "sticky" than the male versions,[6] because the patriarchy accords primacy to male agency and desire. We remember clear narratives that reinforce our knowledge of the world and our belief system.[7] Snitow remarks that under the current rules, "stickiness" would be tantamount to a betrayal of feminist ideals, which include questioning the dominant narrative, undermining the status quo and speaking with a multitude of voices.[8] Women therefore need to look for other ways to find their place in the collective memory.

Sticky

William Hirst also mentions other reasons for which certain memories stay with us for longer. He calls them relatively neutral reasons – as opposed to political ones – offering up as an example the tendency to remember red,[9] which has a powerful impact on the sense of vision. Snitow notes that images and figures of martyrs likewise increase the "stickiness" of a story.[10] Both these statements highlight the significance of the visual and affective dimension of memory. The dominant historical narrative is founded on dominant



Fig. 2 and 4. *The Misses Borówczanka*

representation, but we are inclined to recognize the meaning of representations that do not belong to it if they trigger our affective response. According to Kaja Silverman, to look is to embed an image among various important, albeit unconscious, memories (*visual habitus*) gathered in our mind. If a new image is brought to the vicinity of those memories and it is similar to what matters to us, or has moved us strongly, it will awaken the memories and gain in value for us.[11]

Piskorska taps into this kind of "stickiness" – from the stories of her protagonists she picks images that caught her attention, moved her, evoked other memories and acquired a symbolic meaning. This is why the Misses Borówczanka, from Maria Konopnicka's *Na jagody!* ("Picking Blueberries"), become important for her. The multiple line-drawn girls from this children's book (figs 2 and 4) become symbols representing a separatist and harmonious lesbian community that found refuge from other people in the forest. This is a reference to the lifestyle of Konopnicka, but also that of Maria Rodziewiczówna – both writers lived, each with her female partner, in manor houses far from the madding crowd. Piskorska weaves fantasies on the basis of history, and her drawings and objects evoke a special mood – the dense atmosphere of a summer day in the countryside, the smell of hay and resin, fingers sticky with blueberries, lethargic afternoons spent reading together and doing handiwork (literal and figurative). It is an imagined vision of an intimate world that needs to be protected. A predatory hawk hung on a string (fig. 6 and in *Na jagody!*) is akin to a warning. The alley leading to the manor house is haunted at night by a White Lady (fig. 7), but rumor has it that it is just Dulębianka giving a piggyback ride to Konopnicka, who covers herself with a white sheet to scare potential thieves away.[12]

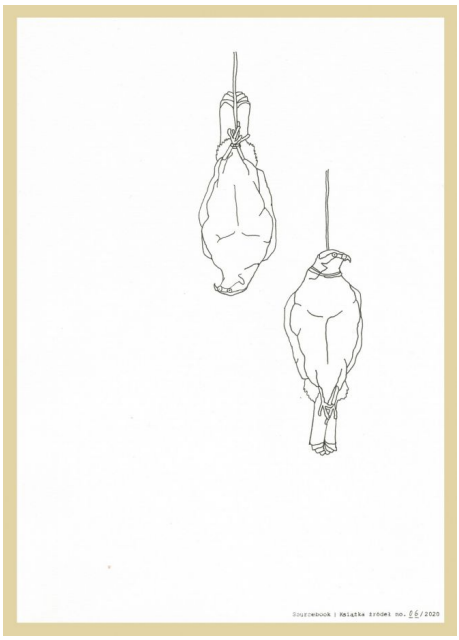
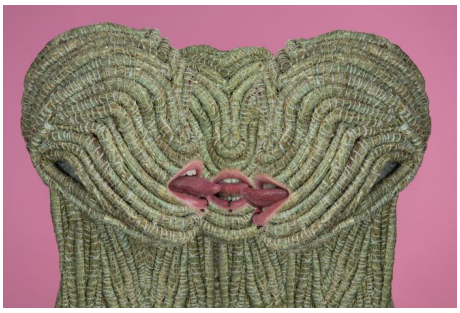


Fig. 6. Fig. 7. *White Lady*

Lato leśnych ludzi ("The Summer of the Forest People", 1920) and Maria Rodziewiczówna's biography introduce to the catalog fantasies about a butch-community that seeks to survive independently in the midst of undisturbed nature. It is informed by scouting ideas: respect for nature, self-development, and shared responsibility (figs. 34 and 35). In the figure of chief Wolverine, the eldest of the novel's protagonists ("settlers of the wilderness, founders of this primitive existence"[13]), Piskorska discerns a representation of Rodziewiczówna herself. While still a teenager, the writer began to dress in a masculine way and took over a farmstead inherited from her father. Following this way of thinking, Panther – "the companion whom [Wolverine] brought up for himself" – would refer to Helena Weychert, the writer's partner. The third protagonist, "a walking gentleness," Crane, would be Jadwiga Skirmunttówna. The latter settled down in Hruszowa after Wychert moved to Warsaw, but all three of them remained in touch. Schematic drawings depicting "useful ties" (figs 27 and 28) resemble illustrations from a scouting manual, and in the context of the whole catalog they may stand for symbols of relationships and friendships formed between women, but also of the social norms that bind them. Seeking to find a name for this ménage à trois, this alternative to marriage in which she lived, Skirmunttówna uses the German term *Wahlverwandtschaft*,[14] which means spiritual kinship or chosen kinship, and it can be understood as a relationship that breaks valid conventions. In a patriarchal and heteronormative society founded on monogamy, a lesbian

relationship between three women may appear monstrous (fig. 25), a drastic breach of the social order. Piskorska weaves straw Christmas decorations and (closer to her protagonists' situation while self-isolated during the pandemic) creates an object with the very title *Wahlverwandtschaft*, consisting of three heads and bringing to mind a totem, a symbol of mystical ties, a coat of arms for a non-traditional family (fig. 24).

In turn, "Monster" is a term that "sticks" to Narcyza Żmichowska – and this is how Piskorska represents her, once again using the weaving technique (fig. 9). The writer's unconventional lifestyle, her aversion to marriage and refusal to subordinate to dominant rules, as well as her ease at speaking out, turned her into a controversial figure.[15] Additionally, "the Enthusiasts" – the first Polish feminist group and founded by Żmichowska – could seem to opponents of emancipation to be a many-headed hydra. The group members followed the idea of "sisterhood" – founding their educational, conspiratorial and emancipatory activities on relationships based on friendship and love. Brimming with affection, the ties "kindled"[16] between the Enthusiasts are visualized by Piskorska in the form of schematic drawings depicting women wrestlers, or lovers, in an intimate embrace. The boundaries between bodies become blurred. It is easy to lose track in the tangle of arms and legs of which body part belongs to whom. This conveys the way in which the group members actually interacted with each other: a letter addressed to any one of them was in fact meant for the eyes of everyone else. Different individuals merged into a single figure, for example when Żmichowska wrote: "My dearest Tekla-Bianka"



Il. 25. *Wahlverwandtschaft*
Il. 28, 34, 35. *Useful Ties*

and likened her friends to Siamese twins.[17] The Enthusiasts' agenda provided an avant-garde counterbalance to patriarchal individualism – it expressed a hope for a radical change invested in the community.

Unite

The topic of a women's community is also addressed in another work that forms part of *Sourcebook*: *Wiecha* ("Topping Out")] (fig. 1) is dedicated to the two activists mentioned at the beginning of this text: Sławomira Walczewska and Ann Snitow. It is accompanied by the quotation, "from the soil here beneath this house,"[18] a reference to the meeting between the two in 1991 at Walczewska's apartment in the attic of the house belonging to the Association of Women Postal Workers in Krakow (figs 12 and 19). Operating for more than a hundred years, the cooperative, set up by the previously mentioned Władysława Habichtówna, was founded to help women who could not get married because of their profession. "We, working women should unite. [...] Throwing us into the pursuit of earning our daily bread, fate has united us"[19] – as the founder of the house said regarding the idea behind it. "From the soil here beneath this house," as Snitow notes, grew the local women's movement. A grass and herb wreath created by Piskorska, adorned with a saw and an axe cut from wood, references the tradition of celebrating the completion of an important stage in construction work, when such a decoration was installed atop the first rafter of a new building. This was to guarantee good fortune and hasten the completion of the work. In Liliana Piskorska's project, it is the feminist movement



Fig. 12. House of Building Association
Fig. 19. *Sketch for Women Postal Workers*

that becomes just such a house.

The author of *Sourcebook* finds in the biographies and texts of her protagonists various experiences, values and ideas that may inspire not only lesbians and women. She appreciates the political imagination that emerged from the practice of breaking prevailing rules and forming alternative relationships, which – as she believes – may become the foundation of a new society. She discerns empathy with the oppressed, which resulted from the very experience of oppression. She reads between the lines about our common co-dependence and the need to build a community of care. Piskorska quotes the words of Maria Dulębianka, who engaged in political activity, recognizing that women were the most important "new factor," capable of changing the corrupted world, eradicating the "weeds" of militarism and capitalism as well as everyday oppression and wrongs.[20] Piskorska suggests the lesbianism of her protagonists be perceived not only in terms of sexual orientation, but also as a political manifesto that posits a radical rejection of the patriarchy.[21] *Sourcebook* is an original attempt to generate an affective "texture of how belief was lived,"[22], in order to preserve it.

1 Liliana Piskorska, *Sourcebook / Książka źródeł*, 2020, 1 (computer printout).

2 Grażyna Borkowska, "Wstęp" in Narcyza Żmichowska's *Poganka* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2013), XXI–XXII.

3 Krzysztof Tomasik, *Homobiografie* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014), 28.

4 Ibid., 39–40.

5 Agnieszka Brożkowska was denied permission by the representatives of the Board of the Women Postal Workers' Cooperative. See: Agnieszka Brożkowska, "Władysława Habichtówna, Solidarność albo śmierć," in *Krakowski Szlak Kobiet: Przewodniczka po Krakowie emancypantek*, vol. II, ed. Ewa Furgał (Krakow: Fundacja Przestrzeń Kobiet, 2010), 172. From: Piskorska, *Sourcebook*, 6.

6 A local example may be the popularity of Karol Radziszewski's exhibition *The Power of Secrets* (curator: Michał Grzegorzek, U-jazdowski, 15 November 2019 – 29 March 2020, https://u-jazdowski.pl/program/wystawy/karol-radziszewski), dominated by representations of male homosexuality, which have easily stuck in the memory.

7 Ann Snitow, *The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 284.

8 Ibid., 286.

9 Ibid., 278.

10 Ibid., 284.

11 Kaja Silverman, *Treshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1996), 3–4.

12 Tomasik, *Homobiografie*, 40.

13 Maria Rodziewiczówna, *Lato leśnych ludzi* (Poznań: Gebethner i Wolff, 1920), 7.

14 Tomasik, *Homobiografie*, 62.

15 Tadeusz Żeleński (Boy), "Przedmowa do pierwszego wydania," in Narcyza Żmichowska, *Listy: Narcyssa i Wanda*, ed. Barbara Winklowa, Helena Żytkowicz (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2007), 15.

16 "Exalted, frequently passionate friendships were kindled between women," ibid., 8.

17 Barbara Zwolińska, *O konwencji i formach grzecznościowych w listach Narcyzy Żmichowskiej (w świetle przyjmowanej przez pisarkę epistolarnej roli przyjaźni)* (Warsaw: DiG, 2004), 158. From: Piskorska, *Sourcebook*, 16.

18 Snitow, *The Feminism of Uncertainty*, 220.

19 "Referat jubileuszowy na 50-lecie istnienia Spółdzielni Mieszkaniowej Urzędniczek Pocztowych w Krakowie oraz wyjątki z przemówień Władysławy Habichtówny," in *Krakowski Szlak Kobiet*, 88. From: Piskorska, *Sourcebook*, 5.

20 Maria Dulębianka, *Stanowisko polityczne kobiety* (Warsaw: Skład Główny

w Administracyi „Steru", 1908, 13.

21 Piskorska, *Sourcebook*, 2.

22 "Of course, almost everything and everyone gets forgotten. We know hardly anything about the belief systems and – still more elusive – about the texture of how belief was lived …"; Snitow, *The Feminism of Uncertainty*, 278. Quoted from: Piskorska, *Sourcebook*, 1.