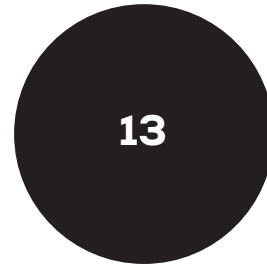




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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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Anna Michalak

## **The Author as Literature. Dorota Masłowska's (Visual)**

### **Autofiction**

Translated by Sara Rodowicz-Ślusarczyk

Masłowska's debut was an event in which the author and her image emerged simultaneously with the published text itself, complementing it. Dressed in a tracksuit, Masłowska played some kind of a role within the space of the media. Together with the ways in which the book was promoted, her self-creations conjured up a certain brand. The author became recognisable, and this in turn influenced the reception of her work; while opinions on the literary value of the text itself were strongly divided. Dominik Antonik portrayed the phenomenon of the author brand in his book *Autor jako marka (The Author as a Brand, editor's translation)*<sup>1</sup>. According to Antonik, an author brand is superior to the text, which renders meaningless any musing about the latter's literary value as disconnected from the author and the context. He takes up the term *dispositif*, reinvented by Ryszard Kluszczyński, along with Lev Manovich's theory, and Henry Jenkins' idea of media convergence, as well as Scott Lash and Celia Lury's revived concept of the cultural industry, all of which leads him to juxtapose the names of Jacek Dehnel and Michał Witkowski with the Nike and Apple brands. A brand isn't a thing, but one could say the it is an object of the media which partakes in shaping communication space. The clients' presence in different media, as well as their emotional engagement are what makes its creation possible. Antonik's theses can be easily connected with recognition of the writer's status as medium, described by Marek Krajewski in his article, *Staliśmy się mediami (We Have Become the Media)*:

Let us imagine a person writing a book. They will use all kinds of different media, such as writing, the computer, the Internet, and various other means of communication—the radio, the television, the billboard—which are essential for establishing a connection with potential readers. As they become a writer, and thus not only someone who writes, but also someone who is read, this person becomes a medium. A medium thanks to which the cultural industry can create its connections (...).<sup>2</sup>

In an article-analysis of Antonik's book, *Autor nie jest niewinny* (*The Author Is Not Innocent*), Maciej Jakubowiak goes as far as claiming that the writer herself is literature:

But this scattered communication, made up of words, images and sounds, can we still call it literature? What determines its identity? What proves to be fundamental in this new situation is the figure of the author. While constituting a point of reference for all these messages, the author also becomes their object. The writer is the beginning and the end of literature which undergoes mediatization, the writer himself becomes literature.<sup>3</sup>

We can thus speak about mediatization not so much of literature but of the figure of the author, constantly present in the media. Echoing the transformation of cultural practices connected with the change of communication media, the author is called upon to show herself but also to play the role of a critic with respect to her own work. The text of the book is only one of the many elements within the communication space, a space wherein the author comes to the fore as an agency capable of creation and self-creation. Meanwhile, the field of communication and the various media it engages is shaped in a concurrent manner, with content dispersed across various channels, none of which is central.<sup>4</sup>

One element of the publishing process which employs the figure of the author is the promotional book launch meeting. In order to reflect upon the author's capacity for being literature, I want to look at the meeting which promoted Dorota Masłowska's last book, *More Than You Can Eat*<sup>5</sup>, which took place on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015, at the bar Studio in Warsaw. The book that was presented is a collection of articles from a column about food, published between 2011 and 2013 in a women's monthly, *Zwierciadło* [*Mirror*]. The meeting was announced through publishing an event notice on the Internet-based social medium, Facebook. This announcement used a photograph of Masłowska taken by Kobas Laksa<sup>6</sup>. Five days earlier, in an interview conducted by Sylwia Chutnik, Dorota Masłowska explained why she decided to engage with the theme of food, "I thought that my persona, my so-called media image is very detached from the universe of groceries, in spite of my surname [*masło* means butter in Polish], and so generally, this could be very interesting"<sup>7</sup>. The book includes illustrations by Maciej Sieńczyk, who has previously collaborated with Masłowska on numerous occasions. Sieńczyk's illustration

portraying the author is also visible on the book cover. In the aforementioned interview, Sylwia Chutnik points out, "It's also yet another book where we can see you and your portrait on the cover". Masłowska comments, "I result from the way I write, and so does my perception, so it's hard for me to pretend it isn't me but someone more objective who's writing"<sup>8</sup>. Upon Masłowska's request, the publishing house invited Sylwia Chutnik to once again conduct the interview during the book's promotional meeting. Other invited participants included those involved in Masłowska's previous project, *Mister D*. The event was comprised of two thirty-minute-long parts. During the first part the writer read three columns from the book, accompanied by music. The second part was the interview conducted by Chutnik.

In the performing arts, performance art as such is connected to the artist's active presence within the work. Henry Sayre writes that this can be conceived of as "a determined action or set of actions (...), which take place as part of a special occasion, within an established place"<sup>9</sup>. According to this definition, the promotional meeting is a piece of performance art, the photo shoot and the notice on Facebook are a part of it. The first part of the meeting is also a performing of the text. As Mieke Bal says, the idea of an author reading the text "connects the past of the writing with the present of experiencing the work"<sup>10</sup>. Reading as such also provides the opportunity for new interpretations, while the text is performative in its own nature. It describes an existing reality and creates a new one. Public readings influence the author's subjectivity as it is materialised in the presence of spectators. Revealing the author and her real physicality resists the classical realistic narrative, wherein she would be invisible and the less we would notice her, the wiser and stronger she would seem.

Sayre goes on to write that within performance conceived of as an art, the performers maintain their own identity. That is, they do not embody someone else, as in theatre. As a performer, Masłowska sanctions the credibility of spoken words—and because she isn't anonymous, she adds extra meanings to the text. Simultaneously, the author and the text reconnect in the instant of reading. Reading out loud can also be important for Masłowska, as it allows her to constitute her own subjectivity as an author in direct contact with an audience, and the text. Her authorship becomes performative in the sense of a constant playing out. There is a harmonious fusion between what Masłowska does, how she writes, what she

looks like, how she behaves, what she says and how she says it—a fusion which results, so it seems, from the totality of her experience. Hence the efficiency of the author—of her image, her body, her voice—as a medium for the text’s artistic content.

An important part of performance art is its one-off character. It creates its own reality which will disperse as it ends, but which nonetheless remains in the participants’ memory. Memory is also what renders performance art possible, because its meaning must be somehow recognisable for the audience. Masłowska’s text relates to everyday experiences, the custom of a promotional meeting is maintained, and the author herself is a known figure. In parallel to a discourse about her literary work, Masłowska also conducts a visual narrative on “What a writer looks like”. Commenting upon herself from the time following the publication of her debut *Snow White and Russian Red*, she says “It’s funny how I had these attributes of a writer back then. Now I must be too much of a writer to collect any attributes. I don’t have to make myself up”<sup>11</sup>. Visual representations of Masłowska play the role of intermediaries in textual communication with the audience, and they provide a structure for concepts about the author. Thus, the audience bring with them a lot of presumptions about the event, and its meaning is built based on these presumptions. During the event, Masłowska plays herself while also playing with an image of the author’s persona, reading and talking about experiences connected not with literature, but with the mundane act of eating. Thus, art mingles with life, rendering the artist visible as a human being. The text is also saturated with mockery, the title itself as well as the subtitle, *Paraculinary Column*, already make food a mere excuse for speaking about something else. One can find here a critique of consumerism (already present in the title), and this takes place on this very consumerism’s own territory—a women’s lifestyle magazine. The book’s back cover includes the same short text by Masłowska as the one used in the event’s description on Facebook. The author states:

Everybody knows I write books, I record albums, but few people guess that in my free time, I also eat a little bit. I wrote columns about this previously unrevealed fact for *Zwierciadło* magazine. For two years I had a sort of alimentary section there, where I described the food I ate with the verbiage typical of my writing.

Yet these forced culinary deliberations were merely a pretext for broader reflection—bragging about my overseas travels, describing the moral slips of people I know, or revealing the drastic details of my plastic surgery. Today, additionally adorned with Maciej Sieńczyk's genius illustrations, I pass them on, moved, to the reader's hands.<sup>12</sup>

It isn't only the text which is a parody representation of reality, but also the ironic enactment of a promotional meeting, visible in the way the event was organised and realised. The read text, as well as the interview, are "performed" in a factitious way, they are overly staged. Much like the title, the subtitle, and the text of the book, their playing out suggests that something else is at stake than a simple promotional meeting. Masłowska explains she agreed to write the series on food for a women's magazine only because the editors fully accepted her terms. The publication of the book and the promotional meeting also took place on her own conditions. Usually, food columns in women's magazines find themselves at the extreme opposite of the artistic value ascribed to books garnering award's like the *Nagroda Literacka Nike*. Still, Masłowska decided to write them, and what's more, she even participated in a promotional meeting which launched their book edition. During the meeting, boundaries between the private and the public, or those between art and life were blurred. Masłowska talked about cooking, about everyday life, her daughter was also in the audience and she became one of the motifs in the interview.

Mieke Bal claims that theatricality is "ostensibly subjectivity's other"<sup>13</sup>. Functioning in the public sphere as a writer brings with it the necessity of performing a series of repetitions of the norms ascribed to the production of a writer's subjectivity. Putting these demands into inverted commas makes it possible to reclaim one's own agency in the process, while also admitting to a dependency on these demands. Questioning norms of behaviour connected to high literature through the ironic playing out of authorship can produce the effect of creating a more authentic subjectivity, one which encompasses the private "I" of the author and their everyday experiences. A negation of the necessity to subscribe to ritual, that of endowing artistic value upon one's work, highlights the significance of the author's subjectivity. Thus, during an event, which can be considered a performance, the overly played-out identity can be a means of augmenting authenticity, and of reclaiming agency in creating subjectivity on more transparent and honest terms.

The concept of the author as a brand is largely based on Ryszard Kluszczyński's ideas regarding interactivity. He confronts the artefact with an interactive work, a work which is the product of the author's and the viewer's mutual activity and which can only materialise itself in this interaction, thus becoming identical with its reception. The artist doesn't construct any meanings nor does he search for them—his main task is to create



Kobas Laksa, *DOROTA 2015*. Photo courtesy of the artist

context for experiencing the work, a context wherein various singular meanings come up for each individual addressee<sup>14</sup>. What most clearly differentiates performance art from theatre performance is interaction with the audience<sup>15</sup>. Engaging the viewer requires them actually feeling that the show is addressed to them, and that the performer is authentic. Throughout her entire book launch Masłowska directly addressed the audience, which in turn responded to her, laughing and clapping. Together with the band, the author reacted to "interruptions" that occurred, for example playing Krzysztof Krawczyk's song, *Parostatek*, for members of an audience who were leaving a neighbouring theatre. Towards the end, after two questions from the public, when no one else was volunteering to speak, Sylwia Chutnik made a comment: "Well it certainly isn't a shower of questions". To which Masłowska replied, "But it is some form of discussion". Participating in a show of performance art is a unique experience, whose reality fades when the performance ends, and trying to later render this experience in words can fail to capture its essence. Experience is a category that is widely described, but in most cases is considered personal, empirical, corporeal, and not fully accessible to language<sup>16</sup>. The unique character of experiencing performance art, impossible to render through language, is something that disturbs attempts at placing it within a congruous meta-narrative on identity. Thus, the event does not contribute to stabilising Masłowska's subjectivity, it is rather an element of a process wherein auto-fictionalisation occurs. This is because the autofiction in question is based on making visible the affective and subjective investment within the actual process of creating.

Serge Doubrovsky's concept of autofiction takes into account the fictional character of autobiography as creating a fictional story where one plays the main role oneself. This seems to agree with Paul de Man's intuitions when he states that "the

differentiation between fiction and autobiography cannot be reduced to an either-or opposition. It rather leads to a situation wherein we cannot decide if something is one or the other<sup>17</sup>. According to Philippe Lejeune, the characteristic trait of a textual autobiography is the autobiographical pact, based on the assumption that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are all the same person, who "truly" exists<sup>18</sup>. This kind of a referential character is what distinguishes an autobiographical text from fiction. In this framework, an autobiography is not literature, because it is "true", and thus doesn't require the subject to capture herself from a meta-level. The reality that the autobiographical text refers to is not an illusion of truth created with adequate referential signs, but rather a realistic portrayal of a "truly" pre-existing reality.

The term "truth" is a big problem, as it doesn't make a very reliable impression in this context. It could seem that the author's real person comes to the rescue of arbitrary language signs. Or perhaps it is rather her image, usually created with photographs and portraits. In a photograph which depicts the author, the reference doesn't require any pact, because the similarity can quite simply be observed. Photography's specific efficiency is based on the intuitive conviction of its credibility, because we assume it to be a perfect copy of truth<sup>19</sup>. But even before corrective software manipulations became an inseparable part of the photograph, the arbitrary character of photographic captions was already noted. In a very obvious way, a portrait doesn't reflect reality—just like a photograph in which the exposure can be staged and then later undergo far-reaching corrective alterations, including the adding of objects which weren't originally there in the photo.

The photograph to promote the event was taken by Kobas Laksa. Laksa is a visual artist who also creates performance art pieces, and two of his films, *Pojechałem z mamą na pielgrzymkę* (*I Went On a Pilgrimage with My Mom*) and *Koło jest przyjemne* (*The Circle is Pleasant*) are portraits<sup>20</sup>. During the photo shoot with Masłowska, apart from the cover photo, he also created another which was posted in the comments, and five more images can be seen on the author's Facebook profile, in a gallery entitled *Dorota*<sup>21</sup>. The photos have clearly been staged. They depict Masłowska in a modern kitchen, very ascetically arranged, with some unusual and even surreal props, the boldest of which is a chopped-off plastic hand. In one photograph, Masłowska is looking out through the frame of a mirror, wearing a long, ugly plastic nose—this may be a very direct way of pointing out the multi-



layered process of creating an “untrue” image (Pinocchio’s nose?). What the mirror reflects isn’t seen by the person looking into it, but by those who look at the photograph. The viewers thus look at a multiplied image, and there is no moment wherein the relationship between the “true” person and their reflection would become stable. In the photograph used as a cover image, Masłowska poses dressed in attire that isn’t kitchen-like: she is wearing a colourful, silk-like blouse, with strong make-up and meticulously arranged hair, holding the plastic hand and touching her lips with it. Next to her on the kitchen stove there’s a pot full of plastic forks sticking out of something (probably some snails with large shells). As a woman in the kitchen, holding the chopped-off hand like a piece of meat, the writer evokes associations with traditional ideas about a woman’s proper place, and treating her body like a piece of meat. The shoot is a performance in front of the camera rather than the “true” Masłowska, “truly” cooking in her “true” kitchen. Together with Masłowska, Laksa creates a photographic essay about the writer’s figure, wherein they play with the convention of a woman’s kitchen portrait shot for a women’s magazine. The visual aesthetics also have a lot to do with the aesthetics of Masłowska’s texts themselves. Her language isn’t natural, and although it strongly resembles colloquial language, it is rather its remix. After taking it apart, she reassembles it anew from ready-made, somewhat processed elements, and it is thus transformed and overly stylised. As such the photos and all the forms of representation are fictions. Much like the text.

Dorota Masłowska’s artistic strategy is evocative of the concept of visual autofiction in conceptual art, described by Joost de Blooist<sup>22</sup>. Conceptual art concentrates on exposing the creative process, and although it employs different means, text and image have special significance in this respect. In her book entitled *Doświadczenie audiowizualne* (*The Audiovisual Experience*), Maryla Hopfinger underscored the behavioural tendencies in conceptual art, especially present in the domain of performance art. They lead to annihilating the distinction between art and life<sup>23</sup>, through interventions into mundane, everyday reality. Visual autofiction becomes a form self-commentary or self-criticism as it is played out. The main differential traits of autofiction are its capacity for questioning genres, and its excessive use of meta-narratives. Simultaneously, the conceptual definition of authorship makes any meta-narrative as such impossible, because the goal of conceptual art is to blur the difference between art, practice, theory, and critique. In Masłowska’s case,

these elements can be found not only in the aforementioned photo shoot, but also in the text that is juxtaposed with the book's description, and the promotional meeting. Republishing articles from a previous food column in a women's magazine in the form of a book, which is then in turn promoted during a conventionally structured book launch, can be seen as a way of creating this autofiction. This can be seen as a strategy of critical commentary on the institutions of literature and the author as such. Alternatively, it can be seen as an ironic, self-aware albeit compulsive submission to the logic of marketing. In any case, Masłowska doesn't express her "own views" in a direct manner, but together with the audience she experiences the façade character of a reality that is both described and created live during the meeting. Thus, she both shares her experience and depicts ways in which her subjectivity is contoured, and the part she herself plays in this process. In one of the interviews, she says:

In the end, I always give in to the temptation of turning the camera onto myself. Of taking a photograph of myself with my own work, against the background of a world I created. The author is one of the protagonists, after all. Her emotions connected to writing, her current life situation are generally the motor for the whole thing<sup>24</sup>.

The themes of Masłowska's projects are often related to her own image as a source of artistic success, where attention is focused onto the self rather than the creative work. One's own image can be understood as the author brand, the creation of which requires the viewers' emotional engagement. The participatory character of her work doesn't follow the consistent linear narrative, but it is rather a certain identity project. "Dorota Masłowska" is an interactive, multi-media work, it is augmented literature, so to speak. It's important to add that the events connected to publishing and promoting the book took place simultaneously to Masłowska's music project, *Mister D.*. This is how she described it: "For me this album is also a way of mocking myself, of mocking my own image and the product called 'Dorota Masłowska'"<sup>25</sup>. Masłowska is thus literature as the creation of autofiction, through various textual and non-textual means.

## Footnotes

- 1 Dominik Antonik, *Autor jako marka. Literatura w kulturze audiowizualnej społeczeństwa informacyjnego* [The Author as a Brand. Literature in the Audiovisual Culture of the Information Society], (Kraków: Universitas, 2014).
- 2 Marek Krajewski, "Staliśmy się mediami" ["We Have Become the Media"], *Dwutygodnik* 2015, no 162, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/5998-stalismy-sie-mediami.html>, accessed April 10, 2016.
- 3 Maciej Jakubowiak, "Autor nie jest niewinny" ["The Author is Not Innocent"], *Dwutygodnik* 2015, no 167, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/6097-autor-nie-jest-niewinny.html>, accessed September 14, 2015.
- 4 Henry Jenkins, *Covergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, (New York-London: New York University Press, 2006), 205.
- 5 Dorota Masłowska, *Więcej niż możesz zjeść. Felietony parakulinarne* [More Than You Can Eat. Paraculinary Column], (Warsaw: Noir sur Blanc, 2015).
- 6 See also: <https://www.facebook.com/events/897658763623824/>, accessed on December 10, 2015.
- 7 See also: <http://vod.tvp.pl/audycje/kultura/cappuccino-z-ksiazka/wideo/11042015/19355190>, accessed on September 14, 2015.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Henry Sayre, "Performance", in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 91.
- 10 Mieke Bal, "Performance and Performativity", in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 198.
- 11 Katarzyna Surmiak-Domańska, "Dorota Masłowska: jestem Bogiem rzeczy małych" ["Dorota Masłowska: I am the God of Small Things"], *Wysokie Obcasy, Gazeta Wyborcza* supplement October 30, 2012, [http://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/1,53662,12689562,Dorota\\_Maslowska\\_\\_jestem\\_Bogiem\\_rzeczy\\_małych.html?as=2](http://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/1,53662,12689562,Dorota_Maslowska__jestem_Bogiem_rzeczy_małych.html?as=2), accessed on January 16, 2016.

- 12 Dorota Masłowska, *More Than You Can Eat*, back cover.
- 13 Mieke Bal, 227.
- 14 Ryszard Kluszczyński, *Film, wideo, multimedia. Sztuka ruchomego obrazu w erze elektronicznej* [Film, video, multimedia. The Art of Moving Image in the Digital Era], (Kraków: Rabid 2002), 31–34.
- 15 Anna Burzyńska, "Performans tekstualny" ["Textual Performance"], in, *Dekonstrukcja, polityka i performatyka*, [Deconstruction, Politics, Performativity] (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), 395.
- 16 Roma Sendyka, *Od kultury ja do kultury siebie* [From the Culture of I to the Culture of Self], (Kraków: Universitas, 2015), 127.
- 17 Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement", *MLN*, vol. 94, No. 5, (December, 1979): 921.
- 18 Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
- 19 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010) 124, 125.
- 20 See also: the artist's bio: <http://culture.pl/pl/tworca/kobas-laksa>, accessed on January 10, 2016.
- 21 See: [https://www.facebook.com/kobaslaksa/media\\_set?set=a.10153309162471015.1073741837.770971014&type=3](https://www.facebook.com/kobaslaksa/media_set?set=a.10153309162471015.1073741837.770971014&type=3), accessed on January 10, 2016.
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- 23 Maryla Hopfinger, *Doświadczenie audiowizualne* [The Audiovisual Experience], (Warsaw: Sic!, 2003), 112.

24 Surmiak-Domańska.

25 Agnieszka Kowalska, "Córka Rydzyka śpiewa własne piosenki, czyli Dorota Masłowska nagrała płytę" ["Rydzik's Daughter Sings Her Own Songs, or Dorota Masłowska Has Recorded an Album"], *Gazeta Wyborcza* February 21, 2014  
[http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,15498546,Corka\\_Rydzika\\_spiewa\\_wlasne\\_piosenki\\_czyli\\_Dorota.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,15498546,Corka_Rydzika_spiewa_wlasne_piosenki_czyli_Dorota.html), accessed on January 10, 2016.