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“Agriculture is work, not fun” – reads the slogan of a campaign organized in 2018 by the Lower Silesian Chamber of Agriculture, which intended via a variety of channels (films, posters, information disseminated in local media and during festivities) to remind those who had just moved to the countryside about the nature of work in agriculture and its demands. Three short information clips were shot (*Smells in the Countryside*,



Alicja Rogalska, *Alien Species; Jersey Migrant Worker Archive (2017-2018)*

Transport, Noise in the Countryside) which bring to mind training materials for newly arrived residents. What comes to the fore is the irrefutable materiality of farming: the smell of natural fertilizers used to grow crops, the lack of appropriate access roads, and the noise of modern machines used on farms. According to the authors, the campaign

is an appeal to the local authorities to take decisive actions while drawing up spatial management plans, adjusting the countryside and dirt roads to modern agricultural equipment and informing the inhabitants and law enforcement services that working in the fields during the harvest is necessary regardless of the time of day.¹

The information campaign came as a response to a host of recent incidents that have marked a return of the – seemingly outdated – conflict between the city and the countryside. The new inhabitants of rural areas, mostly fugitives from major urban centers, more and more often complain to the police about the work of nearby farmers, which they see as a nuisance and breach of the peace. This happens most often during the harvest, when farmers work after 10 PM (if the grain is dry and the weather is about to change the next day, crops need to be gathered as quickly as possible, and therefore work often continues late into the night). Sometimes farmers are admonished by the police or fined on the basis of Article 51 of the Petty Offences Code, which states: “whoever shouts, makes noise, raises

alarm or in a different way disturbs the peace, public order, night rest or causes a scandal in a public place shall be liable to the penalty of arrest, restriction of liberty or a fine".²

This conflict might appear to be local and episodic, yet it is underpinned by a nexus of problems related to modern-day transformations of the city and the countryside. It demonstrates the blurring of administrative borders between the two, the complex character of rural public space, and relates to changes in agriculture and its social perception. This perception, in turn, has been shaped by historical myths and narratives. For that matter, the countryside is perceived predominantly as a mere "resource", a landscape devoid of the context of physical labor, a view enjoyed from your veranda, the countryside "rustic" style.

One of the reasons why the countryside is losing its agricultural context and farmers' work (perceived as mere "fun") has become depreciated is a process whereby it is "desocialized". What does this mean? Roch Sulima remarks that "the semantic field of the 'countryside' is diverging to an ever greater degree from the semantic field of the word 'peasants'. The countryside is becoming more and more of a geographic, landscape, mythical-symbolic phenomenon than a social address".³ This problem has a long-standing tradition in Polish public life. It often shapes the perception of farmers' protests in urban spaces, for instance in the case of the wave of agricultural workers' strikes in the 1990s, which – although they became one of the most powerful voices of protest against neoliberal economic reforms and highlighted the social costs of the capitalist transformation – were mostly seen as riots that disturbed the "proper" functioning of the city.

The tension between the mythologized images of the countryside and the political representation of farmers provides a good entry point to reflect on the artistic practice of Alicja Rogalska. In her projects devoted to the countryside and those who live there, the artist begins with the question of representation, understood both as images and as "speaking on behalf of someone else". What she relegates to the background, however, is the question of "dismantling" widespread and stereotypical visions in terms of their incongruence with reality and tracing the mechanisms of power that lead to distortions and lend them legitimacy. Rogalska instead takes an interest in collaborating with farmers and in images unmediated by the structures of power and dominant media discourse – even if they function in a hermetic niche. Agricultural work becomes a lens to expand one's field of vision.

Rogalska's art projects take as their starting point the invisibility of farming work, yet they do not necessarily need to produce a material representation: video or photographs. The artist concentrates more on revealing local and global mechanisms (always both political and aesthetic at the same time) that determine this invisibility.

Cultivation

Given Poland's official ideological orientation under communism, artists would often address the "peasant question". The rural theme, and therefore also the topic of farming, was present not only in literature, but also in film and television series. Today, images of labor in the countryside are seen mostly by those directly engaged in such work – farmers. They can be found in specialized television broadcasts, such as "Agrobiznes" [Agrobusiness] and "Tydzień" [The Week] on Polish State Television as well as "Wieś to też Polska" [The Countryside Is also Poland] on TV Trwam, and sometimes also in entertainment TV shows, such as "The Farmer Wants a Wife", whose broad audience includes viewers with no connection to agriculture whatsoever. Yet, in the latter case, the images are not only secondary to the matrimonial adventures of the protagonists, but also usually provide a pretext for manufacturers of farming equipment – sponsors of the program – to advertize their wares.

Yet, a certain niche is developing online. YouTube has seen the emergence of more and more channels that gather hours of footage showing modern-day agriculture. In 2015, Alicja Rogalska, alongside curator Aneta Rostkowska, organized a review of such amateur film work. [CULTIVATION – the National Polish Festival of Short Agricultural Films](#) was held as part of the ArtBoom Festival in Krakow.

Created mostly by young farmers and posted on YouTube, the films provide an insight into their everyday lives, yet they do not portray labor as toil. They actually offer a proud demonstration of modern production techniques. Often they are edited like music videos; film footage is often accompanied by a soundtrack of fast electronic music that adds dynamism to the images and deprives them of any sense of ponderousness. It is as if the YouTube farmers wanted to surround agriculture with a magical aura, lending it glamor and desirability. Seen from such a perspective, farm labor appears to be fully mechanized, and therefore pleasurable, although more than a dozen minutes of footage that show sowing

a field or the harvest may also simply be boring. Based on the repetitiveness of the activities performed, the films induce a certain trancelike state, thus giving us a taste of the farming experience.

The channels also bring together a community that not only discusses agriculture, and the types and characteristics of the machines used, but also the ways of shooting and editing footage. It is an “image niche” that attracts just one specific group of interested viewers – in the age of algorithms, it is probably difficult for someone not seeking information on agriculture to come across. On the lookout for images created by the grassroots, Rogalska would like to change the perception of such labor. In this case, it means looking at the machine or directly from the machine, “from a tractor’s perspective” – as the artist and the film series curator put it.

The YouTube niche is a reversal of the modern-day invisibility of agricultural work, which can be traced back to the period of transition to capitalism in Poland. On the other hand, the accumulation of such footage brings to mind the “hyper-visibility” of peasants and workers in the Polish People’s Republic, when the country’s rural areas were synonymous with the nation’s “supply base”. By organizing the CULTIVATION Festival, which provided a venue for farmers-cum-filmmakers and those studying the countryside to meet, Rogalska established a platform where amateur practice became a starting point for reflecting on the modern-day transformations occurring in agriculture and the social advancement of peasants under communism in Poland.

Potatoes

The artist’s projects usually adopt a participatory character – they revolve around meeting, and exchanging knowledge and experiences, instead of producing an art object. This was also the case with her artistic residency on the island of Jersey, where Rogalska collaborated with migrant workers. Located just off the French coast, the island is famous for growing potatoes known as Jersey Royals. Kidney-shaped, they have a thin skin and an earthy flavor. They are mainly consumed in Great Britain, where more than thirty thousand tons of Jersey Royals are shipped every season. On your plate, the potatoes are a harbinger of the coming spring, since the island’s gentle climate makes it possible for the first harvest to begin as early as the end of March. Traditional cultivation methods are involved – potatoes

need to be planted by hand as the fields are usually located on slopes, while seaweed collected on nearby beaches serves as a fertilizer. The Jersey potato variation is listed in the register of EU's regional agricultural products (Protected Designation of Origin) – a law that guarantees the protection of the name and authenticity of produce. What is therefore protected is the “Britishness” of this delicacy, while concealing at the same time its dependence on a migrant workforce: cultivation relies primarily on the labor of seasonal workers from Poland and Portugal. This dependence made itself manifest at the beginning of 2018, when the launch of procedures preparing for Brexit made the pound dip and far fewer Poles than usual came to work on Jersey. According to media reports, due to Brexit and poor weather conditions, the harvesting of Jersey Royals began almost a month later than usual for the first time in history and yield was smaller than in previous years.⁴

As popularly viewed, the road that a potato travels to the plate is short – food “comes from” the shop. Like other kinds of agricultural produce, the history of its production remains off the average person's radar. That gap was filled by Alicja Rogalska during her artistic residency on the island in 2017 and 2018. Her project, *Agri-Care*, is a prize for the best employer on Jersey awarded by employees. At meetings organized by the artist, agricultural workers discussed local working conditions and their experiences on Jersey. During workshops, they used “tactile memory” to model potatoes in clay, realistically reconstructing their shape and appearance. One of them, judged closest to ideal, was cast in bronze. It became the trophy awarded by workers to the best employer in the agricultural sector on Jersey. The clay potatoes, in turn, are displayed in so-called “honesty boxes”, which are normally used by farmers from Jersey to sell vegetables and fruit, but also preserves and eggs. An honesty box is a stand with products set up by a road with a price list and a money-box. Customers take what they want and leave money. Clay potatoes are sold in a similar way at various local festivities. The project is characterized by a fair dose of perverse wit. A clay potato resting on a satin pillow with golden emblems marks an ironic reversal of everyday life. The glory of statuettes nowadays belongs more to the realm of business, not labor. How would working conditions change if it was workers from the lowest ranks of the social ladder who awarded prizes to employers, decided based on production conditions and employment policy?

In her work, Rogalska always shows labor from an alternative non-commercial point of view – it is the employees, and not the employers, who are given the possibility to speak out. It is similar in yet another project of hers created on Jersey, *Alien Species*. This is a visual counter-archive that gathers photographs and videos made by farm workers employed on the island. Although Jersey's economy has relied on a migrant workforce for 150 years, it is difficult to come across images that represent migrant workers, depicting life from their perspective and "taking their side". The only available imagery is commercial and generated by mainstream media and employers, who keep possession of the images. In the future, the workers' archive that comprises private photographs taken by farm workers will become part of Jersey Photographic Archives and will be made available online under a Creative Commons license, offering the possibility to view its contents and order selected copies.

As in the *Cultivation* project, Rogalska seeks a grassroots point of view and a possibility for workers to create their own representation. There is a marked difference between the amateur agricultural films posted on YouTube and the private photographs of migrant farm workers from the island. The former primarily take pride in modernity, the latter depict the not completely attractive daily reality of a physical worker abroad. The photographs show workers' makeshift flats, their outfits and practices, such as dressing in layers (which is useful when you work from chilly morning to warm afternoon), thick fog hovering above the fields in the early morning, dirt under finger nails, the scorching sun while potato lifting, mud when potatoes are planted, fatigue, and finally knocking-off time when you can finally relax.

Rogalska's projects on Jersey concentrate on the relationship between lending a local product a national status and the invisibility of migrant work. This omission results from a number of factors: the invisibility of labor as such, depreciation of agricultural work and, finally, xenophobic marginalization of a migrant workforce. In her activities with workers, the artist shows that making the latter's work visible requires that hierarchies of perception be reversed and the tools of power that legitimize the omission of the everyday sphere be recaptured.

Starting with the issue of the image of the countryside, Rogalska concentrates on collective action, while her projects always prioritize community and coming together. From a more general perspective, they depict the contemporary politics of

the visibility of physical labor. Rogalska achieves this by challenging the existing orders of representation, reversing everyday conventions of representation and – often humorously – juxtaposing opposites (a potato made of bronze). The visibility of agriculture is sanctioned today both by local social conflicts (master vs. serf) and by global transformations in which migrant work is hidden behind the business interests of modern-day corporations-cum-empires.

Footnotes

- 1 “Komu przeszkadza zapach wsi?,” *Więści Rolnicze*, May 12, 2018.
- 2 “Krowy muczą, koguty pieją, a rolnicy hałasują kombajnami. ‘Rolnictwo to praca, nie wybryk,’” *Tvn24.pl*, July 5, 2018, accessed July 23, 2018, <https://www.tvn24.pl/wroclaw,44/nie-wszyscy-nowi-mieszkanicy-wsi-zadowoleni-z-pracy-rolnikow-apel-dir,851372.html>.
- 3 Roch Sulima, “Sprawa chłopska i polskie ‘przeklęte problemy,’” *Kultura Współczesna* 2015, no. 1, 27.
- 4 Steven Morris, “Jersey Royal potato crop could be hit by shortage of EU workers,” *The Guardian*, January 15, 2018, accessed July 29, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jan/15/jersey-royal-potato-crop-shortage-eu-workers>.