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The Need for Visibility: Modes of Work of Contemporary Women Visual Artists

Translated by Łukasz Mojsak

The protagonists of James Baldwin's *Another Country* are buffeted by dark passions, whose fulfilment becomes constantly postponed. Painful memories tear apart their dreams of the future; lust intensifies their fear, anger, and frustration. The impossibility of articulating one's own experiences and aspirations, as well as constant failure to meet social expectations, lead to conflicts, alienation, losing oneself in suffering, and to the suicidal death of one of the characters. The necessity to present your sorrows to the world becomes a way to name and define them, but also a condition of survival:

Perhaps such secrets, the secrets of everyone, were only expressed when the person laboriously ragged them into the light of the world, imposed them on the world, and made them a part of the world's experience. Without this effort, the secret place was merely a dungeon in which the person perished; without this effort, indeed, the entire world would be an uninhabitable darkness.¹

What becomes visualized may become visible, gain sense, undergo codification, and thus acquire a certain cultural status, which guarantees a place in social hierarchies of values. Baldwin distinguishes this double-track process of revealing experience by telling difficult stories of characters for whom being a person of color or a non-heterosexual individual in America in the 1950s becomes a source of distress and failure. The author also draws attention to the need to synchronize newly articulated content with forms of social life, on which an individual needs to "impose" their "secrets" in order to find his or her place therein.

Although the work of contemporary women visual artists does not need to adopt such a dramatic form, it often proves to be a struggle for the possibility to articulate one's own ways of understanding reality. Work as an activity is a struggle for visibility, which becomes the first condition of recognizing its effects (as artworks).

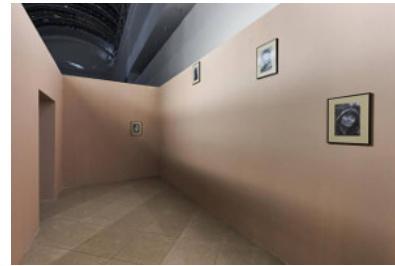
Not only is it hidden from sight (at a given moment), but also invisible (not considered as work). What is more, the invisibility of work in art is coupled with its frequent inherent instability and uncertainty, when the difficulty lies not so much in stipulating the criteria of being recognized as an artist,² but rather in fathoming the rules of functioning in the field of art and obtaining a status therein that ensures a good life.³ Changing fashions, the hermeticism of the milieu, the reproduction of patterns that grant privilege only to selected artists, and the confused logic of relations between individual entities – these are only some of the aspects of broadly understood communication in the artistic field. And, inscribed in such communication, the possibility of the control and regulation of social practices

embraces both activities defined as work and those which seemingly do not belong to the realm of work.

In this text, I examine modes of work of contemporary women artists in order to reflect on how staying within the field of vision and visibility become values that are associated with their work. Drawing on 13 in-depth interviews conducted with Polish women artists active in the field of art,⁴ I seek to reconstruct and shed light on the problems around which contemporary narratives about women's work and its value may develop. At the same time, my considerations are guided by reflection on the gender-related character of the invisibility of work, which bears connection to the presence and representation of women and men in exhibitions.

Why is visibility important?

The concluding report of the study *Wizualne niewidzialne. Sztuki wizualne w Polsce. Stan, rola i znaczenie* [Visual Invisible: The State, Role, and Significance of the Visual Arts in Poland], conducted in 2015 and 2016, puts forward the following claim:



Diana Lelonek, *Ściana (Wall)* from the *Anti-Static* exhibition, 2018, National Museum in Poznan, curator: Piotr Krajewski (transference and reinterpretation of the corridor leading to the Rector's office of the University of the Arts in Poznan). Photo: Tomasz Koszewnik



The corridor leading to the Rector's office of the UAP, 2018. Photo: Diana Lelonek

The basic kind of differences that divide the field of the visual arts relate to visibility. It determines the difference in access to other resources (funding, interest, prestige), and it does so exponentially, as a result of which both experts and non-professionals are familiar with merely a fraction of the vast number of artists. The same pertains to institutions and art schools.⁵

The authors of the report, Marek Krajewski and Filip Schmidt, understand visibility as "recognizability, renown, and presence in art circulation and the media,"⁶ and they connect these values with the economic dimension of the living situation of Polish artists. In the statements that they analyzed, visibility is perceived as a condition of proficient functioning in the art world, although it does not offer a guarantee.⁷ Visibility is temporary and requires an individual to invest a variety of efforts, which become entwined with a series of socio-economic factors that can be influenced only to a limited degree – although, as Kuba Szreder remarks, "the allocation of possibilities is not accidental."⁸ The author highlights a flexible and constantly changing set of dispositions and circumstances that determine the temporary status of an individual in art circulation (reputation, visibility in the circulation, social contacts, knowledge, experience).⁹ He additionally highlights the role of structural opportunism – a phenomenon that "arranges social relations in art circulation by making art workers depend on seeking opportunities, regulating their flow, and controlling access to them."¹⁰ If we agree with this interpretation, which posits the strict structural dependency of actors on temporary and constantly changing opportunities, then we might better understand the confusion felt by artists, which results from their struggle with a reality deprived of order and rules, an uncertain reality, which "At best [...] is confusing and felt as discomforting. At worst, it carries a sense of danger."¹¹ A countermeasure against such permanent uncertainty and ambiguity, against unpredictable positions that might be allocated to individuals in the future, can adopt the form of the search for new ways to articulate one's own artistic practices, and therefore put faith in attempts to make them visible and situate them in a given social context. And although the "capital of visibility," understood as the resources and possibilities of lending visibility to given practices, seems even more volatile, makeshift, and impermanent than symbolic capital (related, among other aspects, to "the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability"),¹² building such capital turns out to lie at the foundation of artists' work, as it can become connected with attempts to tame uncertain existence subordinated to the activity

of authority (its dispersed mechanisms), described by Jonathan Crary in the category of “mutation in the construction of attentiveness.”¹³

What is more, if we treat invisible work as an activity that is banal, inappropriate, shameful, unserious, or mundane,¹⁴ then lending visibility to and exhibiting work and its effects becomes the goal of the efforts of women artists who wish to define their practices in the reverse way. Although success – understood as global recognizability, fame, or high earnings – is not something that guides their daily work, the valorization of that work (in order to assess it, one needs to notice it) in the media, institutional, or market discourse may, in their view, valorize their identity and life in the same way. For, according to Joanna Bednarek’s diagnosis, “work in creative professions is [...] tightly interwoven with identity”¹⁵ – it builds the artists’ sense of self-worth, and this leads to a double risk: “the lack of success is destructive for the very core of our person – and, at the same time, it is highly probable given the structure of creative sectors, in which a small group of winners take it all [...] Therefore, the motivation to work harder appears in us ‘spontaneously’ – nobody needs to impose it on us. Exploitation thus transforms into self-exploitation – we are the ones who impose on ourselves long working hours and exorbitant production norms.”¹⁶



Agnieszka Grodzińska, *I, Academy / Self Recognition*, 2017-2018

The invisibility of women artists’ work

In the context of contemporary forms of capitalism based on knowledge production and communication, it is difficult to clearly separate work from life beyond work. As for women artists, we can often observe not only the unpleasant consequences of cognitive capitalism,¹⁷ but also a double dimension of cultural burdens and customs that influence their fragile and uncertain position in the field of art. On the one hand, invisibility may be inherent in their work – because it is work performed by women.

A look into the reservoir of stereotypes that function in Western culture, and define “women’s” roles and identities, reveals both the idea that women are closer to “nature” and the idea that their “natural environment” is the domestic sphere, which



Agnieszka Grodzińska, *No More No Less* exhibition, 2018, curator: Przemek Sowiński, Zona Sztuki Aktualnej, Szczecin. Photo: Kamil Macioł

enjoys a lower status in cultural terms than the public sphere. Sherry B. Ortner explains: "Now, since women are associated with, and indeed are more or less confined to, the domestic context, they are identified with this lower order of social/cultural organization."¹⁸ The lower status of domestic work attributed to women bears a direct relation to its invisibility: it is work that requires constant repetition and whose effects are quick to disappear. It does not have a social rank, because it is separated from the public sphere. As Izabela Desperak points out, the division into the public and the private sphere consolidates the making invisible of "everything related to the private, the female, and the biological"¹⁹:

Studies devoted to the topic trace the division into socially and economically valuable productive work and worthless invisible domestic work back to the advent of the Industrial Revolution, which separated the workplace from the household or farmstead. That division was fathered by Adam Smith and Karl Marx, among other figures, who considered domestic work as unproductive and parasitic, while ascribing the function of parasites to domestic servants, and indirectly also to women.²⁰

Therefore, the work of women active in the field of art is often recognized primarily as "women's" work – something that is not entirely work, or work not done seriously. This is echoed in the pejorative use of the term "women's art,"²¹ which in the colloquial understanding often connotes the lowbrow, the mediocre, or the trivial (such as women's mass culture).²² What is more, the use of this term is often perceived by feminist researchers as something that poses the threat of essentializing "womanhood," and thereby legitimating a plethora of stereotypes attached to it.²³ For this reason, women artists sometimes oppose defining their art as "women's" art, and define their activities as "girlish."²⁴

Although women artists, to the same degree as male artists, are burdened with convictions resulting from the colloquial understanding of their role in society and the Romantic myth of the genius artist that accompanies it,²⁵ the former seem to have a more acute experience of unequal and wrongful treatment inside the art world.²⁶ A perfect example in this context is offered by Anna Okrasko's piece *Who is a woman painter if not a wife for a painter*, in which the artist displayed in the corridors of the Academy of Fine Arts the sexist statements that she had heard from students and lecturers of the Faculty of Painting (such as: "Breasts in art need no support," "Female artists don't have nice neat hands and the girls from the

painting department are dirty," and "The Academy of Fine Arts should be like the army, there is no place for sissies with complaints who cry after every criticism").

The report *Marne szanse na awanse?* [*Fat Chance to Advance?*]²⁷ published in 2015 by the Katarzyna Kozyra Foundation also indicates the ongoing presence of gender-related stereotypes, various forms of gender-related discrimination, and related difficulties that trouble female students and academic teachers at Polish art academies. Both in the first dimension – the association of domesticity, care, "bustling,"²⁸ and household work with women – and in the second dimension: ascribing subordinate and stereotypical roles to women in the art world, work done by women can be treated as invisible, petty, and less valuable than work done by men.

"Trying to make ends meet on a daily basis"

Having said that, the artists whom I interviewed understand their work in many different ways, and are often far from embedding it in the stereotypes that dominate patriarchal culture. Some of them emphasize the patriarchal status of artistic work and the uncertainty of activities undertaken:

Trying to make ends meet on a daily basis simply drains your energy. And that's a tragedy (i11).

If you're invited to a project, to make an exhibition, to participate in an exhibition, to work with new things – with a guarantee of basic financial opportunities, I mean financial basics – that's already a lot, to tell you the truth (i12).

I also think it's good to be an artist from time to time. It's also that some people feel they are artists – they do one project after another. I don't know if they ask themselves about the adequate sense of what they're doing. It just seems to me that you fall into a kind of trap. Of course, it's cool when you're active and somehow mobilized to systematic activity, for instance by your studies, but I know that from time to time I manage to hit the bull's-eye. I hope that it's something like that. I hide my pearls somewhere on my hard drives (i2).

For me, success means keeping afloat. If you can keep afloat all year, that's a success (i8).

Only in the case of three informants (although all of them are active in the field of art, and exhibit their works in public and non-public institutions), does artistic work allow them to make a living without the need to look for other sources of income. Yet they point at a certain kind of privilege, which gave them a “better start” and continues to offer them a sense of security, such as an apartment given to them by their parents or being born to an artistic family. In turn, women artists who work at academies treat those jobs as their main source of income; they appreciate the welfare and financial stability that this type and place of employment offers. The other artists, who neither make a living exclusively via their artistic activity nor work at an academy – being aware of the mechanisms that regulate functioning in artistic circulation – point at the uncertainty that accompanies their daily existence, but also at the necessity to “seek to make ends meet”: applying for scholarships, securing extra funding, engaging in “cunning” conversations with officials, or seeking commissions that do not necessarily have an artistic character.

Women artists also demonstrate varied approaches to the need to constantly create new projects (compelled by structural opportunism). Some succumb to that pressure (“so be it – I need to go, and ask, and show” [10]), whereas others question the competence and value of projects created non-stop. The latter case reveals a doubt concerning the visibility of work done in such a way: is it perhaps better to keep something to yourself (on your hard drive) and show it at the right moment instead of trying to articulate something “misguided” that will fail to be noticed? Although these two approaches seem, at first glance, contradictory, they bear testimony to two beliefs that are not mutually exclusive, and perhaps even complement one another. The first pertains to the necessity to remain active, which involves taking self-reliant steps in order to lend visibility to your work (which can be associated with “regime through activation,” discussed by Joanna Bednarek).²⁹ The second pertains to the unstable position of a woman artist and her work, which is constantly subjected to self-evaluation and to assessment by others. Such a situation poses the risk of making oneself dependent on one role, which may prove unsatisfactory (“it’s good to be an artist from time to time”) and fail to guarantee financial stability.

Life based on projects becomes a constant chase for the future; it entails constant thought about subsequent goals and planning the next activities, for, as Bojana Kunst remarks, “one needs to constantly maintain the connection between work and the future if one wishes to survive on the artistic market.”³⁰ Not only to invent,

create, and make subsequent projects visible, but also – as one of my informants says – to constantly build in oneself the motivation to act:

To always keep thinking that it's worth doing something. To go from one project to the next. To keep yourself in action, because a functioning artist has to be very active, seek the ways to show herself, to organize an exhibition. It doesn't matter if she's in the mainstream or in alternative circulation and opens a gallery at home. She needs to set goals for herself. I think it has to do with fueling the energy to act (i1).

Endless activity and constant movement towards future projects (whether motivated by fear of invisibility or financial instability, or rather by hope for various forms of gratification) determine one of the first modes of women artists' work that emerges from the conducted interviews.³¹

Work that is not only work

Nowadays, as Luc Boltanski argues, we witness two processes of the circulation of artworks (and thereby also of the work behind them), which he defines as an internal configuration and a capitalist configuration.³² Born towards the end of the 19th century, the process of internal circulation was based on a personal contract between four kinds of subject: artists, collectors, dealers, and critics. A work acquired meaning in the process of attribution ("attributing it to a specific whole – a reason or an author of the event [object – KS] – equipped with an identity, intentionality, and agency"),³³ which was largely the responsibility of critics, thus lending the product of an artist's work a specific value. All of this – as the French sociologist underlines – happened slowly, which made inheritance-based accumulation possible. The second regime – capitalist – became consolidated towards the end of the 20th century. The pace of circulation of artworks is on the rise, and the actors active in the process are changing. Although the previously mentioned actors continue to play a certain role, the lead is taken by large auction houses, investment funds, and other entities from the media and market spheres.³⁴ Boltanski further states that, in the latter process, the attribution of artworks takes a different course, and artists themselves – according to the requirements of accelerated circulation – need to demonstrate flexibility in adjusting to changing conditions and expectations:

In the capitalist mode of circulation, the artist's task does not consist merely of producing a thing that may transform into an artwork, but also in producing an alias of that thing, which will give it meaning; this entails – as is the case with the artist figure themselves – the necessity to conduct the process of codification. The producer of a thing must therefore achieve such a degree of reflexivity that will allow them to foresee the conditions that will accompany the reception of a thing. The goal behind this procedure is to facilitate and render more flexible the task that consists of tying the alias of a thing to the alias of its alleged maker. An author creates their work in the sense that sociology ascribes to the production of reality. Beyond doubt, this is the reason why artists in recent years have grown so keen to tap into theories borrowed from philosophy and/or the social sciences.³⁵

If we agree with Boltanski that capitalist circulation forces artists not only to skillfully handle their work and its products (in the sense of good organization, competence, and ideas), but also to take care of their context, conditions of functioning, and reception, then what becomes highly significant is the activity (work?) involved in generating this very context, which, in the realm of fast-paced circulation, constantly changes and cannot be fully foreseen. Artists therefore need to be not only the authors of their work, but also to manage it proficiently and construct an interesting discursive environment around it. They become the producers of both their artwork as well as the knowledge and affects that make a more complete interpretation of their artwork possible. "The power of an artwork,"³⁶ combined with the invisible work around it, translates into the visibility of an artist and their product in the field of art.

When asked about the circumstances of presenting their artworks in exhibitions (and about the way in which exhibitions come into being), my informants prioritized the significance of contacts and relations with curators, institution directors, gallery owners, and art critics. In the majority of statements, this kind of practice, although assessed differently, was recognized as the most effective. This would mean that the internal mode of circulation, based on personal relations, continues to play a major role, which may result from the peripheral or semi-peripheral character of the world of Polish artistic production – not yet dominated by global flows – but also from the meagre condition of the domestic art market.³⁷

Mingling and showing, expanding your network of contacts, is the only method to have exhibitions (i2).

It was then that I understood that everything was based on contacts. It's not that you'll be recognized if you do something good, it's just about the contacts (i4).

It's important to have contact with an actual person, and I don't go to openings, which I regret, but I don't like it. When the artist is still alive, people like to talk and see what kind of person they are. I often get offers from someone I've already worked with. I go to my own openings. I meet a lot of people there who later want to collaborate with me (i9).

Establishing contacts, mingling, making appearances, talking, sharing knowledge, passing information further, getting to know and "knowing" people: all of these activities become a form of work that a woman artist has to do in order to get her "proper" work noticed. In this context, the differentiation between proper work and work that is not work becomes blurred. Securing her own "interests," a woman artist (as entrepreneur) seeks to promote herself and "practice contact-making," as one of the respondents (i11) put it. These practices require effort, engagement, and time, and yet their results are uncertain.

Forming a network of contacts and building relations with entities in the field of art serves to build attribution, which Boltanski writes about. Yet it is not attribution for artworks (or at least not only for artworks) – it means lending authority, credibility, and individuality to a woman artist herself, who will be associated by such a network with other important figures. It means the confirmation of her value system and her significance in the circulation. That is why elements of internal and capitalist circulation regimes appear to co-exist in the discussed cases, forming an even denser web of meanings in which the personal character of contacts, as well as the tastes of critics and curators, continue to interlace with an ever-greater pace of activity and self-reflexivity of women artists themselves. It does not change the fact that the very efforts towards lending visibility to artistic work have to remain, by principle, invisible. Because, although women artists openly talk about "practicing contact-making" as a necessary condition of making a landmark and functioning in artistic circulation, and collaboration with valued institutions and people in the art world is something that is worth taking pride in, the very mode of establishing and maintaining these contacts (and the related tactics and gimmicks) remains tacit. To

a certain degree, it is also related to the difficulties that women artists, as women, experience in this field. As one of my informants remarked:

It's a kind of understanding between members of the same species –a man and a man can pat one another on the back, but a woman is harder to pat on the back; it's easier to pat her on the bum, but if you pat someone on the bum here, it's difficult to treat her seriously and offer her an individual exhibition at your institution (i3).

Akin to other areas of social life, the field of art is permeated with sexism. While establishing contacts and meeting curators, institution directors, and the technical staff of galleries and museums, women artists, more often than male artists, are exposed to taunts, jokes, and paternalistic or chauvinistic remarks concerning their gender. Unwilling to appear “oversensitive,” without a sense of humor, etc. (reasons that patriarchal culture hastens to put forward in order to make an excuse for women’s wrongs and complaints)³⁸ – and wanting to show their artworks “nevertheless” – they turn a blind eye on such situations, while dominant behavior and customs remain unchallenged as a result.

Work that works

What also remains covert is the sphere of non-artistic work, whose sole purpose is to secure a source of income (which, of course, does not pertain to work at the academy). Although women artists admit that they “turn out potboilers,” such activities do not correspond with how they would like the narratives of their work to develop, and therefore they themselves also marginalize this area of activity. The work of women artists in the field of art can therefore be considered by themselves on two levels: that of the invisible activities that are necessary to stay in circulation, and that of strictly artistic activities, in which they inscribe different functions. These functions, in turn, are understood more as goals rooted in



*Gdzie są artystki? (Where are the Women Artists?), performance at the opening of the exhibition *I po co nam wolność? (Why Do We Need Freedom, Anyway?)* at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń, 13 April 2018. Photo: Marek Krupecki*



*Gdzie są artystki? (Where Are the Women Artists?), performance at the opening of the exhibition *I po co nam wolność? (Why Do We Need Freedom, Anyway?)* at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń, 13 April 2018. Photo: Marek Krupecki*

the normative convictions of an individual (“goals-values”)³⁹ than as properties that are permanently ascribed to artistic practice as such.

One of the goals of art most clearly articulated by women artists themselves is leading to changes in the perception of reality, although it does not mean that a woman artist’s work has to be useful in the same way as work in other professions:

And what can be said about what I do? Overall, I had a problem with the fact that my parents wanted me to follow in their footsteps all the time, because art cannot be done after hours. They didn’t get it, they couldn’t understand it, because art for them was a sort of whim and something useless, and everyone can paint those little flowers. Well, I had to cope with that somehow. But I think it’s about certain emotions and moving the viewers. And I guess that’s the most important thing –that if you reach your inner self then you’re able to activate such deposits of energy and power that can... or at least it seems that you’re able to change the world, to make it better in a certain way. My art is largely based on the fact that, after all, I’d like the world to be better, and lots of my activities are devoted to that (i5).

The goal of artistic work is to “move the audience”: art is supposed to affect emotions, and thereby transform thinking about the world, proposing “anti-models” that arrange social imagination anew.⁴⁰

Thus delineated, this function is coupled with an ethical stance, defined by one of my informants as a form of the social utility of art:

I don’t consider it a burden, but it’s related to my morality, my work ethics. [...] I simultaneously engage in many philanthropic activities. I do workshops with kids from some shabby districts; I feel that I need to do it. What I can convey is the knowledge that I have, the tools related to art and design. I can and I want to convey it. And this is what I see as social utility. [...] As long as you work with design, it’s clear that you do it for the people, but when you work with art, that’s not necessarily so. The first thing I always think about is what the person who encounters my art can take from it. Because I don’t know what they will actually take. I’m keen to bring it as close to them as possible or offer them a spectrum of possibilities from

which they can take – whether a given work can shake them emotionally or disturb their thinking, or offer skills... (i4).

Through “shaking someone emotionally” and “disturbing their thinking,” women artists expect that their art will have an effect – that their work will not be an inner act, oriented solely to self-therapy, but that it will change something in the lives of its viewers. One of my informants underlines that “what I’d like to avoid most of all is that my work is transparent, because in such a case it’s done in vain” (i4). Non-transparency here is a mode of marking your way of thinking about the world, strictly correlated with agency; the same person states: “I get some money, some money is invested in the work, and if the work doesn’t work then I think that I’ve missed something, that I’ve done something wrong” (i4). Insofar as invisibility seems an order in which work is ignored, seen as trivial or devoid of value, transparency implies indifference to the work. When work is not manifest it becomes illegible, misguided, helpless, or deprived of effectiveness. Hence the low focus in the women artists’ statements on considering their own practice and the effort invested therein in formal categories, whereas ascribing meaning to one’s work is connected with a certain effect on reality and expected viewers:

So that you understand who you are and what you are for. That whole pleasure of reflection, reference. I don’t believe that art changes the world. But it changes everything for an individual (i9).

Desire for success?

Can the functions of art, thus defined, correspond to the dream of artistic success? Is success measured by the same categories in the field of art as it is in corporations? Or does the specific character of artistic work require a different definition of success and the references behind it? Finally: what values should we use when describing the lives of artists in which work often determines the dominant horizon? One of my informants addresses this question as follows:

I don’t know how to define success or a career; someone is highly recognized, but on what scale? Of the city, the country, the world? It’s very blurred. I think that for some of the artists – which I know from my personal experience and conversations with people who also stayed in art, although they have already graduated and found professional employment in a different sector – success means, for instance, that we still do it and we

hang on to it. Despite few opportunities to advance, we see some added values in it, and we believe in it (i1).

The question concerning the conditions of success triggers the reaction of revolt among the majority of the women artists – they oppose viewing their practice through the prism of this category, which, they argue, cannot be easily applied to a description of work in the arts. They often prefer to talk of a good life instead of success or “career”:

I don't know if success is a good word in art. This word doesn't seem to fit (i3).

I always find it funny, and I'm in a huff when someone says this. Career was never my goal. I always wanted to have a good life, and it does not mean that I need to enjoy some kind of glory (i4).

I'm also not a big fan of the notion of success – for me it has a certain capitalist, neoliberal ring to it. I'm not a fan of that notion. I'd rather treat the field of art as work as such. I guess it's my work and I'd like to make a decent living out of it. This is something personal, something that satisfies me, that is my success, although I don't like this word. It's redundant (i12).

The above statements clearly reveal a certain dislike for “success,” which is mainly associated with celebrity culture (one of the informants mentions Marina Abramović as an example of an artist who has achieved success), yet reluctance stems, above all, from the refusal to think of artistic work as the phased linear accumulation of achievements and privileges that would mark advancement, which, in turn, would translate into a growing position on the market and a higher number of exhibitions at ever-larger and more-prestigious institutions. Success may be ephemeral, and it is easy to deviate and retreat from the path of externally defined advancement. Revolt against success, thus understood, is also a revolt against the role of the entrepreneur, which is so often set for an artist by their social environment. The point is not to revive the legend of the Romantic artist (only two of the 13 informants talk about art in lofty terms as a vocation), but to treat artistic work as work that escapes both the capitalist trap of the “Sasnal effect”⁴¹ and the myth of the destitute artist who lives for recognition and the possibility to exhibit their works for free.⁴²

I won't sacrifice myself for art and die of hunger. [...] Being an artist is also a profession, work, and not the vision that it's enough for an artist to have some cheap wine at their exhibition opening, but an institution makes money, and everybody else makes money – and for the artist it's enough to have some wine (i6).

What plays a major role in this context is the recognizability of the woman artist and her work, which is treated rather ambivalently by my informants. On the one hand, some of them argue that although recognizability is important, it does not guarantee success; it may be temporal and whimsical, it abounds with changeable criteria, and it depends on different fashions. On the other hand, recognizability is necessary to function in a relatively satisfactory way in the art world.

Those exhibitions started to come his way because he was in that academic structure. Maybe not as a lecturer, but he made an appearance there, and that somehow helped him at the time when he started those studies. [...] He rented a studio in Warsaw for a short while, and he said that being in Warsaw, in the center, was already enough of a reason why those exhibitions were coming his way (i3).

In the above statement, the visibility of the person and their work results from presence at an art academy and from living in Warsaw; both of these factors are related to the previously mentioned “practice of contact-making.” Exhibitions “come an artist’s way” when they mingle with the milieu and are talked about. Recognizability is also generated by collaboration with institutions:

Visibility often emerges from working with an institution – it makes you visible. Even commercial circulation doesn't give you as much visibility as collaboration with public institutions (i1).

The capital city plays such a visibility-generating role in statements made both by artists who live in Warsaw and elsewhere:

I think that [the city] totally helps, judging by other artists. Because they are easily accessible, people come to cities and use such occasions to visit galleries and studios (i9).

In Warsaw, diploma exhibitions do play a role. I was noticed after my diploma (i7).

A lot of people move to Warsaw for a reason – all the galleries are here and most things happen here, so I guess it's easier. There's some access after all (i8).

Among the conditions of success and recognizability, some of my informants mention having a “good name” (which brings to mind the role of the alias described by Luc Boltanski). This pertains both to the name that one has made for oneself (professional achievements, contacts in the milieu, etc.) and an inherited name:

It really is important to make a name for yourself, to be recognizable and firmly believe in what you do (i2).

Making a name for oneself means building its recognizability. It requires work performed in two modes: the invisible – seeking to organize exhibitions, writing grant applications, but also “practicing contact-making,” and the “proper” mode – which relates to the time when the products or processes of work are exhibited (especially in the case of performative and participatory activities). In turn, inheriting a famous name is regarded – particularly by people who do not come from artistic families – as immense symbolic capital, which significantly facilitates artistic careers, both at the academy and beyond. It offers a kind of “bonus” visibility that does not require extra work – at least at the beginning of one’s professional path.

My informants talked about success and career, usually adopting a double perspective. On the one hand, they distanced themselves from success; on the other hand, they were easily able to deconstruct popular visions of success (fame, money, large-scale exhibitions). Even those who had graduated only several years before have already acquired the knowledge and experience that allowed them to distance themselves from thinking about an artistic career and success as effects of nothing else but diligent, reliable, and ambitious work. Such statements echo diagnoses related to the “dark matter of the art world”⁴³ as conceptualized by Gregory Sholette, describing the immense disproportion in access to visibility between the privileged artistic elite, who have achieved success, and the overwhelming majority of other artists and amateurs, who have lost the race for



*Gdzie są artystki? (Where Are the Women Artists?), performance at the opening of the exhibition *I po co nam wolność? (Why Do We Need Freedom, Anyway?)* at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń, 13 April 2018. Photo: Marek Krupecki*

visibility (success). The concept proposes to explain the absence of the majority of artists from official circulation via structural conditions related to the specific mode of activity of art institutions and the art market, without holding the losers liable for their failed attempts to gain visibility.

Why Do We Need Freedom, Anyway? On absent women artists

At the time of writing this text, the Centre of Contemporary Art "Znaki Czasu" in Toruń is hosting the exhibition *Why Do We Need Freedom, Anyway?*, curated by the institution's director Waclaw Kuczma.⁴⁴ The show addresses the question of freedom. The website reads: "Freedom is defined with an act of awareness, internal responsibility balancing upon indefinite space of one's own metaphysical aspect. The question 'Why do we need freedom?' thus becomes equivalent to the artistic prerogative of responsibility and predictability of the future contemporaneity."⁴⁵

Which artists, according to the curator, propose interesting reflections on freedom? The online text reveals that the entire undertaking was inspired by four men: "The starting point are four 20th-century artists: Witkacy, Władysław Hasior, Jerzy Bereś and Tadeusz Kantor. The underlying reason for the concept are two works: *Nie zabrną me twory popod żadne strzechy, bo...* by Witkacy and *Wyszywanie charakteru* by Władysław Hasior."⁴⁶ Among 38 artists and collectives, the exhibition features work by just one woman – Krystyna Gorazdowska. What is the reason behind such a drastic disproportion between the presence of women and men in a show that addresses a topic of interest to artists of both sexes? When asked about the underrepresentation of women artists, the curator-director answered that he saw no need to explain his selection, and responded to the proposal to organize a discussion with his participation: "I consider this matter closed and therefore I will not participate in this event."⁴⁷ Nevertheless, representatives of Toruń's artistic milieu organized a debate devoted to the problem several weeks after the exhibition's opening.⁴⁸

The case of the Toruń exhibition, and the reluctance to problematize it by taking into account the question of gender, clearly shows how transparent the work of women artists can become in the Polish field of art. I also enquired about this gender-



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related aspect in my research. My informants pointed to the education process at art academies, where gender inequalities emerge. For instance, men enjoy easier access to lecturers (the majority of whom are also men)⁴⁹:

There's this strange configuration of forces that makes itself manifest in different situations. There's this professor, a guy, and there's this student – and they talk louder, they have a sort of understanding, which has no obvious reason other than them both being guys. I think it's simply unfair. Well, I get the impression that male students were treated in a different way than female students (i13).

These inequalities are reproduced after graduation, when artists seek ways to lend visibility to their work:

On a somewhat superficial level the milieu is open and there are equal rights, but on the other hand, when kids come into play, men stay and women disappear. There's no longer equality in taking care of them. In this sense, maybe women artists deserve more support (i8).

Failure to treat women seriously, and therefore also disregard for their work, is one of the most important reasons behind the markedly smaller representation of women in exhibitions at Polish public art institutions.

Sometimes there's this thought draining my head that if I'd done that project as a man it would have been perceived differently. So I think it works that way.

I don't know if being a woman, the gender – is still not treated entirely seriously (i3).

During the last four years (since 2015), the CoCA in Toruń has organized just three individual exhibitions by women artists out of a total of 21 individual shows.⁵⁰ Solo presentations are regarded by the artistic milieu as a token of recognition for an



Gdzie są artystki? (Where Are the Women Artists?), performance at the opening of the exhibition *I po co nam wolność? (Why Do We Need Freedom, Anyway?)* at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń, 13 April 2018. Photo: Marek Krupecki



Gdzie są artystki? (Where Are the Women Artists?), performance at the opening of the exhibition *I po co nam wolność? (Why Do We Need Freedom, Anyway?)* at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń, 13 April 2018. Photo: Marek Krupecki

artist, retrospective exhibitions especially so. The meagre representation of women at the Toruń institution may bear testimony not only to the lack of interest in women artists' work, but also to blindness to gender issues, which aggravates the structural injustice and inequality experienced by women in the field of art. An institution that avoids presenting women's work (or presents it only to a limited degree) seems to replicate the belief in "visual purity,"⁵¹ as described by Rosalyn Deutsche, which has already been questioned on multiple occasions. In the context of the feminist exhibition *Public Vision* in 1982, which influenced the debate on postmodernism and challenged that modernist myth, Deutsche stated: "Museums and galleries, it was held, simply discover and preserve timeless, transcendent values present in art objects."⁵² The lack of gender-sensitive reflection in institutional politics cements thinking about art as a non-gendered, "universal," practice, thus depriving women's work of visibility. And although the field of art is characterized by many features that make it differ from other fields of cultural production, it is saturated to the same extent with patriarchal cultural patterns:

Well, yes, the influence is that gentlemen are brought up in a totally different way. Gentlemen are inculcated from their childhood that they are great, and they know they are great, and when they talk bullshit everybody gives them a round of applause because they are great. [...] And we don't have it – we need to learn it, we need to go into therapy to build up power because our mothers often castrate us, and who the hell knows when it will end? (i5).

Gender determines the way women function in the art world; it also affects the visibility of their work. The beliefs expressed by my informants concerning gender inequalities, but also the means of achieving "success" in art, along with the precarious dimension of their existence, are not an accusation against specific individuals: they are a complaint about the system of art in which they function, and, indirectly, also about the capitalist regime and the patriarchal structures that are deeply embedded therein. These structures, in turn, grant privilege to discourse oriented towards men, which claims the role of universal discourse. The voice of women is still poorly heard in that discourse, especially because, as they avoid claims of universality, women artists often acknowledge their personal perspective, and they are not usually used to speaking on someone's behalf. Acting tactically,⁵³ they seek visibility that will guarantee them a good life.

Feminists resisted the idea that life histories and other personal narratives were primarily useful for gathering information about historical events, cultural change, or the impact of social structures on individuals' lives. Rather, they were interested in women as social actors in their own right and in the subjective meanings that women assigned to events and conditions in their lives.⁵⁴

Therefore, the task of the researcher who adopts a feminist perspective consists of revealing the subjective meanings that contribute, to a certain degree, to lending visibility to women artists' work.

*** The artists whose works illustrate this article (Agnieszka Grodzińska and Diana Lelonek) were not among my informants during the interviews that provide the basis for this text. I would like to thank the artists and creators of photographic documentation for making their images available.**

Footnotes

1 James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dell, 1985), 98.

2 See: George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 1974); Grzegorz Dziamski, *Postmodernizm wobec kryzysu estetyki współczesnej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 1996).

3 I refer here to reflection on fragility, precarity, and a good life as a certain politically generated condition, pursued by Judith Butler in *Frames of War* (2011) and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2016).

4 Between July and November 2017, I conducted interviews with professionally active women artists (each of them had at least one exhibition that year or during the previous year) living in Bytom, Katowice, Lublin, Poznań, Toruń, Warsaw, and Wrocław. My oldest informant was born in 1971; the youngest were born in 1988. The interviews were conducted individually and lasted from 1.5 to 3 hours. They were informed by the principle of preserving the artists' anonymity (hence the use here of numerical designations of interviews rather than names).

5 *Wizualne niewidzialne. Sztuki wizualne w Polsce. Stan, rola i znaczenie. Raport końcowy*, eds. Marek Krajewski and Filip Schmidt,

<http://wizualneniewidzialne.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Wizualne-Niewidzialne-Raport-kon%CC%81cowy-v2017.pdf>, 29 (accessed June 1, 2018).

6 Ibid.

7 "Division between a narrow wealthy elite and the rest of the artists, described by our respondents, proves not entirely valid, since according to another important trait of that stratification, even the most famous artists known from the press, who enjoy a high position in the art world and make a living from art, usually live on an average level." Ibid., 41.

8 Kuba Szreder, "W obiegu. Strukturalny oportunizm jako sposób urzędzenia pracy i życia uczestników artystycznej cyrkulacji," *Czas Kultury* no. 3 (2016), 21.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 18.

11 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 56.

12 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 291.

13 Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 77.

14 I evoke these terms quoting Marek Krajewski, who uses them to indicate the "invisible" daily practices of city dwellers, which – although they influence urban life and contribute to boosting its social dimension – often remain beyond the main field of interest of contemporary scholars who study the city, precisely because of their hardly "prestigious" or significant character. See: Marek Krajewski, "Niewidzialne miasto' – uspołeczniająca moc fotografii," in *Niewidzialne miasto*, ed. Marek Krajewski (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2012).

15 Joanna Bednarek, "'Rób to, co kochasz, Kochaj to, co robisz'. Kreatywność jako technika regulacyjna," *Zeszyty Artystyczne* no. 28 (2016), 17.

16 Ibid.

- 17 On the characteristics of cognitive capitalism, see: Mikołaj Ratajczak, "Wprowadzenie do teorii kapitalizmu kognitywnego. Kapitalizm kognitywny jako reżim akumulacji," *Praktyka Teoretyczna* vol. 15, no 1 (2015).
- 18 Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in *Women, Culture, and Society*, eds. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 79.
- 19 Izabela Desperak, *Płeć zmiany. Zjawisko transformacji w Polsce z perspektywy gender* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2017), 27.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 One of my informants says: "It pisses me off terribly in this miserable art field that this category [women's art – KS] simply makes you appear as an unprofessional artist" (i12).
- 22 See the chapter "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986).
- 23 As pointed out by Halina Filipowicz, among others, who reflects on the status of "women's literature," which sustains "the patriarchal rules of the game, which consists of maintaining the dichotomic division into 'the female' and 'the male!'" See: Halina Filipowicz, "Przeciw 'literaturze kobiecej,'" in *Ciało i tekst. Feminizm w literaturoznawstwie – antologia szkiców*, ed. Anna Nasiłowska (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2001).
- 24 See: Julita Wójcik and Paulina Ołowska's project *The Dream of a Provincial Girl*, as described by Ewa Tatar: "The action can also be deemed pioneering since it highlights the category of girlishness, which I understand as a very conscious feminist ironic take on the way in which the previous generations of feminists defined womanhood, lending the woman an unreal dimension as a subject, universalizing her, her experience, and desire, which was also a characteristic feature of the majority of feminist activities in Poland before the year 2000." Ewa Małgorzata Tatar, "Artystki polskie po 2000 roku," in *Artystki polskie*, ed. Agata Jakubowska (Warsaw–Bielsko-Biała: Wydawnictwo Szkolne PWN, 2011), 147–148.
- 25 On Romantic longing for authenticity and individuality – characteristics ascribed to men, see: Hans Abbing, "Notes on the Exploitation of Poor Artists," in

Show me the Money (Blowup Reader 5), ed. Michelle Kasprzak (Rotterdam: V2_Institute for Unstable Media, 2011).

26 In this context, it would be worthwhile to count the number of exhibitions in Polish art institutions (galleries and museums) that are individual shows by women artists, and those that are individual shows by male artists. During my preparations for the interviews with women artists, I counted individual exhibitions in institutions with "CCA" (Centre for Contemporary Art) in their names: out of 35 individual shows organized in 2015, only 13 were presentations by women artists; in 2016, out of 35 individual exhibitions (coincidentally the same number as the previous year), only 10 were individual shows by women artists (data collected on the basis of archival notes on the websites of the CCAs in Bytom, Gdańsk, Toruń, and Warsaw).

27 *Marne szanse na awanse? Raport z badania na temat obecności kobiet na uczelniach artystycznych w Polsce*, eds. Anna Gromada, Dorka Budacz, Juta Kawalerowicz, and Anna Walewska, [http://duszan.com/kozyra/Marne szanse na awanse RAPORT.pdf](http://duszan.com/kozyra/Marne_szanse_na_awanse_RAPORT.pdf) (accessed June 1, 2018).

28 In Polish, "praca krzątacza," a term coined by Jolanta Brach-Czaina that refers to everyday activities such as tidying up, washing up, and cleaning. See: Jolanta Brach-Czaina, "Krzątactwo," in Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo eFka, 2006).

29 Bednarek, "Rób to, co kochasz."

30 Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester, London: Zero Books, 2015), 164.

31 While preparing the interviews, I was aware that my further analysis of the gathered material would be focused on meaning (see the types of interview analyses in Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* [London: SAGE Publications, 2007]). Among other aspects, this meant that after transcribing the interviews I subjected them to coding (description and attaching text segments to categories derived and interpreted from them), and later to analysis and interpretation proper, which situates the emerging meanings in a broader context. This article is a result of such analysis and interpretation.

32 Luc Boltanski, "Od rzeczy do dzieła. Procesy atrybucji i nadawania wartości przedmiotom," trans. Iwona Bojadżijewa, in *Wieczna radość. Ekonomia polityczna*

społecznej kreatywności, eds. Michał Kozłowski, Agnieszka Kurant, Jan Sowa, Krystian Szadkowski, and Kuba Szreder (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęż Zmiana, 2011), 33–39.

33 Ibid., 23.

34 Ibid., 37.

35 Ibid., 38.

36 Ibid., 39.

37 See an interview with Mikołaj Iwański, in which he emphasizes the rickety condition of the Polish art market, as well as the incongruence of two narratives that dominate it – one formulated from the position of an unengaged participant (“artists should make a living from the sales of their works,” “the market has the right to verify artists’ work”), and another formulated from the position important to artists, who are largely deprived of any possibility of selling their artworks: “Jak świadomie obsługiwać fantazmaty peryferyjnego rynku sztuki? Z Mikołajem Iwańskim rozmawia Tomasz Załuski,” in *Skuteczność sztuki*, ed. Tomasz Załuski (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2014).

38 See, for instance, the mechanisms of violence against women described by Maja Staśko: <http://codziennikfeministyczny.pl/metoo-wygodniej-uwierzyc-sprawcy-ale-wlasnie-dlatego-trzeba-wierzyc-skrzywdzonym/> (accessed June 20, 2018).

39 See: Jerzy Kmita, *Późny wnuk filozofii. Wprowadzenie do kulturoznawstwa* (Poznań: Bogucki Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2007), primarily the chapters “Uwarunkowania subiektywno-racjonalne a uwarunkowania funkcjonalne” and “Kultura symboliczna.”

40 See discussion of the idea of “anti-models” in: Pascal Gielen and Thijs Lijster, “Culture: The Substructure for a European Common,” in *No Culture, No Europe: On the Foundation of Politics*, ed. Pascal Gielen (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015), and the book devoted to reflection on this idea: „Anty wzorce” we współczesnej sztuce i kulturze wizualnej, ed. Karolina Sikorska (Poznań: Galeria Miejska Arsenal, 2018).

41 See: Łukasz Gorczyca, “Dobry wieczór: efekt Sasnala,” www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/3032-dobry-wieczor-efekt-sasnala.html (accessed

June 20, 2018).

42 See: Abbing, "Notes on the Exploitation of Poor Artists."

43 See: Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London–New York: Pluto Press, 2011).

44 *Why Do We Need Freedom, Anyway?*, curator: Waclaw Kuczma, artists: Sylwester Ambroziak, Kamil Banach, Marcin Berdyszak, Jerzy Beres, Leon Chwistek, Edward Dwurnik, Krzysztof Gierałowski, Wiesław Gołuch, Krystyna Gorazdowska, Władysław Hasior, Tadeusz Kantor, Michał Kokot, Zbigniew Kołaczek, Jarosław Kozłowski, Henryk Król, Bronisław Linke, Paweł Lewandowski Palle, Łódź Kaliska, Jacek Malinowski, Tadeusz Małachowski, Tomasz Musiał, Andrzej Nowacki, Zbigniew Pronaszko, Andrzej Różycki, Robert Rumas, Antoni Rząsa, Marcin Rząsa, Krzysztof Skarbek, Józef Szajna, The Krasnals, Andrzej Tobis, Jerzy Wardak, Zbigniew Warpechowski, Grzegorz Witek, Witkacy, Krzysztof Wojciechowski, Wojciech Woźniak, Wojciech Zamiara, Centre of Contemporary Art "Znaki Czasu," Toruń, April 13 – August 5, 2018, <http://csw.torun.pl/csw/wystawa-nam-wolnosc-24456/> (accessed June 15, 2018).

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Written response from the director published on the website of the group initiative *Why Do We Need Women's Freedom, Anyway?*, organized in reaction to the situation at the CoCA in Toruń, <https://ipoconamwolnosckobiet.blogspot.com/2018/06/i-po-co-nam-wolnosc-kobiet-diskusja.html> (accessed June 25, 2018). A letter of protest written in mid-April 2018 was signed by representatives of the Toruń artistic milieu and a further 400 people from across Poland. An excerpt from the letter reads: "We believe that director Waclaw Kuczma has demonstrated deliberate or unconscious ignorance by stating that the history of Polish art comprises virtually only male voices and neglecting the highly significant opinion of Polish women artists. Such an approach is extremely dangerous when manifested by the director of a public institution, who taps into his privileged position to decide that only men are allowed to speak in public, and it deprives women of their voice,"

48 The discussion was held on June 29, 2018, <https://ipoconamwolnosckobiet.blogspot.com/2018/06/i-po-co-nam-wolnosc-kobiet-dyskusja.html> (accessed June 29, 2018). See also: www.pomorska.pl/wiadomosci/torun/a/chca-dyskusji-o-braku-artystek-w-centrum-sztuki-wspolczesnej-w-toruniu,13289632/ (accessed June 29, 2018).

49 See: *Marne szanse na awanse?*

50 My calculations are based on the archive of exhibitions on the CoCA website: <http://csw.torun.pl/temat/sztuka/wystawy/?type=archive> (accessed June 25, 2018). The analyzed period saw presentations of works by Natalia LL (2017), Karolina Komasa (2018), and Iwona Chmielewska (2018). During 2015–2016, there were no individual exhibitions by women artists. The gallery of the CoCA collection has operated at the institution since 2017. This additional space, with a slightly different profile than the main exhibition space, has so far hosted presentations of nine works, of which four were created by women. However, it is not the institution's "proper" exhibition space; it is situated in the entrance hall, and the shows organized therein do not enjoy the same prestige as those held in the regular exhibition halls.

51 Rosalyn Deutsche, "Agoraphobia," in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Chicago: Graham Foundation, 1996), 295.

52 Ibid.

53 "The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power." Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 36.

54 Susan E. Chase, "Narrative Inquiry: Multiple Lenses, Approaches, Voices," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research: Third Edition*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, and New Delhi: Sage, 2005), 655.

48 The discussion was held on June 29, 2018, <https://ipoconamwolnosckobiet.blogspot.com/2018/06/i-po-co-nam-wolnosc-kobiet-diskusja.html> (accessed June 29, 2018). See also: www.pomorska.pl/wiadomosci/torun/a/chca-diskusji-o-braku-artystek-w-centrum-sztuki-wspolczesnej-w-toruniu,13289632/ (accessed June 29, 2018).

49 See: *Marne szanse na awanse?*

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