

ABSTRACT

Drawing from a research project focusing on women artists active in Wrocław in the 1970s, I propose an interdisciplinary approach for current and future art histories that is based on a combination of methods from various fields (cultural anthropology, social history, archival studies) and driven by feminist theory, activism for social and historical justice, and the politics of care.

Considering Wrocław's historical and cultural context in the second half of the 20th century – being the main but extensively destroyed city of the so-called regained territories, populated almost entirely by people resettling from the Eastern Borderlands and Central Poland – and shifting the disciplinary focus from the objective (artefact) to the subjective (personal narrative), I would like to bring more attention to the multitude of diverse women's stories that have not been incorporated into what we know as conventional art history. This approach, based on inclusion and collaboration, involves mutual discovering, creating, archiving, and disseminating of what I eventually name 'oral art herstories', combining 'oral history' as the main research method with 'art herstories' as the project's more activist output and goal.

The research evolved slowly from 2014 and had a chance to bloom with substantial funding obtained in 2018 from the National Science Centre (NCN). Unfortunately, it was violently interrupted by the COVID-19 crisis. The risk of endangering the elderly artists willing to share their stories caused critical revision of the project and resulted in a withdrawal from outcome-oriented pursuits. This became the clarifying turning point where the project's underlying values suddenly emerged: personal connection, mutual trust and care, establishing collective knowledge and shared agency. This could become an ethical agenda for an engaged art history, willing not only to rescue and reclaim the value of the overlooked or forgotten (initially after Ewa Domańska), but also to become mindfully inclusive and empowering for the living, resisting the neoliberal urge of academic production and perhaps becoming 'relational art history'.

keywords

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The Vulnerable Body in the Archive:

Matriculating Oral Herstories of Art with (Self-)care

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‘I don’t want to disappoint you, but I’m not a feminist’ – as one of the artists told me at the very beginning of our first interview. I was too preoccupied with my role as interviewer, busy setting up the conversation space and adjusting all the equipment, to react in that moment. I simply carried on, taking it for granted that probably no one from that generation of artists studying or just starting their careers in 1970s Poland would identify as a feminist. But when I started working on the opening paragraph for this article, this sentence came back to me. That particular artist – who I knew from her outstandingly reflexive and emancipatory artworks, full of vital imagination and wit, and from her courage to explore both artistic and gender boundaries – would have been a perfect match for the figure of the 1970s feminist creator. However, it is her own beliefs and views that are central to the methodology of this oral history. Why would she think that? Does she consider feminism irrelevant, or is it for her a ‘ridiculous’ Western idea? Is being called a feminist considered an insult for a woman of a particular context in Poland today? The seeming discrepancy between how I perceive that artist’s works and the meaning of her sentence has moved me deeply.

As I began to write my own story down for this article, the energy moving between my eyes and hands recalled that seemingly negligible moment from the unconscious and I began to wonder about its significance. Its meaning emerges between two physical acts of communication: my conversation with the artist and the encounter with myself in writing, and it was my organism that held and released the recollection. When I am interviewing women artists, along with various digital

recording devices, I also bring the organic apparatus of my body. It is inhabited by my [*pardon the dualism*] mind and feelings [*and the unknown?*], which are prone to involuntarily respond with thoughts and emotions. I have just recently acknowledged that this plays an important role in the research process. After many years of working predominantly at a mental level, I have grown – not without setbacks – to recognise and appreciate that the practice of oral art history is an inherently corporeal method, in which intellect and body are intertwined. This living instrument that I use in my research also has its characteristics, boundaries, and needs, which I have learned to better recognise and embrace with successive interviews.

In this article, I would like to present some of my methodological reflections regarding the situated practice of researching creative women's micronarratives – collecting, archiving, and engaging with personal stories of artists who have lived experience of being a woman. I consider it to be *a process of facilitating art herstories* rather than writing about women's art from the position of an expert. My goal is to share my findings in pursuit of using oral history methodology in the field of art history, contributing to more inclusive and equitable narratives within the discipline. Specifically, I would like to present how the researcher's corporeality is intertwined with the archive's collective speaking body and suggest mutual self-care as a means of addressing potential vulnerabilities and as a tool for co-emancipation. I also believe that this text can become a mirror for other struggling researchers and that it has the potential to enrich art history with an affective perspective on how knowledge is generated.

These findings are mainly based on the oral history study of the strategies of female artists active in Wrocław in the 1970s, which I carry out for my PhD research at the Institute of Art History, University of Wrocław, under the supervision of Professor Anna Markowska.¹ This ongoing project, initiated formally in 2013, involves a combination of methods derived from various fields, including cultural anthropology, sociology, digital humanities, and archival studies, as well as art itself. It is primarily driven by my explorations of feminist theory and practice, on one hand aiming to generate new knowledge, and on the other seeking to foster social change through activism striving for historical justice, informed by the politics of care. This article is a presentation of the partial results of the project regarding the methodology of the oral herstory projects in the field of art history.

The *oral history of art*, investigating subjective experiences and beliefs instead of facts and 'objective' truths, seems to be a particularly insightful method in the context of the Northern and Western Territories of Poland. The so-called Regained Territories were severely affected by the brutal physical, symbolic and social dev-

¹ The article was developed within the framework of the research project *Art of Wrocław's female artists in XXth 70s in the light of their micronarratives*, funded by the National Science Centre (no 2017/27/N/HS2/02476).

astation inflicted during World War II and the total population displacement after 1945. As this displacement and the events of the war were followed simultaneously by heavy state propaganda, cultural modernisation, and a bottom-up recultivation of the artistic milieu, personal testimonies from individuals of diverse backgrounds are very precious and reveal history as a polyphony of sometimes contradictory voices, presenting both official and unofficial historical narratives (Markowska and Reznik 2016). This method has proved to be very productive in destabilising dominant historical narratives and introducing underrepresented ones, and I have found it useful also in the context of the paradigm shift in art at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, when artistic practices were increasingly becoming ephemeral, body-related, performance- or action-based, conceptual or contextual.

By ‘situated practice of oral art history’, I mean not only the consideration of the complex contexts in which artists were situated, both in the period under study and at the time of the meetings, but also the dynamic negotiations of the historian’s existence and identity taking place *with* the research process. For me, those two were very often interdependent: my investigations were informed by my academic and personal development, and my growth relied not only on my findings but also on my encounters with the artists themselves. Those ‘encounters in-between-worlds’, as historian Ewa Domańska would describe meetings with the witnesses to history (Domańska 1999), in all cases resulted in forming specific interpersonal bonds. Especially when created from feminist positions, *art herstories* are based on reinforcing sisterhood, and thus mutual empowerment, as well as caring for matrilineal heritage. My initial intention was to induce art herstories and make them more visible, but these meetings with artists also ‘made me’ – I emerged as an art herstorian.

‘Matriculation’ is a term I have coined for this text adopting the Polish translation of Bracha L. Ettinger’s theory of the matrix and inspired by its artistic-academic exemplification in the *Macierz/Matrix* project presented by The Curatorial Collective (Kolektyw Kuratorski) in Kraków in 2018 (Chromik, Gienza and Bojarska 2022). I use it here with the (politically understood) meanings of: 1) registering, incorporating (stories) into a register (archive, history) – the act of conscious inclusion into an institutionalised system of social remembrance; 2) acknowledging someone’s entrance into the academic realm; 3) maturing, maternal fostering (de) growth – bestowing the caring ‘matrixial gaze’ instead of the dominant and exploitative male gaze; 4) coming of age – the liminal act of passing into society, marked in the Polish education system by the almost ritualistic ‘matriculation exam’ for entrance to university at the age of 18, thus transitioning from private childhood to public adulthood.

At first, attention and care were directed in my project towards the legacy that I have recognised as undervalued and underrepresented in art history, and which I dearly wanted to save. Yet gradually my undertaking has been revealed to me as one of self-rescue: I needed to find out how to take care – under a loving inner motherly eye – of myself first. It was a personal shift from the intellectual to the corporeal, moving towards more organic self-awareness, mindful movement, sustainable pleasure, and creative practices of everyday life, embracing activism and embodied knowledges. This *radical self-care*, understood as a micropolitical act of confronting the oppressive, patriarchal imperative to self-sacrifice, could only then be extended to my environment and become a research method.

After ten years of my meandering feminist oral history practice, I feel ready not only to amplify the voices of others but also to share my narrative of becoming and failing as an oral art herstorian, even though initially I did not expect to have a story of my own. I would therefore like to explore the possibilities of academic storytelling, drawing mainly from autoethnography, which focuses on research-based and positionally conscious self-description. I aim to track stimulating and healing practices, relationships and readings that have affected me on a variety of levels. I wish to further use this methodological framework in my PhD thesis, where I will be presenting the testimonies of the interviewed women artists and analysis of their artistic strategies together with my observations and the subsequent reworking of the material collected. I believe this will adequately represent the interconnection between the artist and the researcher, the two biological and socio-cultural organisms that carry all their memories, cultures, herstories and the possible futures within them.

This text is also a report on the 'archive's vulnerabilities' – my testimony of failures and doubts. Those not only reveal the project's weaknesses but can be transformed into invigorating sources of compassionate strength and resistance to the exploitative mode of academic production. Putting in ever-increasing levels of effort, stemming from childhood trauma and gendered into self-exploitation, has turned out to be a downward spiral for me. Collapsing, asking for help, and learning from it was probably my most significant research experience and success so far. Recovery from a crisis would have not been possible if not for all the caring people around me, to whom I am deeply grateful for their empathetic understanding, tender presence, and wise support.

Chosen roots. Collecting pieces for oral herstories of art

As an art historian, I had been taught that interviews are a useful tool for writing about contemporary art insofar as artists and curators and even their families and associates are often able to share vital information, documents, photographs, unknown artworks, and precious insights. Yet I cannot recall getting trained in conducting interviews. Moreover, I cannot say that I was trained to use feminist theory either – I think it was not really part of the art history curriculum at that time, as even recall one of my professors making patronising jokes about it. But I was lucky to have been able to blaze my own path of study within the Interdepartmental Individual Studies in the Humanities (MISH) at the University of Wrocław, having the opportunity to take classes in Polish philology, philosophy, cultural studies and ethnology, which broadened my perspective with an interdisciplinary approach.

My application for doctoral studies was preceded by a vital turning phase – my ‘feminist awakening’. Being raised and having studied in the paradigm of the male gaze and under male authorities, reading philosophy and texts written mostly by men, presenting a masculine, Western and anthropocentric perspective, I had succumbed to the charm of this type of power and aspired to the phallogocentric order. But this changed after I had taken a year’s leave to work as a waitress in London. I came back to Wrocław to finish my studies and to obtain my degree and started working in the Falanster cooperative – a leftist bookshop, café and cultural venue. For a diligent student coming from a conservative family background, this was the ultimate de-schooling. I still wanted to grow intellectually, so I applied for the PhD programme, seeking to exercise the new perspectives and skills that I had acquired thanks to socio-politically aware teamwork. The idea to deal with the oral histories of women artists active in Wrocław came to me quite spontaneously, as a transgressive gesture of leaving the academic ‘ivory tower’. Just after discovering Linda Nochlin’s pivotal *Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (Nochlin 1973), I realised that important stories of women were missing in my area of study. Feminist oral history appeared to me the most promising method of challenging the dominant narrative in art history. I recognised it as a collective space for a transgenerational polylogue where a multitude of underrepresented women’s voices could be heard and amplified. I saw it as a vehicle of unlearning, a tool of mutual empowerment, a space for social bonding, and eventually a platform for establishing more inclusive and open archives of contemporary art. But at the time there was, and to some extent there still is, no established methodology of the

oral art history. On one hand, I was excited to be entering uncharted territory; on the other, I was looking for points of support.

Among the available sources were various collections of interviews with contemporary artists, but the majority of them were journalistic and conducted predominantly with men. The most impactful for me were the conversations held by the established artist Artur Żmijewski with his colleagues, all of them associated with the 1990s Critical Art movement, collected in a publication entitled *Trembling Bodies*. This book included feminist artists Katarzyna Górna, Katarzyna Kozyra, and Joanna Rajkowska, and presented precious insights on the heterogeneous social, political, and artistic motivations for the artworks created by this flamboyant generation active in the period of post-communist transformation in Poland. As Żmijewski states, his position as a fellow creator and a friend enabled his interlocutors to be open with him, instantly establishing a mutual understanding within the intersubjectivity of the verbal exchange (Żmijewski 2008, 10-11). He also claimed that his book was research and that the artists he spoke with created new knowledge by transforming their socio-political observations into discursive pieces of art. He thus named them 'the eyewitnesses' of reality (ibid, 12-14). This disciplinary crossover of art and science was very attractive and promising for me, as it validated my intuition. But as Żmijewski's bold statements were expressed from a position different from mine, at the same time I felt intimidated. A few years later, similar feelings were evoked by the widely acclaimed Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Lives of the Artists, Lives of the Architects*. I read the copy I managed to obtain in excitement, as it was a collection of interviews with the greatest figures in Western art (Obrist 2016). I secretly fantasised about becoming a local and feminist Obrist. It was a desire for achievement, recognition, and power, which I believed I could use to support the little-known women artists from the eastern European Wrocław while simultaneously elevating myself. But I was nothing like the Swiss curator and critic nor like the Polish male artist – although I was somewhat privileged and intellectually eager, on a material and emotional level I did not have enough resources, confidence, and empowerment to successfully perform such a transgression.

It was grounded in the lived experience of a white, overweight and non-heteronormative girl/woman, raised in a modest family of Catholic resettlers from the so-called Eastern Borderlands (today part of Ukraine), Polish with a possibly suppressed Jewish or Armenian heritage, living in a town in the heavily industrialised region of Upper Silesia, overly ambitious and well trained in people pleasing. Crossing the borders of various areas of study, combining humanities with art, hybridising methodologies and dissemination formats – playing with and around knowledge – was my pleasure since I passed what in Poland is known as the 'matriculation

exam' for entrance to university and chose my course of studies. But instead of following an idealised career path of a rogue experimenter, I delved into the search for a 'reliable' oral history methodology that I could transmit into the field of art history from other university disciplines, like cultural studies, anthropology or history. I had believed that this would attract more approval. Using the language drawn from Clarissa Pinkola Estés' famous psychoanalytical *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, a book which became a self-recovery manual for women of my generation, that was the voice of the internalised Bluebeard, a fear preventing me from reaching my truth (Estés 1998).

My first 'proper' methodological source was *Oral History and War. The Concentration Camp Experience in the Perspective of Biographical Narratives* by Piotr Filipkowski (Filipkowski 2010). Because of this study's scope, it was a very difficult read for me. But as it was the only available Polish academic monograph using that method, I had an inner compulsion to get through it. Since the theme of atrocities was present throughout my entire childhood and adolescence, I should be mentally immune to it, I rationalised, though I had no organic space in my mind-body to process the book. Most of the sources I found later on dealt either with war and trauma, oppression under the communist regime, or ethnic-based violence (Kudela-Świątek 2013; Kłapeć, Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, Szadura and Szumiło 2014). However, I believed it was my duty to work through all that at times quite heavy reading and to pick out methodological clues for my research in the field of art. It was a relief when I came across the journalistic *Rebels*, published by Anka Grupińska and Joanna Wawrzyniak, a collection of interviews conducted with representatives of the Polish counterculture of the 1970s and 1980s (Grupińska and Wawrzyniak 2011). I was delighted to be finally reading the micronarratives of creative individuals who were contesting the system with their actions and artworks, even though the majority of interviewees were men.

I knew that the oral art herstories archive I was envisioning had to address three key issues: 1) the so-called Regained Territories and recultivating cultural life after the resettlement – uncertainty combined with the vitality of creating the new life in the 1970s, known as the 'golden decade' of post-war Wrocław; 2) art and its shifting paradigm, modernisation, and the neo-avant garde experimentation, changing representation strategies, the relationships, and power dynamics within the artworld; 3) the notions of womanhood, emancipation, and equality. This last component I was exploring intensively while undertaking postgraduate gender studies at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IBL PAN), where I was de- and re-learning philosophy, literature, art criticism, humanities, social sciences, and even theology from feminist perspectives. I was

recognising them as mine – representative of the gender I was socialised in and in line with my own corporeal experiences.

Around that time, I accidentally came across a bilingual book *Testimonies: In a Female Voice*, a collection of herstories of key Czech and Slovak female artists and art theoreticians (Štefková 2012). In a situation of certain methodological isolation, learning about this project gave me a feeling of warmth and proximity, a sense of being part of a transnational community of like-minded researchers. In Poland, there was much more inspiration for me in the field of art, which seemed to be in the midst of an archival turn, than in academia. The most notable was Karol Radziszewski's exhibition *America Is Not Ready for This* – a queer exploration of the story of one of the most important contemporary female artists Natalia LL, using the oral history method and presented as a film and a collection of documents. The Warsaw-based pioneering gay artist revisited the legacy of the senior colleague from Wrocław, reperforming her legendary 1977 trip to New York funded by the Kościuszko Foundation. He visited places she had been to and collected stories of the people she had met, namely Vito Acconci and Carolee Schneemann, while also receiving interview refusals from Hans Haacke, Lucy Lippard, Anthony McCall, Sarah Charlesworth, William Wegman, and Colette, who either did not recall meeting her or had other reasons not to speak (Radziszewski, Szcześniak 2012). It was a well-produced and multilayered project that, again, both inspired and intimidated me. I was held by an impression that what I was trying to do at the intersection of art and research had already been done and that there was not much space left [*my old demons of competitiveness of the desire for originality or dealing with manspreading?*]. So I pushed myself even more into the scientific field, creating online databases within the digital humanities. Even though I dearly wanted to have a conversation with Natalia LL, I felt 'unready for this' – we lived in the same city for several years before her passing away in 2022, but I never found the courage to approach her. However, out of this particular vulnerability grew one of my key research questions: why have there been no other great women artists in Wrocław?

Nochlin's original question was addressed by the Łódź-based feminist artist Anka Leśniak, who in her *Fading Traces* project collected the autobiographical testimonies of the most important Polish female artists of the 1970s: Izabella Gustowska, Anna Kutera, Natalia LL, Teresa Murak, Ewa Partum, Krystyna Piotrowska, and Teresa Tyszkiewicz, presenting them as a video archive-installation.² I remember again having the feeling of similarity and mirroring the work of an experienced artist, like with Štefková's project, but at the same time, I cannot recall envy, like when visiting Radziszewski's exhibition. Perhaps those reactions were different due to the medium of my experience, respectively: a small book, a full-blown

² *Fading Traces: Polskie artystki w sztuce lat 70.* = *Fading Traces: Polish Women Artists in the Art of the 1970s*, Anka Leśniak, accessed 4 May 2023, http://www.ankalesniak.pl/fading2010_pl.htm.

³ *The Women's Art Library*, Goldsmiths, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/make/>.

⁴ *Elizabeth Murray Oral History of Women in the Visual Arts Project*, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/inside-the-archives/elizabeth-murray-oral-history-of-women-the-visual-arts-project>.

⁵ Documentation Centre for Contemporary Art in and from Austria, basis wien, accessed 4 May 2023, <https://www.basis-wien.at/>.

⁶ Artpool Art Research Center, accessed 4 May 2023, <https://artpool.hu/en>.

⁷ *Forgotten Heritage – European Avant-Garde Art Online*, accessed 4 May 2023, <https://www.forgottenheritage.eu/about/>.

⁸ *Wystawy sztuki kobiet = All-women Art Exhibitions*, accessed 4 May 2023, <http://wystawykobiet.amu.edu.pl/english.html>.

⁹ *Historie Mówione Nowoczesności, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej = Oral Histories of Modernity, Museum of Modern Art*, accessed 4 May 2023, <https://artmuseum.pl/en/archiwum/historie-mowione-nowoczesnosci>.

museum exhibition, or an internet website with a project's documentation. But I believe that, regardless of the presentation format, I was attracted by the feeling of commonality and synergy of efforts – being there for the same cause and speaking from similar positions.

In 2014, a collection of stories about an artistic event of the Golden Grape Symposium and Exhibitions (1963-1981) and the New Art Biennial (1985-1996) taking place in Zielona Góra was published (Słodkowski 2014). It felt very grounding to discover that there was such oral art history research being conducted parallel to my commencing project, and that it even matched some of my criteria. I felt I was part of something bigger – perhaps a disciplinary shift or a community of researchers making the change I had hoped for. Again, this validated my research intuition and aroused some envy in me: reading this beautifully designed book stemming from similar intellectual interests in 'rescue history' (Domańska 2014) and 'horizontal art history' (Piotrowski 2009), with amazing contents and a foreword by the aforementioned Filipowski, I felt one step behind [*why such rivalry?*]. Even though my research was from a feminist angle and exploring specifically women's art, meaning that there was no actual conflict of interest, and my study could have benefited greatly from that publication being disseminated, somehow it put me off. It took me a while to understand this.

Reflecting upon my thoughts around Żmijewski's project, fantasies around Obrist's practice, or feelings towards Słodkowski's accomplished publication, I have realised that all those were my projections onto male figures, resulting possibly from not having enough women role models. Why were there no acclaimed women experimenters in my field of study? It also resembled the emotions that were evoked when I was discovering the Women's Art Archive in Goldsmiths,³ exploring oral history collections of the British Library or the Smithsonian,⁴ after visiting the libraries in Frankfurt, Oslo and Helsinki, when learning about the basis wien archive⁵ or Artpool Art Research Center in Budapest,⁶ when admiring the *Forgotten Heritage: European Avant-garde Art On-Line* website,⁷ the *All-women Art Exhibitions* research project,⁸ or the recent *Oral Histories of Modernity* archive of the Modern Art Museum in Warsaw.⁹ This particular envy is a mix of appreciation, affinity, excitement, desire, and motivation, all triggered by a deficiency.

I recognised that I was longing for a proper material structure. But beneath it, it was always my conviction that 'I do not have enough', my belief that 'I am not enough'. In the realm of the highly parameterised academy, where one has to constantly prove their worth to the system and speak the language of benefits, while there is such an overflow of scholarly publications, this is a very vulnerable place to be in, risking the relentless pursuit of points while simultaneously struggling to read everything and, at the same time, make existential ends meet. On a more

pragmatic level, I needed material resources for outsourcing the technical work, preservation of the archive, development of a website or a publication, and also financial remuneration for my work, allowing me to pay my bills and support myself. I decided to apply for a substantial grant to gain security and it took me a few years before I got it in 2018. It was an amazing feeling of accomplishment after several attempts, especially since I have been on the verge of abandoning that project and changing my occupation on several occasions. I was about to turn thirty-five and I was at times very frustrated and tired of the precarious life of a perpetual PhD candidate with no reliable job or basic housing security. But with that fundraising achievement, I felt a new wave of enthusiasm – my sense of agency was artificially enhanced by winning a grant competition, which I saw as my academic springboard to advancement.

The great reveal: the matter that matters and a global failure

It might be disappointing, but in this article, I will not present or analyse the micro-narratives of artists whom I have talked to across all those years of research. I am saving those stories for my PhD dissertation, where I will describe the project's scope, methods, research questions, critical axes, and progression. In this text, I aim to present the learning and meta-processes happening while meeting in person, engaging with, and collecting the stories of Katarzyna Chierowska, Anna Kutera, Anna Bolcewicz, Anna Szpakowska-Kujawska, Ewa Maria Poradowska-Werszler, Maria Gostylla-Pachucka, Anna Płotnicka, Jolanta Marcolla, and others [*is it enough material already?*]. I would like to use my own research experience to tell a story which can be useful in the field of art histories, especially one that aims at social justice and is informed by the ethics of care. For me, reconnecting with the organic matter became vital: learning how to take care not only of the stories, the carriers of meanings, or cultural heritage and civilisational values, but first and foremost how to take care of the physical and psychoemotional roots and relations, and how to mutually care for the living biological beings.

From the very beginning, I knew that my research was a corporeal event – I wanted to physically meet artists and interact with them. Yet I was not fully conscious of the underlying significance of this, as my focus was initially on memories and the content of stories told. Slowly, during the subsequent interviews, I started to notice the fascinating multitude of aesthetic information flowing: the qualities of different voices, gestures, facial expressions, body postures, ways of moving, appearances and clothing, and even the decorations in the flats. There was information coming

at me from all sides, the meanings of which I could not fully grasp, but which I felt were very important, especially when studying women artists who were excellent in creating representations: gendered personas and environments. It was clear to me that these conversations should be recorded as high-quality audiovisual material that could become a precious source for the future. I wished that others could interact with the archive so that it was more like a living organism than just a dusty library shelf. But there is also another side to it: being a sensually sensitive person and trained as an art historian, I have a body strongly receptive to a variety of sensory qualities, especially visual ones, and process them with my whole organism, along the body-mind line. But understanding that aspect of my work came to me a bit later, with some worrying symptoms of health problems.

I started noticing that the conversations I was conducting were energetically, sensorially, and verbally intense for me, quite overwhelming and exhausting – usually it took me a few days to recover from them. Just recently I realised what a huge portion of information I was processing through my body each time: I was handling the interview, the interpersonal interaction, the technical equipment, the psychological sentient device of myself, post-production, and analysis. Ironically, in my commitment to taking care of others' stories, I was neglecting myself, which I became aware of after facing the consequences. The emergence of an autoimmune disease, situated somewhere at the intersection of body and mind, was a source of reflection for me, that I had been unfortunately abusing my organism. So I redirected my attention: I gave myself dietary, psychotherapeutic, and pharmacological care, developing body awareness, practising yoga, exploring movement, contact with nature, and sexuality, looking for what gives me peace, pleasure, and joy.

During this time I was also reading *The Shaking Woman or a History of my Nerves*, a book that I had acquired accidentally, ignorant of who its author was. It turned out to be a treasured companion, which I nibbled on bit by bit for a few years, like the most delicious, intense and long-lasting delicacy – it was so satisfying to interact with the erudite and critical Siri Hustvedt's narrative. She describes her own experience of recurrent convulsions, which began after her father's death. The experience of loss triggered violent bodily reactions that, from time to time, completely took control of her entire being, abruptly interrupting her lectures, throwing her on the ground, and completely preventing her from her usual verbal communication. Hustvedt takes a sharp look at her ailment, deconstructing the Western medicine paradigm, where health is not only pathologised but where body and mind became arbitrarily separated. By telling her own story with great self-awareness and by situating her self-observation in the context of the history of psychiatry, neuroscience, or psychoanalysis, the author shows how knowing her own experience is an integral part of a sovereign being, and how caring evokes

understanding. That it is she who has the agency to narrate her life, with all the inherent mental and organic processes, and that this is not the privilege of any of these Western disciplines (Hustvedt 2010).

After the liberation of my inner writer thanks to the *écriture féminine* (Cixous 1976), it was the reading of Susan Sontag's diaries that introduced me to the conscious reconnecting of mind and body (Sontag 2012); this was grounded later in movement during the Body-Mind Centering sessions with dancer and choreographer Iwona Olszowska; the experience of contact-improvisation and gaga workshops bringing me more self-awareness and expression; rereading Jolanta Brach-Czaina's *Cracks in Existence* (Brach-Czaina 2018), one of the most important Polish feminist philosophical texts; discovering ecosexuality through the artworks of Annie Sprinkle & Beth Stevens or Agnieszka Szpila's radical novel *Hexes* (Szpila 2021); the recently published in Poland *Bad Feminist*, a collection of essays by Roxane Gay, who inspired me to be a naughty academic, to enjoy myself, and to make a difference at the same time (Gay 2022). All these physical-mental exercises helped me unlearn my limiting academic discipline and convictions, eventually enabling me to surpass the scholarly apathy and exhaustion that I had been experiencing.

As I re-learned how to handle my own emotions and care for my body, I began to notice the special role these play in the process of creating an archive of oral art herstories, providing a medium for the formation of relationships and communication between two conversing women. This became strikingly clear to me with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought into every physical interaction a serious risk of a severe disruption to those 'protein interfaces' we inhabit. With the lockdown and the spread of a deadly virus, as an oral historian investigating the stories of elderly women, I found myself in a total deadlock, from which I was unable to extricate myself on either a technical or an ethical level.

Wanting to find a way out, I invited Joanna Synowiec to an artistic research collaboration in the context of the Wrocław 70/20 Symposium,¹⁰ a celebration of the 50th anniversary of an artistic event from 1970 that symbolically established a conceptual breakthrough in the Wrocław art scene (Nader 2009). In the project entitled *Reverberations*, carried out jointly with Dominika Łabędź, Beata Rojek, Katarzyna Roj, and curator Alicja Jodko, as well as Iwona Ogrodzka and Agata Kalinowska, we planned to develop and creatively rework the oral histories archive of the Wrocław '70 Visual Arts Symposium. After conducting a couple of interviews in between lockdowns, we made a docu-camera performance in the form of a séance [Fig. 1], presented online as a miniseries [Fig. 2].¹¹ As women symposiasts on the verge of two worlds, inspired by nineteenth-century spiritualist

¹⁰ *Symposium Wrocław 70/20*, accessed 4 May 2023, <https://www.symposium7020.pl/en>.

¹¹ *Pogłosy = Reverberations*, Entropia Gallery, accessed 4 May 2023, https://entropia.art.pl/view_news.php?id=609&arc=1&year=2020.

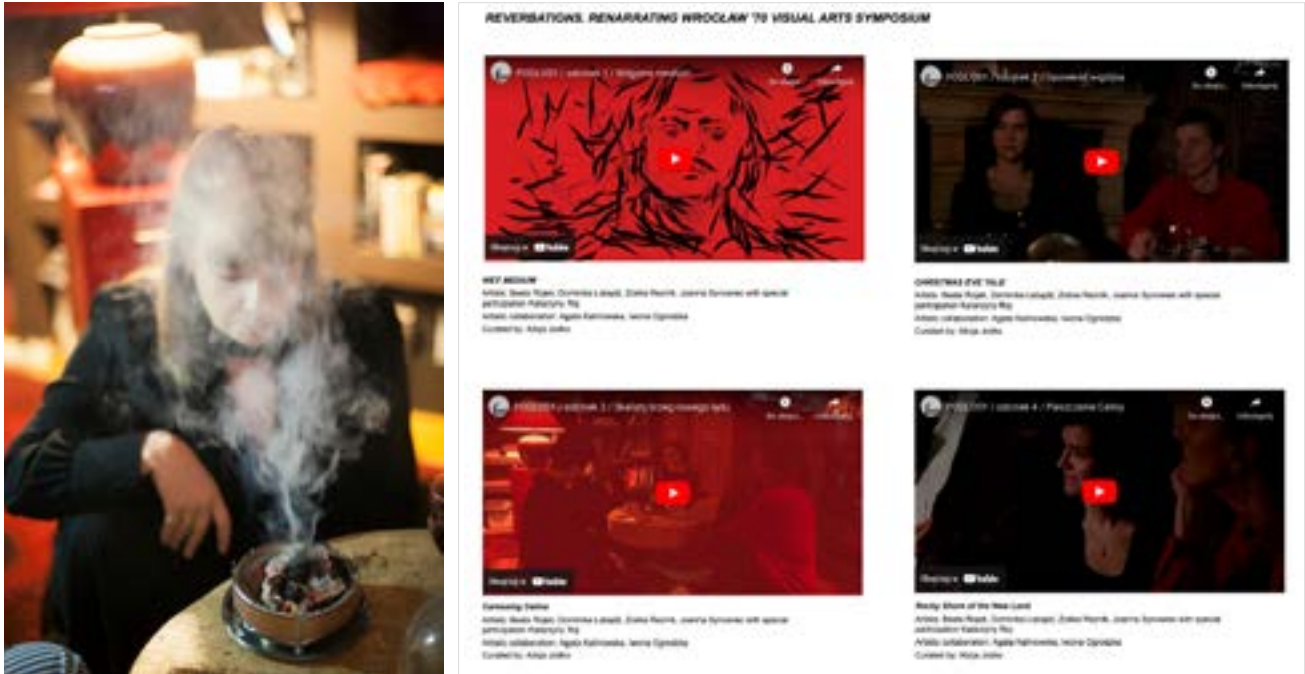


Fig. 1 – Katarzyna Roj on the set of *Reverberations*, Wrocław, 2020. Photo courtesy: Agata Kalinowska, Galeria Entropia / Strefa Kultury Wrocław.

Fig. 2 – *Reverberations* miniseries, 2020.

practices, we embodied the conflicting stories of two important witnesses to the history of 1970, Anna Szpakowska-Kujawska and Zbigniew Makarewicz, filtering them through our organisms and experiences. Eventually, we did not directly present any of the interviews, but rather used them as prompts to evoke the performance of our own feminist narratives around both official events and to release our stories and critical insights rooted in our bodies. The corporeal and ethical aspects of running an oral history project during the pandemic, with a set of guidelines, were presented in a text *Breathing the Same Air* (Reznik and Synowiec 2020). This project was a laboratory for me, where I drew on the energy of sisterhood and collaboration – exchanging knowledge, experiences and ideas with trusted, creative women from different disciplines. This motion inspired me to redesign an ongoing grant project in which I was seriously stuck. I realised that by conducting this research individually for over seven years and struggling to prove myself as a PhD candidate while earning as a teacher, I was experiencing isolation and burn-out, which were exacerbated during the pandemic. But in the collective artistic research of *Reverberations* I experienced joy and fulfilment, so I knew that I would be able to move on with my research if I could work in a healthy, team-based environment. I needed to find a way to open up the project formally restricted to be conducted solo – I was eager to expose the vulnerabilities of the research processes, exchange doubts, invite new perspectives, ask for and accept help, start

delegating tasks, let go of control and meticulousness, invite more chaotic and creative processes, accept imperfections, sacrifice some of my initial goals, heal from the neoliberally reinforced narcissistic desire for individual achievement.

Despite the huge pandemic crisis, I saw a chance of saving the project and thus saving my PhD. With *Reverberations* I intuitively sent out the impulse to establish a diverse and horizontal women's circle, where we mirrored each other's practice, sparked energies and cross-over in thoughts. Most importantly, we were mutually taking care of the project, supporting each other in self-care. From this experience, I began to rebuild, strengthen and confidently embrace my agency in the hierarchical field of the academy, ready to consciously reposition myself and take a stand in the borderland territory of art history and artistic research. However, I did not manage to embody this intention, because my body-mind did not keep up with my professional plans – it painfully resisted any further work with a meltdown. It was later that I understood why that happened.

In the course of the pandemic, I was unaware of burning out professionally, frustrated by the solitude in my long-lasting research and the online teaching deprived of corporeal stimulation. After experiencing major turbulence in my personal life and several losses among the people closest to me, I felt immense loneliness and suffered from grief, which I did not know how to process. I threw myself into various tasks that kept me busy, like the mindless work of additive data collecting. I made the mistake of trying to work out emotional difficulties through labour, using it for self-regulation rather than to achieve the research objective. It was one of my self-destructive behavioural patterns I was not aware of, together with overthinking, ruminating, procrastination, and keeping the illusion of having everything under control.

I had signalled my intentions to extend the duration of the project to my supervisor and in one of the reports and for that purpose I had saved the grant money. I was convinced that even though I had difficulties I would eventually manage to fulfil the project's obligations, as I had already found a solution. However, while struggling with depression and anxiety and on a medical leave, I did not send a formal request on time. I was shocked when the project was automatically terminated with only about 25% of the grant money used, without the possibility of resumption due to my health situation. As a researcher I worked for 36 months under a so-called 'junk contract', so formally I was not an employee and was not protected by labour laws. This only intensified the crisis I was already in, and it took me another two years to get out of it.

Taking extra self-care

Hustvedt's autobiographical essay became my literary aid and comprehension device. It helped me to reconnect the jagged threads of my own problematic existential experience, socio-cultural situatedness, and creative and research processes into a more conscious and integrated whole. My crisis became also an opportunity to deconstruct the unhealthy and exploitative environment I found myself in within the academic system, something more other people also face. I am deeply convinced that the path of healing through reclaiming my relationship with my emotions and body, as well as my voice and story, is not just something private, but rather an extremely vital emancipatory practice that should be at the very centre of my attention and practice.

Having a rather traditional upbringing in Poland, I have inherited a set of romantic phantasms around the figure of the self-sacrificing Mother Pole in the forefront. This myth grew very strongly into the collective consciousness during the period of Poland's partitions, constituting an oppressive positioning of women as the guardian of the home, and thus the protector of tradition, sacrificing her own life for the sake of the fatherland and to save national values. According to Iza Kowalczyk, during the transformation period of the 1990s, this myth was recreated in the figure of a bold businesswoman, supporting another patriarchal logic – neoliberal capitalism (Kowalczyk 1999, 12-18; 2010, 51-63).

Taking care of others, their stories, values, and legacy, was bringing me approval and appreciation. The dark side of this culturally inherited 'mothering' is the ease of accepting excess obligations. It is very tricky how the patriarchal hetero-matrix situated me, a contemporary educated woman, as willing to take extensive care of whole my universe – an underpaid, precarious worker of the fields of art and academy, concerned more about the heritage than about self. While being intellectually aware that it is a shard of patriarchal misogyny, my body did not know it until I consolidated my corporeal and mental experiences into a fully embodied knowledge. It was the simple, everyday deeds of caring for myself that became micro-revolutionary acts of disobedience, opposing the logic of (self-)exploitation. *Radical self-care* became my antidote to putting myself second, removing myself into the shadows, slowly disappearing [*though physically gaining weight*], excluding myself. Moving away from a 'toxic sense of responsibility' towards a more compassionate, continuous, and mutual care was also inspired by Rebecca Solnit's *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, which promoted my capacity to trust my processes and accept fatigue, frustrations or even burnout as political acts (Solnit 2016).

Considering art and heritage, I decided to follow the maternal gaze that also sets healthy boundaries for using resources. Unlearning some of the cultural patterns,

roles, and behaviours, ‘matriculation’ became for me *caring for others through caring for myself* – cultivating others’ stories by nourishing my presence. In everyday practice, it is tender nurturing and fierce standing for all the notions of otherness in me as the way to respectfully make and hold a more equitable social space. In terms of archival practice, this is the courage to keep asking an open question ‘Whose archive is it?’, followed by ‘How to make it more inclusive?’, and an empathetic yet mindful of our resources ‘How can we take care of it together?’. A relational and corporeal turn for (oral) art histories

I have noticed that incorporating my own existence into my academic practice helped me to become more mature as a partner for my interlocutors. Having a mutual lived experience of being a creative and socially active woman became a connecting, communal sensation. This was clarified for me after the several conversations I had with Joanna Synowiec within the framework of the *Reverberations* project when interviewing Anna Szpakowska-Kujawska together. I took the role of the camera operator then while Joanna was conducting the conversation. I was enchanted to observe as the two talking women bonded and I knew that, even though I was also an active participant in that situation, their exchange had a very special quality. Synowiec, a newlywed mother, expressed that explicitly in our miniseries episode entitled *A Christmas Eve Tale*, where we discuss various issues around motherhood while working in arts and culture: ‘Well, I kind of went to Szpakowska-Kujawska to have her tell me how to do it. Really!’, she said.¹²

As an ‘oral art herstorian’ I have decided to hold conversational space as an intersubjective platform for the existential exchange – not only hearing and collecting the female artists’ stories but also resonating with them, bringing my own identity and experience to the meeting, enabling myself to be seen. I believe that within the discipline I have moved away from interviews that I would call ‘mental excavations’, mining information from the memories of my interviewees, which I connote as belonging to the patriarchal logic of extraction, inevitably leading to the exploitative use of the so-called natural and human resources. I practise a conversational mode rooted in the exchange of lived experience and the corporeal being, for which I found dance and choreographic exercises very helpful, especially contact improvisation.

I am embracing a more empathetic mode of research that I would describe as *relational art history*, after Nicolas Bourriaud’s essay on Relational Aesthetics, which has informed my research since my master’s thesis (Bourriaud 2002). In that model, I wish to discover or establish a consensual and at least a temporary relationship with the person who is willing to share their story with me. Within the artworld, a multitude of non-financial forms of exchange exist to nurture interpersonal and professional bonds – we cooperate, interchange competences, share resources or

¹² *Pogłosy / odcinek 2 / Opowieść wigilijna = Reverberations / Episode 2 / A Christmas Eve Tale*, YouTube.com, 2:10–2:18, accessed 4 May 2023, <https://youtu.be/9tYbGZO62rY?t=130>.



Fig. 3 – The opening of the 2015 F/M Festival, Centre for the Reanimation of Culture (Centrum Reanimacji Kultury – CRK), Wrocław, 23 May 2015. In the front right: Katarzyna Chierowska and Anna Bolcewicz with Zofia Reznik, in the centre: Magdalena Grobelna, and in the back: Marta Pałyga. Photo courtesy: Patrycja Mastej, Fundacja Wersja. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wersja/22822065444/in/album-72157659554534704/>

¹³ *F/M Festiwal 2015*, Flickr, accessed 4 May 2023, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wersja/albums/72157659554534704>

networks. As an art professional, I have been asked by my interlocutors to write reviews, Wikipedia biographies, and curate their exhibitions. Such flows of symbolic values, resources, and influence are no secret in the community, although they do raise controversy, making it necessary, in my view, to make them transparent and visible. Even with the flattened hierarchies and in communal archives the power dynamic is still there in the relational practice, as Claire Bishop points out (Bishop 2004).

I remember that at an early stage of my research, in 2015, I invited the artists I had been meeting to actively participate in a grassroots, almost zero-budget feminist festival that I co-organised with a group of friends [Fig. 3].¹³ Inviting Katarzyna Chierowska, Anna Bolcewicz, and Anna Kutera, who were involved in the independent art scene of the 1970s, to exhibit and perform with the young artists in one of the Wrocław's squats was an incredible, inclusive, and transgressive experience. Following this, in 2016, I received an invitation from Chierowska to be the



Fig. 4 – Katarzyna Chierowska with Aga Tomaszewska during Chierowska's action 'The Art of Begging' (*Sztuka żebrania*) at 2015 F/M Festival, Centre for the Reanimation of Culture (Centrum Reanimacji Kultury – CRK), Wrocław, 23 May 2015. Photo courtesy: Kamil Nowelli/ Katarzyna Chierowska, Fundacja Wersja. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wersja/23082691079/in/album-72157661762013841/>

curator for her project [Fig. 4].¹⁴ I also remember that for some time we were neighbours with Bolcewicz, and that she paid me and my family a visit for Christmas Eve dinner. I also remember that Chierowska, after I moved into a new flat, visited me with her best wishes and gave me some houseplants from her own abundant collection. But I must confess that I have failed to stay very close with the women artists I met when my personal difficulties started and when the pandemic hit all of us, which made me feel guilty. I wanted to offer more than I was capable of. Those plants from Chierowska, among other indicators, visualised for me how during my periods of depression I stop nurturing the entities around me, letting them dry out and sometimes die, which is a manifestation of self-neglect [Fig. 5]. The pandemic also triggered my anxiety about the loss of people who were important to me, especially the loved ones and the elderly. Because of my fear, I was frozen – physically unable to pick up the phone, write emails, respond to invitations, and certainly not able to conduct research based on meeting and talking to people. I managed to confide in one of the doctoral seminars, but the reasonable solutions suggested by my supervisor and colleagues did not convince me – because I was driven by the irrational. It was impossible to maintain complete safety, especially when the women inviting me to their private spaces, tired of the rules and forced alienation, insisted on talking without face masks. Or when their bodies spontaneously sought physical contact, for example by touching my arm, or when waves of cordiality led to completely natural bursts of laughter or even hugs. Having to restrain this spectrum of physical and emotional communication also felt to

¹⁴ *F/M Festiwal 2015: Photelart Katarzyna Chierowska 'Sztuka żebrania'* = *F/M Festiwal 2015: Photelart Katarzyna Chierowska 'The art of begging'*, Flickr, accessed 4 May 2023, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wersja/albums/72157661762013841/with/23342213262/>. *18000 GROSZY = SZCZĘŚCIE, CZYLI SZTUKA ŻEBRANIA. FINAL PROJEKTU = 18,000 PENNIES = HAPPINESS, OR THE ART OF BEGGING. PROJECT FINALE*, Cojestgrane.pl, 6.09.2016, accessed 4 May 2023, <https://cojestgrane.pl/polska/dolnoslaskie/wroclaw/wydarzenie/39he/18000-groszy-szczescie-czyli-sztuka-zebrania.-final-projektu/bylo>. MWW Muzeum Współczesne Wrocław, Facebook, 16.09.2016, accessed 4 May 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/MuzeumWspolczesne/photos/a.1193519817385099/1193519984051749/>.

Fig. 5 – Fallen plants at the *Reverberations* setting in my apartment. Wrocław, 2020. Photo courtesy: Agata Kalinowska, Galeria Entropia / Strefa Kultury Wrocław.



me like a major loss, and switching to online interviews seemed impossible due to technical capabilities. The fear of transmitting the COVID-19 virus – but not of receiving it! – was probably just a representation of my deeper problem with control, catalysed by the pandemic. But there was just too much going on for my organism to handle at the same time: the refugee crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, the war in Ukraine, sexual violence, mobbing and homophobia, to name a few of

my personal experiences of that time. All these subsequent waves of difficulties kept me disconnected, immersed in emotions stemming from traumas, including the intergenerational ones I was carrying or resonating with. It took me a while to see through it all and to understand what was mine and what was not.

As I made the decision to be more attentive to my own well-being and feelings, I began to notice new sensations and qualities in my own research. I noticed that during conversations I bring out the part of myself that resonates with the person's story, that I am easily moved and drawn into the reality of others. Effortlessly, often subconsciously, I tune into the emotional reality of others and actively follow their narratives, so I put a lot of effort into not getting carried away. When this was happening at the beginning of my fieldwork, I thought it was a useful attunement, helping me to gain trust and keep the story flowing. But later I started to question it. What is my intention when I connect with another person's world? How am I feeling in that moment, what experiences and emotions am I bringing with me that day? How much energy and space do I have in that particular situation to evoke and receive another person's story? How is my body reacting to what I am hearing? Do I need a break or a change? Apparently, the oral history techniques I studied were not suitable for me, perhaps they were written by and for researchers with different backgrounds, predispositions or socialisation (Kaufmann 2010) [*wasn't it mainly by and for men?*]. I realised that I was too open and too active as a listener, too susceptible to experiencing or physically responsive to the stories being told to me. Perhaps I was hypersensitive because my own traumas or insecurities were very active. Was I too self-concerned, narcissistic, 'hysterical', or just trained to be overly polite?

I am a great listener, and I have received this feedback on numerous occasions. I would follow someone's story with great ease, helping them weave their individual narratives and retrieving their personal meanings. During the course of the research, however, I began to suffer – the symptoms were headaches, bloating, constant fatigue, irritability, sleep problems, and weight fluctuations. I was diagnosed quite inconclusively, and I would see it as 'creeping deregulation': autoimmune thyroid disease, eating disorders, irritable bowel syndrome, neurosis, depressive-anxiety disorder... a growing collection of manifestations of internal conflict. I was amazed to discover during psychotherapy that the root was in me being not open enough. How could this be, when I was allowing such a huge flow of verbal, emotional and sensory information through my mental-organic system during every conversation, eager to meet and understand others? With the appropriate guidance, I understood that my issue was coming from the opposite angle – I was not being open enough to show myself, to present, express and include myself in the conversation. It made perfect sense in the context of the gendered social training I had received.

Following various interview guidelines, I was trying too hard on the side of empathy all that time. By being so committed to collecting herstories and possibly enhancing them, I had left no room for my own herstory to be part of this project. I believed that I should not occupy any space, and become almost invisible – without volume or body – while being very present with my consciousness and mind. So I was keeping myself out of the dialogue, leaving my own experience, personality, and identity on the threshold of the encounter, remaining quiet about myself for the presumed sake of other women. This act of silencing myself was, of course, caused by the internalised misogyny that I probably still carry within me and that still needs to be addressed (Beard 2017). Like many people socialised as women, I need to train boundary-setting, self-respect, and putting my immaterial and organic self in first place. Eventually, I adjusted my oral history methodology and came up with my own, personalised conversation techniques, specific to my psycho-emotional and sensory constitution and experiences.

I would call it a *corporeal turn* in the way I practise oral art history, as it was all about the awareness of the sensitive, responsive and affective apparatus I am using when encountering other entities in their bodily manifestations. This turnaround is at the same time a realisation of the invisible ‘choreographic’ training I had received as part of my discipline: wandering around artefacts and experiencing the ambience of exhibitions, physically visiting monuments and assessing their proportions with body measurements or steps, kinetically exploring the artworks’ colour energetics with skin. Apparently, the sensual reception of artworks precedes the intellectual one just like bodies converse before any words are uttered.

Who cares? Is an ally!

The artist I invoked at the very beginning of my text, Jolanta Marcolla, sent me a surprising gift – my portrait. During the pandemic, losing physical contact with people she considered of significance to her, she painted watercolour images of them, which she displayed as an exhibition at a moment of safety in 2021, inviting everyone to come to the opening. I was enchanted by this simple relational practice and simultaneously very touched to be included. However, I was moving then and the parcel had been circulating somewhere for an alarmingly long time. When it finally arrived after a few weeks, for some reason I did not open it for another year and a half – I put the envelope in a prominent place, right next to a statuette of Natalia LL made by Wykwitex, a collective of young artists from Wrocław, acting together from 2017 to 2020 [Fig. 6]. At the time of writing this text, I was forced to move again, and at this point, I can finally say that I feel



Fig. 6 – In the front: a bust of Natalia LL's by Wykwitex, from the *Bravo Girls* series, around 2019. In the back: the sealed envelope with a portrait painted by Jolanta Marcolla. Wrocław, 2023. Photo of the author.

safe. Now, I would love to open this parcel and revive the energy flow in this acquaintance.

Personal safety, physical comfort and general well-being became an area of keen interest to me at every stage of my research. I have eventually arrived at what I consider to be the *facilitation of art herstories*, where I am responsible for creating a safe space for the micronarratives to emerge in a consensual exchange. This requires enhancing mutual trust and openness on both sides of the conversation: the capacity to reveal ourselves, show our various aspects, monitor mood, raise needs and be responsive, acknowledge vulnerabilities and take care of them. As a woman researcher with an excessive focus on others, I had to unlearn handling people to achieve my goals and focus more on maintaining myself. Reestablishing

a healthy relationship with my own body and feelings and learning how to give and receive organic and emotional feedback became fundamental in my practice in the oral history of art. I find that *mutual self-care* – a collective act of supporting each other’s self-care and nurturing our own stories – is a good cure for the gendered self-sacrifice and the risk of self-exploitation in the field of academic and artistic production. I consider this ‘matriculative’ responsibility a truly micro-revolutionary strategy that prevents giving up dignity, comfort, pleasure, and fun in the name of any noble mission or rescue.

Forming a women’s circle with a group of friends in *Reverberations* encouraged me to allow myself to become and act as one of the speaking bodies. Performing within the safe boundaries of collective artistic research empowered me to reclaim my voice and space in academia, to tell my own story. With the act of writing this vulnerable text, I am gaining self-acceptance, compassion, and gratitude. I believe that as a scholar I am becoming more aware of my own presence and position, more visible and responsive, and more alive and curious of others and their truths. I deeply hope that this instance of herstory might be useful for another under-privileged researcher, precarious art worker, or academic struggling to find comfort. And that as a collective speaking body, we can co-create more diverse and inclusive knowledge.

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