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Embarrassing Female Performances in the Polish Public Sphere after 1989

The aim of the paper *Embarrassing Female Performances in the Polish Public Sphere after 1989* is to analyse the phenomenon of embarrassing female performances. The category I created is used to describe a very specific group of individual, female emancipatory practices undertaken in the Polish public sphere after 1989: practices that are ridiculed, considered stupid, exaggerated, weak, pathetic and, above all, embarrassing. Although I refer to them as embarrassing female performances, contrary to linguistic customs, I do not treat the word "embarrassing" in a negative sense. In my research, embarrassment is thought as a neutral and adequate definition of the technique used by women to express these arguments that otherwise would not be respected by anybody. I would like to redefine its meaning so that it loses its stigmatizing, deprecating or ridiculous character and becomes the name of one of the strategies of appearing in the public space.

The paper opens with a theoretical introduction. Referring to the works of, inter alia, Sara Ahmed, Nancy Fraser, Luke Purshouse, Erving Goffman, Marta Caminero-Santangelo and Marcin Kościelniak, I explain that I understand an embarrassing female performance as emancipatory act that causes consternation. An embarrassing female performance is considered to be frivolous, insignificant, funny, pathetic and so on. There are five criteria that any embarrassing performance meets. Firstly, it takes place in the public sphere - even if a performance is performed by a person who works as an artist on a daily basis, it is not an artistic event. Secondly, an embarrassing performance evokes embarrassment - this principle allows to define the direction of the circulation of affects: it is on the audience's side that they feel not only embarrassed, but also experience other feelings, especially those that Sianne Ngai called 'ugly' (such as anger, jealousy, paranoia). Thirdly, an embarrassing performance is performed from a weak position, but does not produce a weak discourse - in my opinion, such performances lead to significant changes in the public sphere, even if they themselves are ridiculed and disregarded. Fourthly, performances of this type are the opposite of madness. Although many researchers have tried to prove that madness can also be a chance for emancipation for women, in my opinion it is associated with the inability to communicate. An embarrassing performance is always a way to provoke a discussion and take a privileged, central and subjective position in it. Fifthly, the embarrassing performance is spectacular - I deal with the description of well-known events, widely commented on in the media, which are remembered by many people, although they are not necessarily remembered in the way I write about.

In the following chapters, I analyze examples of embarrassing female performances, at the same time trying to show different variants and possibilities of playing them out. The work is divided into two parts: Periphery of politics and Pro abo. The first part consists of three chapters describing three performances, the second part - three chapters analyzing four performances.

The first part is dedicated to the functioning of women on variously understood political margins (on the margins of history, parliamentary or institutional politics). In the first chapter I am talking about Joanna Szczepkowska's appearance in "Dziennik Telewizyjny" on October 28, 1989. A popular actress, associated with the pro-democratic opposition circles, said the then famous sentence: "Ladies and gentlemen, communism in Poland ended on June 4". The appearance in "Dziennik Telewizyjny" is an embarrassing female performance, because although Szczepkowska was hit by a wave of criticism (both by representatives of the former ruling camp and oppositionists), it was a testimony to the joyful encroachment of a woman and an actress into the public sphere, i.e. a public statement on serious matters made by a socially unauthorized person. In this chapter, I show that there are three

main visual symbols of the political transformation of 1989 - two of them (an election poster with a cowboy and Tadeusz Mazowiecki raising his hand in a gesture of victory) are masculine and pathetic, Szczepkowska's appearance (later repeatedly played, paraphrased and parodied) is feminine and non-heroic. I also investigate the factors that made this frivolous sentence thrown on a TV program and crowned with Szczepkowska's disarming smile permanently imprinted in the minds of Poles.

In the next chapter, I examine the appearance of the same actress at the premiere of *Persona. Ciało Simone* directed by Krystian Lupa. During her monologue, Szczepkowska made three gestures that were not agreed during the rehearsals: she entered the audience, and after a while she returned to the stage; she raised her hand in a Heil Hitler gesture and showed her bare buttocks for a few seconds. Her aim was to provoke a discussion about the working conditions of actors in theaters.

In the third chapter, I look at the founding of the Women's Party by Manuela Gretkowska in 2007. Although the organization ultimately received very low vote share in the parliamentary elections, at the time of its foundation, it was an interesting entity that gave hope for a real fight for women's rights on the political scene. In my research, I show that it was the embarrassing female performance that was the party's driving force. It was also the main reason why a party received support. I associate the final failure of the organization with Manuela Gretkowska's attempts to extinguish operation of embarrassing performance.

In the second part, Pro abo, I look at the struggles of embarrassing performers with Polish anti-abortion law. I begin this part with a theoretical introduction, in which I explain the legal and factual status regarding access to termination of pregnancy from 1993 to today. Using Judith Butler's concept of subjection, I show how the change in abortion law in the early 1990s contributed to the creation of a new, subjected citizen.

In the next chapter I refer to three performances. First of them is the declaration made by Katarzyna Bratkowska in the program "Tak czy nie" on Polsat News that she would terminate her pregnancy. Second - Natalia Przybysz's abortion coming out in 2016. Third - the interruption of the mass at St. Anna by Anna Zawadzka (Anka Zet) and then her appearance in the program "Tak jest" on TVN24. In this chapter I wonder why one of the most popular forms of talking about one's own abortion is the confession and what its limitations are. I also show that an embarrassing female performance is more radical form and therefore more effective.

In the last chapter of the second part, I look at the complex peripheral performance of the Abortion Dream Team, which was initiated by the appearance of the group's members on the cover of one of the editions of the "Wysokie Obcasy" magazine. Referring to John McKenzie's theory, I show that the ADT group introduced a complex performance (peripheral performance) to the Polish public sphere, which operated in the technological, organizational and cultural fields. The embarrassing female performance is in this case a part of performance, influencing the cultural field, changing the discursive sphere by introducing the counter-discourse of happy abortions. The activity of the Abortion Dream Team consisted not only in talking about good, happy and relieving abortions, but above all in organizing an open support network (Abortion Without Borders) aimed at helping all those in need in abortion migration or obtaining funds for a pharmacological abortion, which could be carry out at home. By carrying out this activity ADT compromises the strict, anti-abortion law, showing that it is ineffective and inadequate to the real practices and experiences of female citizens.

In the end, I look again at all the embarrassing performances discussed in the paper, cogitating what effects they have had in the public sphere over time.