

Drawing the Curtain:  
Feminism and Female Artists of the 1970s Polish People's Republic

Agnieszka Frasunkiewicz

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By: Agnieszka Frasukiewicz

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Signed by the final examining committee:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. John Potvin Examiner

\_\_\_\_\_  
Examiner

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Nicola Tullio Pezolet Thesis Supervisor(s)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Supervisor(s)

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. John Potvin Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Annie Gérin Dean Faculty of Fine Arts

## Abstract

Drawing the Curtain: Feminism and Female Artists of the 1970s Polish People's Republic

Agnieszka Frasukiewicz

This thesis analyzes 1970s photographs and photomontages created by Ewa Partum and Natalia LL (Lach-Lachowicz) that respond to concurrent political and cultural conditions in the Polish People's Republic (PPR). Through photographic representations of the naked female body, Ewa Partum and Natalia LL activate a Polish feminist praxis that is adjacent to, but distinct from, Western feminism. The body becomes a tool that subverts static gender identities and provokes an embodied subjectivity. This thesis argues that Poland's historical specificity informs how Partum and Natalia LL use their body, which in turn reflects Polish feminism. This position rejects contemporary claims by the Polish Roman Catholic Church and right-wing groups in Poland, while anchoring Partum and Natalia LL within the lineage of Polish feminists.

This thesis begins with an historical overview of the 1970s in socialist Poland to better understand the social and political context during which Partum and Natalia LL developed their artistic careers. With a specific focus on the artists' early careers and select photographs from Partum's *Self-Identification* (1980) series and Natalia LL's *Artificial Photography* (1976) series, this thesis then considers two dimensions in the analysis of these works. The first dimension refers to feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz's theories of the body to understand how Partum and Natalia LL use their bodies from a philosophical position. The second dimension uses Polish feminist theorist Sławomira Walczewska's discussion of 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century Polish feminist history and Agnieszka Graff's reflections on the gendered implications of post-1989 Poland. Together, this approach creates a composite perspective that links the artists' works with the body, feminism, conceptual art, and Polish modern history.

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## Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Methodology.....	5
Historical Context.....	10
Ewa Partum.....	22
Natalia LL.....	35
Conclusion.....	47
Figures.....	50
Bibliography.....	62

## List of Figures

- Figure 1. Ewa Partum, *Presence/Absence*, 1965. Black and white photograph, 6 x 9 cm. Photograph from Ewa Małgorzata Tatar, “Pamięć czasownika pisać. Sztuka Ewy Partum [Ewa Partum’s Art: The Memory of the Verb ‘To Write’],” *Obieg*, February 26, 2009, <https://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/teksty/8348>.
- Figure 2. Ewa Partum, *Presence/Absence*, 1965. Black and white photograph, 6 x 9 cm. Photograph from Ewa Małgorzata Tatar, “Pamięć czasownika pisać. Sztuka Ewy Partum [Ewa Partum’s Art: The Memory of the Verb ‘To Write’],” *Obieg*, February 26, 2009, <https://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/teksty/8348>.
- Figure 3. Karolina Majewska-Güde, “If You Want to Say Something – Speak in the Language of the Language: Ewa Partum’s Model of Conceptual Art.” *ARTMargins* 10, no. 2 (2021): 85.
- Figure 4. Ewa Partum, *Presence/ Absence*, 1965. Black and white photograph, 6 x 9 cm. Photograph from Karolina Majewska-Güde, “If You Want to Say Something – Speak in the Language of the Language: Ewa Partum’s Model of Conceptual Art.” *ARTMargins* 10, no. 2 (2021): 85.
- Figure 5. Ewa Partum, *Presence/ Absence*, 1965. Black and white photograph, 6 x 9 cm. Photograph from Karolina Majewska-Güde, “If You Want to Say Something – Speak in the Language of the Language: Ewa Partum’s Model of Conceptual Art,” *ARTMargins* 10, no. 2 (2021): 85.
- Figure 6. Ewa Partum, *poem by ewa, my touch is a touch of a woman*, 1971. Black ink, red lipstick, paper, 29.1 x 20.5 cm. Photograph from Majewska-Güde, Karolina, *Ewa Partum’s Artistic Practice: An Atlas of Continuity in Different Locations* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 302.
- Figure 7. Zachęta Lower Silesian Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts. <http://www.zacheta.wroclaw.pl/kolekcje/319-samoidentyfikacja.html>.
- Figure 8. Marek Grygiel, *Samoidentyfikacja, 1980* [Self-Identification, 1980], 1980. Black and white photograph. Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/archiwum-polskiego-performansu/2521/127179>.
- Figure 9. Marek Grygiel, *Samoidentyfikacja, 1980* [Self-Identification, 1980], 1980. Black and white photograph. Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/archiwum-polskiego-performansu/2521/127178>.
- Figure 10. Natalia LL, Installation view of *Intimate Photography*, 1971. Mounted black and white photographs, 220 x 200 x 200 cm. Wrocław: Permafo Gallery. <https://nataliall.com/en/the-70s/>.

Figure 11. Natalia LL, *Artificial Photography*, 1976. Pigment print on paper, 48.5 x 58.5 cm. Image courtesy of ZW Foundation/ Natalia LL Archive.

Figure 12. Natalia LL, *Consumer Art*, 1972-1975. Black and white photographs, 100 x 100 cm. Warsaw, local\_30 Gallery. <http://lokal30.pl/artysci/natalia-ll/>.

## Introduction

In October 2016, the world was struck by mass demonstrations happening all over Poland protesting the right-wing Law and Justice Party's (PiS) proposed total abortion ban. Over 250,000 women and men participated in the Black Protest Women's Strike, during which participants refused to work, attend classes, and perform household tasks.<sup>1</sup> While PiS abandoned the ban for another four years, the Black Protests revealed an active and organized feminist praxis in Poland. According to PiS and other right-wing, conservative entities, Poland has no need for feminism because gender discrimination does not exist.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, such groups argue that feminism is merely a Western import that belongs to the larger "gender ideology" that threatens Poland's identity.<sup>3</sup> The Polish Roman Catholic Church similarly denounces feminism and gender ideology, arguing that its Marxist roots seek to erase existing gender orders and destruct mankind.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the Polish government and Church's claims, Polish feminism has deep roots that stretch beyond the dissolution of the Polish People's Republic (PPR) in 1989. Under the communist governments of the PPR, equality between the sexes was seemingly resolved under

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<sup>1</sup> Paweł Szelegieniec, "Behind the 'Black Protests': The Struggle for Abortion Rights in Poland," *Monthly Review* 70, no. 1 (2018): 56, [https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-070-01-2018-05\\_5](https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-070-01-2018-05_5).

<sup>2</sup> Anna Gwiazda, "Right-Wing Populism and Feminist Politics: The Case of Law and Justice in Poland," *International Political Science Review* 42, no. 5 (2021): 586, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120948917>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 587.

<sup>4</sup> Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, "'Worse Than Communism and Nazism Put Together': Poland's Anti-Gender Campaigns in a Comparative Perspective," in *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 73-74.; Marcin Przeciszewski and Tomasz Królak, "Abp Gądecki: Prawo do życia podstawowym i pierwszym prawem człowieka [Archbishop Gądecki: The Right to Life Is The Fundamental and First Human Right]," *Konferencja Episkopatu Polski* [Polish Episcopal Conference], November 11, 2020, <https://episkopat.pl/abp-gadecki-prawo-do-zycia-podstawowym-i-pierwszym-prawem-czlowieka/>, "20.10.2015 – Małe grupy (po południu) [20.10.2015 – Small Groups (In the Afternoon)]," Episkopat - Informacje [Episcopate – Information], Konferencja Episkopatu Polski [Polish Episcopal Conference], last modified October 20, 2015, <https://episkopat.pl/20-10-2015-male-grupy-po-poludniu/>; "Trzeci dzień Synodu – głosy ze świata [Third day of the Synod - voices from the world]," *Przewodniczący - Blog z Synodu 2015* [President - Blog from Synod 2015], Konferencja Episkopatu Polski [Polish Episcopal Conference], last modified October 7, 2015, <https://episkopat.pl/trzeci-dzien-synodu-glosy-ze-swiata/>.



the premise of equal opportunity in social, economic, and political spheres. However, as early as 1947, conscious efforts by the State and the Polish Roman Catholic Church relegated women back to the domestic realm, and any real efforts to improve the lives of women in the PPR were quickly subdued.<sup>5</sup> Polish women artists working during the PPR emerge here as the forces that created a distinct space for Polish women despite the overwhelming dominance of male artists and the State's push towards traditionally feminine professions. Polish feminist art historians Ewa Toniak, Agata Jakubowska, and Izabela Kowalczyk call attention to overlooked Polish female artists in the PPR and their overt feminist threads but claim that these artists are "proto-feminists".<sup>6</sup>

By the 1970s, the highly charged symbol of the naked female body becomes an important symbol for Polish female artists to dispute culturally and politically informed oppressive patriarchal beliefs. Sculptors like Maria Pinińska-Bereś started used the naked female form in the mid 1960s as a way of reckoning with religiously induced shame, sexual violence, and the repression of female sexuality.<sup>7</sup> British art historians Kenneth Clark and John Berger discuss the importance of the female nude within the art historical canon, noting its use to express divine, aesthetic, and humanistic ideas.<sup>8</sup> Clark's analysis of the female nude distinguishes between a celestial and natural or Earthly Venus, which respectively communicate virtuosity, heroism,

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<sup>5</sup> Ewa Toniak, "Artystki w PRL-u [Polish Female Artists in the Polish People's Republic]," in *Artystki Polskie* [Female Polish Artists], ed. Agata Jakubowska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Szkolne PWN, 2011), 96.

<sup>6</sup> Izabela Kowalczyk, "Wątki Feministyczne w Sztuce Polskiej [Feminist Threads in Polish Art]," *Artium Quaestiones* [Questions of Art] no. VIII (1997): 138, <http://hdl.handle.net/10593/9546>; Toniak, "Artystki," 105.

<sup>7</sup> Agata Jakubowska, "Ambiguous Liberation: The Early Works of Maria Pinińska-Bereś," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/ Journal of Art History* 83, no. 2 (2014): 173-174.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Clark, "The Naked and the Nude," in *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 3-29.; John Berger, "3," in *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), 45-64.

beauty, and sensuousness.<sup>9</sup> Berger's more critical analysis of the nude in European painting highlights the implications of the female nude and the ensuing power imbalance between the presumed male viewer and female subject/object.<sup>10</sup> The predominance of the female nude within the Western art historical tradition simultaneously established patriarchal spectatorship, while lending the female nude artistic authority and infallible status as a pictorial form.<sup>11</sup> Clark and Berger also differentiate the nude and the naked: Clark explains that "to be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word 'nude,' on the other hand, carries, in educated usage no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed."<sup>12</sup> Berger, on the hand, argues that:

To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become nude. Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise. To be on display is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never be naked. Nudity is a form of dress.<sup>13</sup>

While Clark and Berger imbue their descriptions of the naked vs. nude with different value judgements, both art historians arrive at the conclusion that nakedness addresses the material, real world, whereas the nude functions as an idealized veil.<sup>14</sup> However, the boundaries between

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<sup>9</sup> Clark, "Venus I," in *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 71-117.; Clark, "Venus II," in *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 118-172.

<sup>10</sup> Berger, "3," in *Ways of Seeing*, 46-47, 51-53.

<sup>11</sup> Berger, "3," in *Ways of Seeing*, 64.

<sup>12</sup> Clark, "The Naked and the Nude," in *The Nude*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Berger, "3," in *Ways of Seeing*, 54.

<sup>14</sup> British art historian T. J. Clark develops the distinction between the naked and nude in his analysis of Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and suggests that nakedness is a sign of working class identity. For further reading please refer to T. J. Clark, "Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of Olympia in 1865," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 259-273.; Lynda

nakedness and nudity are porous, allowing artists to work in their interstices. Considering the female nude's significance within the art historical canon, its use by Polish female artists allowed them a modicum of artistic freedom amidst State censorship and repression.

My thesis analyzes 1970s photographs and photomontages created by Ewa Partum and Natalia LL that respond to concurrent political and cultural conditions in the PPR. Through photographic representations of the naked female body, Ewa Partum and Natalia LL activate a Polish feminist praxis that is adjacent to, but distinct from, Western feminism. The body becomes a tool that subverts static gender identities and provokes an embodied subjectivity. This thesis focuses on the works created by Partum and Natalia LL, who are recognized internationally as Poland's most prominent female artists of the socialist era. Although Partum and Natalia LL are not the only Polish female artists working through the body in the 1970s, their contributions to the feminist art historical canon have received an abundance of scholarly attention in recent years. Some art historians (Agata Jakubowska, Karolina Majewska-Güde, and Ewa Toniak) have applied a feminist framework onto their works in the context of conceptual art, performance art, and body art. Other art historians (Łukasz Ronduda, Piotr Piotrkowski, and Adam Sobota) have analyzed their works in relation to Poland and Eastern Europe's artistic developments. However, little scholarship has taken up a composite perspective that considers the relation of Partum and Natalia LL's works with the body, feminism, conceptual art, and Polish modern history. These artists emerge from and reflect various moments and art movements in socialist Poland. Furthermore, Partum and Natalia LL's conceptual beginnings and early adoption of the photographic medium make it possible to trace the development of their artistic practice alongside pivotal events in Poland and the growing feminist movement.

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Nead, "Theorizing the Female Nude," in *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 5-25.

Although the works discussed were created in the 1970s, they weave references to Polish feminist history, art movements, contemporaneous politics/ lived realities, as well as anticipatory gestures to succeeding Polish feminist artists.

## **Methodology**

During my research, I consulted scholarly sources on Eastern European and Polish feminisms that attempted to neatly categorize a unified feminist theory appropriate for the region. However, I quickly realized that many Eastern European and Polish feminist voices echoed one another or applied well-established Western feminist theories onto a new geographical context. The difficulty in creating a collective Eastern European feminist philosophy lies in the historical and linguistic diversity throughout the region, and the problems associated with defining “Eastern Europe”. While the term implies a geographical position, “Eastern Europe” needs to be redefined to expand to encompass former socialist nations and countries neighbouring the Eastern Bloc.<sup>15</sup> “Eastern Europe” is thus defined by its shared experience of Soviet hegemony and by the influential role played by Marxist-Leninist philosophy.<sup>16</sup> The impossibility of constructing a cohesive and linear feminist theory of the region is also amplified by a lack of feminist terminology and the weight of the term “Feminism.”<sup>17</sup> Even though many Eastern European and

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<sup>15</sup> Dasa Duhacek, “Eastern Europe,” in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Alison M. Haggard and Iris Marion Young (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 128.

<sup>16</sup> Duhacek, “Eastern Europe,” 128.

<sup>17</sup> I distinguish feminism, a set of ideas, concepts, and behaviours that are based in dismantling patriarchal systems of oppression, from Feminism (capital “F” feminism), which is rooted in Western philosophy and the First and Second feminist waves in the United States. Feminism is a finite term that has been historicized and anaesthetized, much like “decolonization,” and “postcolonial”. Lower-case feminism, on the other hand, denotes action, and offers tangible reactions, responses, and results. My interpretation and differentiation of these terms is influenced by postcolonial scholars Madina Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo. For more context, please refer to Madina Tlostanova’s “The Postcolonial Condition, the Decolonial Option, and the Post-Socialist Intervention,” in *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined*, ed. Monika Albrecht (London: Routledge, 2019), 167-168.

Polish theorists engaged in feminist and women's rights movements, the terms "feminism" or "feminist theory" were seldom used in their works as they denoted a Western context.

While my previous studies of Western feminist theories helped me flesh out the feminist themes in Ewa Partum and Natalia LL's works, I felt that transplanting Western feminist theories onto their works did not fully engage with the artists' histories and the context of their work in 1970s Poland. Without explicit Eastern European or Polish feminist theories, I reoriented my perspective to instead place emphasis on the local and tease out feminisms that responded to the needs of a particular region. I first looked to Polish feminist scholar Sławomira Walczewska's *Damy, rycerze i feministki* ["Ladies, Knights and Feminists"] to understand the history of Polish feminism. In her book, Walczewska offers a Polish feminist historiography using letters, stories, publications, and diaries of prominent Polish women's activists between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Instead of using the term "feminism," Walczewska uses "emancipist discourse" (*dyskurs emancypacyjny*) to trace women's contestation of gender roles since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The author clarifies that the discourse she presents "is not about women's liberation from male domination, but rather about the creation of new knowledge and new practices concerning gender. This discourse does not level power relations, but rather brings them out in the open and redefines them. It constitutes new identities of women and men and redefines the relations between genders."<sup>18</sup> Walczewska's book provides a necessary overview of Polish feminist movements that reveals both the historical specificity of Polish feminism and how Polish feminism differs from Western feminism. Ewa Partum and Natalia LL's works express an inheritance of centuries of Polish feminism, especially with respect to their treatments of the body. As Walczewska points out, the body has always been a site of tension between individual

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<sup>18</sup> Sławomira Walczewska, *Damy, rycerze i feministki* [Ladies, Knights and Feminists] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo eFKa, 2000), 10-11.

agency, societal values and expectations, as well as nationalism and ideology. My analysis of Ewa Partum and Natalia LL's works is therefore grounded in a historical and biographical approach.

In addition to a historical overview of Polish feminism, I looked to Polish feminist author and women's rights activist Agnieszka Graff's seminal book *Świat Bez Kobiet: Płeć w Polskim Życiu Publicznym* ["A World Without Women: Gender in Polish Public Life"]. Here, Graff offers a more a culturally relevant perspective on gender roles in post-1989 Poland that reflects on the consequences of communist rule and the birth of a new democracy on Polish women's rights. As a witness to the fall of the Soviet Union, the democratization of Poland and subsequent discussions of feminism and women's rights activism in Poland, Graff writes from an experiential perspective and does not rely on established feminist theories to inform her observations. The author does not provide a feminist formula, but leaves clues to recognize the same feminist cracks she experienced in others. Most importantly, Graff identifies the precarious position of the feminist: "The feminist gaze is always the gaze of a stranger, the gaze of a foreigner in the land of patriarchy."<sup>19</sup> In keeping with a foreign feminist gaze, I replicate Graff's double foreignness as a Polish Canadian citizen educated in Canada, who carries both Western feminist theories and an inherited diasporic nostalgia. Graff explains that after studying in the United States for six years, she was pulled back to Poland by a yearning for familiarity and by a feeling that she was missing Poland's democratic transformations.<sup>20</sup> My parents, who immigrated to Canada with my two older sisters similarly longed for the familiarity of Poland while they adjusted to their novel (and sometimes hostile) Canadian reality. However, unlike

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<sup>19</sup> Agnieszka Graff, *Świat Bez Kobiet: Płeć w Polskim Życiu Publicznym* [A World Without Women: Gender in Polish Public Life], 2nd ed. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B, 2021), 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

Graff, my parents remained in Canada and built their own community of Polish immigrants and their families. As the only second-generation immigrant in my family, I sought to resolve the unsettlement I felt between my Polish and Canadian identities through my parents' (and their community's) nostalgia for Poland. Instead of soothing my discomfort, the Poland my community felt connected to revealed its ruptures and my incompatibility within it. This research works from the spaces between diasporic identities and the prism of nonbelonging.

To supplement my study of Partum and Natalia LL's works and their use of the body, I referred to feminist thinker Elizabeth Grosz's theories surrounding corporeal feminism in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Grosz critically analyzes how the body has been studied and perceived in psychoanalytic, neurological, phenomenological, materialist and postmodern terms.<sup>21</sup> The author explains that while foundational theorists like Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Michel Foucault conceived novel ways of thinking about the relationship of the body to its sociocultural and spatiotemporal situatedness, their theories do not address sexual difference (or racial and class difference), and thus perpetuate the myth of the universal (white, heterosexual male) body.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, Grosz argues that feminism requires a re-reading of existing theories of the body to redefine the body in non-binaristic, non-essentialist, and non-monistic terms.<sup>23</sup> The author adds that sexual difference must be at the forefront of the redefined body because it informs (corporeal) subjectivity and characterizes all exchanges.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, sexual difference refuses the effacement of women's experiences and universal

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), ix.

<sup>22</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, ix.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-24.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, viii-ix, 17- 20, 190-192.

(phallogentric) positions.<sup>25</sup> Here it is important to clarify Grosz's understanding and use of the term "sexual difference": "sexual difference entails the existence of a sexual ethics, an ethics of the ongoing negotiations between beings whose differences, whose alterities, are left intact but with whom some kind of exchange is nonetheless possible."<sup>26</sup> In other words, Grosz uses sexual difference to account for the irreducible differences or alterities between people that constitute one's lived reality.

Grosz uses the metaphor of the intertwined Möbius strip to illustrate how she works through existing theories of the body and the interdependence of the mind to the body, and body to mind.<sup>27</sup> The Möbius strip is comprised of both "inside out" and "outside in" sections whose beginnings or connective points are indistinguishable. The "inside out" section accounts for how the subject's interiority and lived experience informs the subject's corporeal exterior.<sup>28</sup> Otherwise stated, the exterior, tangible body is given meaning by the subject's interior, and functions as the expression of its interior. The "outside in" section accounts for how the corporeal exterior constitutes or informs the psychical interior, meaning that its socio-culturally coded and inscribed surface creates a subject's interiority or depth.<sup>29</sup> Combined with Grosz's emphasis on sexual difference, the author's digestible application of the "inside out" and "outside in" is particularly useful in identifying how Partum and Natalia LL understand and use

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<sup>25</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, ix-xii. Grosz stresses the importance of sexual difference in developing corporeal feminism: "The question of sexual difference admits of no outside position. The proclamation of a position outside, beyond, sexual difference is a luxury that only male arrogance allows." Ibid., 191.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 192. The author echoes other feminist thinkers like Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler who also use sexual difference to locate the specificity of women's subjectivity. Sexual difference does not amount to essentialism, but it may (or may not) include biological and "universal" differences. Sexual difference is not fixed or ahistorical, but is also contingent on prevailing or accepted theories at a particular moment in time (paradigm shifts). Ibid., 190-192.; For further reading on paradigm shifts as they relate to the development of scientific theories and revolutions, see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1962).

<sup>27</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, xii.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., xii, 115-116.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., xii.



their bodies. Grosz's dissection and nuancing of established philosophies of the body firmly grounds the Polish feminist practices in Partum and Natalia LL's works.

### Historical Context

The 1970s in the PPR are not demarcated by neat margins but are rather contained within politically and culturally defining events of Poland's communist era. In 1968, mass protests after years of built-up tension and growing economic instability set the stage for the impending collapse of the PPR. To celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution, the Warsaw National Theatre presented a play written by Adam Mickiewicz, one of Poland's famous Romantic poets of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> Mickiewicz's dramatic play *Dziady* ("Forefathers") was already well known in Polish society and heralded as one of the greatest works of Polish Romanticism. Named after a folk-Slavic feast commemorating the dead, *Dziady* is a four-part drama that weaves the history of the Polish partitions and Russian oppression with mythology and Romantic, patriotic, and Christian tropes.<sup>31</sup> The drama functioned primarily as a mobilization for Polish independence (from Russia), making it a peculiar choice for the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution. The play was banned by State authorities on January 30, 1968, which became the catalyst for protests and demonstrations around the nation.<sup>32</sup>

Shortly following the banning of *Dziady*, students at the Warsaw University created a petition denouncing the State's position and the threat to Poland's national culture.<sup>33</sup> By

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<sup>30</sup> Anthony Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism: A Cold War History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 148.

<sup>31</sup> Wojciech Zembaty, "Forefather's Eve –Adam Mickiewicz," Culture.pl, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://culture.pl/en/work/forefathers-eve-adam-mickiewicz>.

<sup>32</sup> Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 148.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

February 16<sup>th</sup>, the day the students brought the petition to parliament, the petition had reached 3000 signatures which included entire departments, professors, and other intellectuals. In March 1968, the Warsaw University student leaders held a meeting where they declared ““We will not permit our rights to defend the democratic and independent traditions of the Polish nation to be removed from us,”” after which the peaceful protest began.<sup>34</sup> Students at other universities in Poland joined the cause and protested in solidarity with the Warsaw students. It is important to note that while the student protests were happening in Poland, Czechoslovakia was undergoing major reform movements known as the Prague Spring. These reforms sought to decentralize administrative authority, a threat that Poland’s (and other Eastern Bloc nations’) leaders were deeply aware of. Just as the PPR’s First Secretary Władysław Gomułka feared, Polish students took note of the events happening in Czechoslovakia, who in turn adopted similar demands and slogans in support of their southern neighbours.<sup>35</sup> The State’s response to the student protests included militia deployment, police brutality, smear tactics, student and faculty surveillance, and the expulsion of dissidents from universities and the Party.<sup>36</sup>

The student protests culminated in perhaps the most dramatic event of the year, the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia on August 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>37</sup> In response to the Prague Spring and its calls for Czechoslovak democratization, a Warsaw Pact summit was held in mid-July to collectively discuss solutions to the Czechoslovak problem. Gomułka and others expressed their concerns; Czechoslovakia was straying too far from the socialist path and interventions were necessary to prevent further hostility.<sup>38</sup> After failed negotiations, the Soviet Union, the PPR, the

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<sup>34</sup> Jerzy Eisler, *Marzec 1968* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1991), p. 346, quoted in Anthony Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism: A Cold War History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 152.

<sup>35</sup> Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 163-164.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-156.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

People's Republic of Bulgaria, and the Hungarian People's Republic invaded Czechoslovakia and a new, pro-Soviet government was installed.<sup>39</sup> The new government reversed any reforms, recentralized leadership and control over the economy, and ultimately reaffirmed the hegemonic power of the Soviet Union/Eastern Bloc. Students, workers, and intellectuals' reactions in Poland maintained support of the Prague Spring, leading to a deeper mistrust and anger towards the Polish communist government.<sup>40</sup>

Gomułka remained in power until December 1970, when he proposed 40% food price increases to stabilize Poland's crumbling economy.<sup>41</sup> As these price increases were meant to begin just ten days before Christmas, violent workers protests, demonstrations, and strikes erupted around Poland. By the end of the protests, at least forty-four people were killed and more than 1000 people were injured by government militias and police forces.<sup>42</sup> Due to the nationwide violence and the escalation in anti-communist attitudes, Gomułka was forced to resign and was replaced by Edward Gierek. Gierek was quick to denounce his predecessor's leadership and promised economic reforms, improved State-Church relations, the modernization of Poland's industry, and trade with the West.<sup>43</sup> Like Gomułka, Gierek resorted to food price increases to

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<sup>39</sup> Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 170.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>41</sup> During the Stalinist Era (1947-1956), the PPR's economy followed the Soviet model which comprised of collectivization and forced industrialization of coal and steel industries. Poland's raw material export-focused economy was totally dependent on the Soviet Union, which severely curtailed other industries and Poland's social needs. Upon gaining power in 1956, Gomułka sought to modernize Poland's economy through relations with the West. Ultimately, Gomułka's pro-export economic policies could not appease Western expectations and relied on price increases and restricted domestic consumption as investments to modernize Poland's economy. See Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 180-181, 201-202; Wanda Jarzabek, "Polish Economic Policy at the Time of *Détente* 1966-78," *European Review of History: Revue europeenne d'histoire* 21, no. 2 (2014): 293-296, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2014.888707>.

<sup>42</sup> Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 186.

<sup>43</sup> Since the beginning of the Polish communist era, the State sought to undermine and neutralize the Polish Catholic Church. The Church promoted Polish nationalism, was ideologically anti-Soviet and anti-communist, and provided a sanctuary for Poles. Despite attempts to create a Catholic-Marxist dialogue in the first decade of communist Poland, the State persecuted priests, censored/banned publications, and started anti-clerical campaigns. Eventually, an agreement was reached between the State and the Church that permitted Catholicism (which was a necessity in Catholic-dominated Poland) but ensured the Church's political fealty to the State. See Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 188, 201.; Elizabeth Valkenier, "The Catholic Church in Communist Poland, 1945-1955," *The Review*

ease the economic turmoil, which in turn were met with increasingly more violent strikes and protests.<sup>44</sup> After the protests of June 1976, the establishment of publicly State-defiant worker assistance committees began a broader anti-communist movement in Poland that would lead to its re-democratization in 1989.<sup>45</sup> This would become the start of a broader and more formal anti-communist movement in Poland that would lead to its re-democratization in 1989.

The final years of the decade marked a decisive shift in Polish politics and society that would ultimately inform Poland's governance to the contemporary moment. After years of persecution and suppression, Gierek's promises of improved State-Polish Catholic Church relations culminated with the election of a Polish Pope. Cardinal Karol Józef Wojtyła was elected to the Papacy in 1978 (adopting the name Pope John Paul II), uniting the Catholic majority of Poland. Despite concerns and hesitation from Soviet Union leader Leonid Brezhnev, the Pope's visit to Poland was organized and scheduled to occur in June 1979.<sup>46</sup> The Pope would go on to visit major cities, sites of pilgrimage and mass genocide, all while holding mass and appealing for a united Europe.<sup>47</sup> Amid the growing anti-communist movements that were fuelled by economic instability and memories of State oppression, the Pope's election and visit bolstered the Polish Catholic Church's democratic and nationalistic ideologies.

In the months following the Pope's visit and another round of price increases and violent demonstrations, Solidarność (Solidarity), a new and influential trade union was formed. The unjustified dismissal of Gdańsk Shipyard worker Anna Walentynowicz in August 1980 prompted a new wave of strikes demanding wage increases and other social and political issues,

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*of Politics* 18, no. 3 (July 1956): 305-326, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1404679>.; Bolesław Bierut, "Zadania partii w walce o pokój [Tasks of the Party in the Struggle for Peace]," *Nowe Drogi* [New Roads] 2, no. 14 (March-April 1949): 37-38, <https://pbc.gda.pl/dlibra/publication/93928/edition/84619/content>.

<sup>44</sup> Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 205.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 212-215.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

and the formation of Solidarity.<sup>48</sup> In response to Walentynowicz's dismissal, the Interfactory Strike Committee (MKS) led by former Shipyard worker Lech Wałęsa began the Gdańsk strikes and released a list of demands.<sup>49</sup> What distinguished these strikes from others throughout the decade was their focus on both worker's rights and political freedoms. One of the MKS's twenty-one demands included the release of political prisoners and freedom of expression.<sup>50</sup> Due to mounting international pressure, the State called for negotiations which resulted in the signing of the Gdańsk Agreement and the creation of Solidarity led by Walentynowicz and Wałęsa.

The significance of the Gdańsk strikes, negotiations, and the State's recognition of Solidarity cannot be overstated. These events proved to Party members, Poles, and the surrounding Soviet satellite states that citizen and worker self-governance was possible regardless of the Party's ideology. By capitulating to the strikers and Solidarity, the Party effectively undermined itself and exposed the cracks within its system. Given Solidarity's success, other farmers and workers sought to form their own self-governed trade unions. Recognizing the precarious position of the State and the need to reform legislation, in February 1981 the Prime Minister announced a three-month strike moratorium.<sup>51</sup> However, the brutal beating of two Solidarity members prompted Solidarity to initiate a four-hour nationwide strike on March 24<sup>th</sup>.<sup>52</sup> Approximately 9.5 million Solidarity members, three million Party members, students and schoolchildren joined the warning strike.<sup>53</sup> Essential services like hospitals and coal mines remained operational, but the rest of the nation came to a halt.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 237-238.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 248-253; It is worth noting that when workers at the Gdańsk Shipyard were striking, any news about the strikes were censored by the State. However, worker assistance committees and the Church secretly disseminated news through alternative channels, reaching the international audience and the Pope.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

Prior to Solidarity's warning strike but concerned by the rapidly deteriorating situation, the Soviet Army held the Soyuz-81 military exercises in early spring 1981 in and around Poland.<sup>55</sup> Additional Warsaw Pact exercises coined "Zapad 81" were held in early September of 1981, threatening Soviet invasion if the situation in Poland was not resolved internally. By mid-October 1981, Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence Wojciech Jaruzelski was appointed First Secretary of the Party by the Soviets. Jaruzelski's roles as Minister of National Defence, Prime Minister and First Secretary are particularly important because they imply the beginning of a military dictatorship in the PPR.<sup>56</sup> With dwindling Party members and the threat of Solidarity, Jaruzelski granted himself extraordinary powers and officially proclaimed martial law in the PPR on December 13, 1981.<sup>57</sup> Jaruzelski's martial law introduced a state of war, wherein a military junta was formed, political activists and dissidents were arrested, curfews were implemented, and food shortages intensified.<sup>58</sup> While martial law lasted until July 22, 1983, it effectively concluded the decade and ushered in a new, volatile era in Poland's history.

Despite the social and political turmoil of the 1970s, the art world in Poland flourished and became the center of neo-avant garde artistic activities in East Central Europe.<sup>59</sup> Compared to Hungary and Czechoslovakia, Polish authorities gave artists virtually unrestricted freedom in their artistic endeavours.<sup>60</sup> The only condition of artists' freedom and the autonomy of art was

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<sup>55</sup> Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 310.

<sup>56</sup> As Minister of National Defence from April 1968, Jaruzelski indubitably participated in the suppression of students and intellectuals, and the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. See Paweł Piotrkowski, "Kampania antysemiticka w ludowym Wojsku Polskim w 1967 roku [The Anti-Semitic Campaign in the People's Polish Army in 1967]," *Biuletyn IPN (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej)* [Bulletin of the Institute of National Remembrance], no. 5 (May 2018): 116, 119-120, <https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/biblioteka-cyfrowa/biuletyn-ipn/biuletyn-ipn-od-2017/biuletyn-ipn-2018/24304,Biuletyn-IPN-nr-52018-Polskie-Sily-Zbrojne-na-Zachodzie.html>.; Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 184.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 327-330.

<sup>59</sup> Piotr Piotrkowski, "The Neo-Avant-Garde and 'Real Socialism' in the 1970s," in *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, trans. Anna Brzyski (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 243-244.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

that art had to remain apolitical and uncritical.<sup>61</sup> The State's indifferent approach to the visual arts stemmed from its lack of political resonance in Polish culture and history.<sup>62</sup> As exemplified by the March 1968 protests, Polish literature was deemed a far more dangerous discipline because of its connections with resistance and the struggle for independence.<sup>63</sup> Polish visual arts did not engage with overt political critiques, and was thus deemed as a separate and unimportant discipline.<sup>64</sup> Artists were aware that their artistic freedom was contingent on their silence, but as Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski explains "the possibility of working in the public sphere and having access to state subsidies was simply too significant a privilege to be jeopardized by production of 'undesirable' art."<sup>65</sup> Gierek's economic policies allowed for the rise of consumerism and short-lived prosperity which guaranteed work for Polish artists.<sup>66</sup> The resulting conformist attitude of artists (and citizens) legitimized the State's position which would go unchallenged for a number of years. If artists or groups emerged that threatened the State and social stability, these groups would be infiltrated and surveyed.<sup>67</sup>

All practicing artists working in the PPR belonged to either the Association of Polish Fine Artists (ZPAP), the Association of Polish Photographic Artists (ZPAF), or the Association of Polish Architects (SARP).<sup>68</sup> The *Pracownie Sztuk Plastycznych* (PSP) [Fine Arts Workshops], a state institution created by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts in 1949 was responsible for all commissions of visual and applied arts, and approved all exhibitions so that they adhered to State

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<sup>61</sup> Piotrkowski, "The Neo-Avant-Garde," 286.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>68</sup> Ewa Toniak, "Przedsiębiorstwo Państwowe 'Pracownie Sztuk Plastycznych' jako narracja o PRL [The State Enterprise 'Fine Arts Workshops' as a Narrative of the Polish People's Republic (PPR)]," *Pamiętnik Sztuk Pięknych* [Memoir of Fine Arts], no. 9 (2015):110

standards.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, the PSP ran galleries of contemporary art and sought to distribute and popularize Polish art through their own art market.<sup>70</sup> The commissions were precarious, as the PSP had the power to withhold work from artists, or to hire select artists while disregarding others.<sup>71</sup> Working within the State framework, artists used PSP logic and funding to challenge its traditional visual program, which shaped the artistic and cultural production of the decade.

Officially, the political ideology of the PPR in the 1970s followed Marxist-Leninist communism. Like other Soviet satellite states in the Eastern Bloc, the PPR had a single party system with the Party's First Secretary as the nation's leader. As an ideology forcibly imposed upon Poland that neglected the nation's distinct social and cultural structures, the Soviet communist model failed to fully integrate into Polish society.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, Poland's historically strained relationship with Russia also made the Soviet model especially unreceptive for Polish citizens. When de-Stalinization took hold of the Eastern Bloc, Polish Revisionist intellectuals cited the foreignness of the Soviet-model and instead proposed Polish socialism as a more culturally relevant path to communism.

Polish socialism remedied the mistakes of the Stalinist era, appealed to Poland's historical and national traditions, while preserving close economic and political relationships with the Soviet Union. The Revisionist program, which emphasized a more utopian and human-centered interpretation of socialism, coincided with the protests in Poland and Czechoslovakian reforms and ultimately concluded in 1968.<sup>73</sup> As demonstrated by the Czechoslovakian reforms, the revolutionary potential of Revisionism proved to be too dangerous to the Bloc's socialist

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<sup>69</sup> Toniak, "Przedsiębiorstwo Państwowe 'Pracownie Sztuk Plastycznych' [The State Enterprise 'Fine Arts Workshops']," 107.

<sup>70</sup> Tomasz Załuski, "Kwiekulik and the Political Economy of the Potboiler," *Third Text* 32, no. 4 (2018): 394.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Dariusz Aleksandrowicz, "The Road to Emptiness (The Dynamics of Polish Marxism)," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 43, no. 2 (1992): 108, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/20099435>.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.



system. In response to the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and internal instability, the characteristically ideological tone of the PPR shifted in the 1970s to a pragmatic one that prioritized economic growth and increased output.<sup>74</sup> Communist ideology in the 1970s also emphasized “real socialism” or “really existing socialism,” terms popularized by Nikita Khrushchev’s successor Leonid Brezhnev. “Real socialism” was an ideological term meant to explain why the promises of an affluent and equal socialist society had not been realized.<sup>75</sup> While it did not reflect Marxist concepts of socialism and instead aligned with policies that were economically realistic for a given nation, “real socialism” was a steppingstone towards a truly communist society.<sup>76</sup> Over time, “real socialism” was appropriated by citizens and used satirically to describe the true lived experiences under Soviet-style socialism.

In addition to describing economic hardships and state repression, “real socialism” also becomes a useful tool to describe the gendered implications of life under communism.<sup>77</sup> According to socialist ideology, inequality between the sexes in a communist society would not exist. Compared to pre-communist nations of the Eastern Bloc where women were not afforded the same rights and opportunities as men, communism offered the promise of an egalitarian society based on mutual respect and communal support. Women’s equality in a communist society would mean economic independence through jobs that were otherwise unavailable to women, and the chance to engage and be heard in politics. In “real socialism” however, women were granted greater prospects for economic independence but were still expected to perform

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<sup>74</sup> Aleksandrowicz, “The Road to Emptiness (The Dynamics of Polish Marxism),” 109.

<sup>75</sup> “Socjalizm Realny [Real Socialism],” *Nauki Społeczne i Humanistyka [Social Sciences and Humanities]*, Encyklopedia Interia [Interia Encyclopedia], accessed October 14, 2022, <https://encyklopedia.interia.pl/nauki-spoleczne-humanistyka/news-socjalizm-realny,nId,1993179>.

<sup>76</sup> “The Brezhnev Era,” *Soviet Union*, Britannica, last modified October 18, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Soviet-Union/The-Brezhnev-era>.

<sup>77</sup> Dasa Duhacek, “Eastern Europe,” in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Iris Marion Young (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 131.

housework and childcare duties, creating double or triple burden days.<sup>78</sup> Equality only meant the erasure of (gender, racial, bodily) difference, which in turn privileged the universal human (the straight, cisgender, white, able-bodied man). The State claimed that gender inequality was resolved under communism and to suggest otherwise was to go against the State. State propaganda claimed that gender inequality was the result of capitalism, and feminism a Western and bourgeoisie problem.<sup>79</sup> The women who were involved with feminism and invited others to join distracted proletariat women from the class war.<sup>80</sup> Thus, discussions of gendered difference, possible collective action to improve the lived realities of women, and feminism were virtually impossible.

Although the Stalinist period in Poland (1945-1956) was the most repressive in terms of censorship, state-violence, and extra-judicial killings, Polish historians Agnieszka Mrozik and Małgorzata Fidelis argue that it was also the most progressive for women's equality, autonomy, and rights.<sup>81</sup> Under Stalinism women were free to participate in the rapid industrialization of the PPR and pursue lucrative careers that were previously only available to men. Above all else, women had a newfound sense of legal, social, vocational, and bodily autonomy.<sup>82</sup> Even though women's identities were primarily characterized by maternal qualities and were still comparatively limited, Stalinist ideology permitted the development of multiple identities for

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<sup>78</sup> Duhacek, "Eastern Europe," 131.

<sup>79</sup> Walczewska, *Damy, rycerze i feministki* [Ladies, Knights and Feminists], 160.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>81</sup> Agnieszka Mrozik, "Girls from the Polish Youth Union: (Dis)remembrance of the Generation," in *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*, ed. Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 200, 206-211, 216-219.; Małgorzata Fidelis, "Introduction," in *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-19.

<sup>82</sup> Until 1956, abortions were legal in cases of rape, or if the pregnancy was a threat to the mother's health; Agnieszka Mrozik, "'Cause a Girl is People': Projects and Policies of Women's Emancipation in Postwar Poland," in *Reassessing Communism: Concepts, Culture, and Society in Poland 1944-1989*, ed. Katarzyna Chmielewska, Agnieszka Mrozik, and Grzegorz Wołowicz (Budapest: Central European Press, 2021), 145-149.

women outside the private realm.<sup>83</sup> When Gomułka took power in 1956 and began the process of Polish socialism, any remnants of the Stalinist era were demonized and reversed in favour of prewar traditions. Women working in traditionally male fields were now presented as unnatural and immoral and were encouraged to either switch to more traditionally female jobs or return to the household.<sup>84</sup> Re-establishing gender difference and hierarchies rooted in biology was essential to denounce Stalinism and to promote a Polish national identity that was distinct from a Soviet one.<sup>85</sup> Despite regulations protecting women's employment and assurances from the State, women's status in the public sphere significantly diminished. By the 1970s, Party officials acknowledged the limits of women's rights but no longer offered solutions to improve women's situations.

Among the manifold consequences of the State's transition to Polish socialism and reversion to traditional gender roles was the renewed control of women's bodies. Prior to 1956, the PPR's ideology advocated for moral (a)sexuality. Any depictions of nudity and sexuality were heavily censored and considered demoralizing for the nation.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, overt expressions or celebrations of sexuality emphasized gendered difference which contradicted the State's desired "equal" society. Polish socialism and the subsequent improvement of State-Church relations allowed for the State to stabilize Polish society, but also returned the responsibility of moral discourse to the Church. Not only did the Church promote traditional

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<sup>83</sup> Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization*, 62.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 213-215.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-205; Part of the de-Stalinization process meant that the Church was returned a modicum of power. Working with the State, the Church actively promoted traditional divisions of gender roles and placed maternity at the pinnacle of womanhood and femininity. An emancipated woman (ex. a working and/or sexual woman) or any feminist claims for equality and independence were framed by the Church as Stalinist/ Soviet symbol that threatened Poland.; Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization*, 204-295, 224-225.

<sup>86</sup> Paweł Leszkowicz, "Seks i subwersja w sztuce PRL-u [Sex and Subversion in the Art of the Polish People's Republic]," *Ikonotheka* 20: (2007): 54, [https://www.academia.edu/44664127/Seks\\_i\\_subwersja\\_w\\_sztuce\\_PRL\\_u\\_w\\_Ikonotheka\\_20\\_2007](https://www.academia.edu/44664127/Seks_i_subwersja_w_sztuce_PRL_u_w_Ikonotheka_20_2007).

sexual morality, but it also reinforced the role of the passive, housebound mother.<sup>87</sup> Supported by the State and Church, the asexuality of the PPR extended to the realm of visual arts where works depicting sexuality were deemed pornographic to both devalue them and prevent their exhibition.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, the State and Church's efforts to revert to traditional gender roles and maintain morally palatable sexuality hindered the development of dynamic gender identities and the acceptance of Polish feminism in society. Through their early careers and conceptual exercises, Partum and Natalia LL carved out a space for the explorations of the female body, female sexuality, and feminism despite the State and Church's cultural and moral reversions.

The following case studies on Ewa Partum and Natalia LL review the artists' early careers and the decisive points that develop their respective treatments of their bodies. Afterwards, I will provide a visual analysis of selected photographs from Partum's *Self-Identification* series and Natalia LL's *Artificial Photography* series. I will then use Grosz's theories to consider the ontological dimensions of the works, and how they reveal the artists' relationships to the concurrent art scene and Polish society. Building off of these findings, I will link Partum and Natalia LL's use of their bodies to events in Polish history that express Polish feminism. It is important to note that both Partum and Natalia LL are white, cisgender, heterosexual women who are not reflective of all Polish women of the 1970s. Their artworks and contributions to Polish feminist art have received significant attention from scholars in Poland and internationally. Nonetheless, studying their work with an emphasis on their local context is useful to fill in the gaps of both Poland's socialist period, as well as feminist art more broadly.

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<sup>87</sup> Izabela Kowalczyk, "Wątki Feministyczne w Sztuce Polskiej [Feminist Threads in Polish Art]," *Artium Quaestiones* [Questions of Art] no. VIII (1997): 136, <http://hdl.handle.net/10593/9546>.

<sup>88</sup> Leszkowicz, „Seks i subwersja,” 59-60.

## Ewa Partum

Ewa Partum, born in 1945 in central Poland, began her studies in the textile department at the State High School of Visual Arts in Łódź in 1963.<sup>89</sup> After two years, Partum transferred to the painting department at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw where she was introduced to modernist theories of art and rationalized processes of artistic creation.<sup>90</sup> At the end of her studies, Partum presented her controversial diploma work that critiqued and undermined the Academy. In the diploma work, Partum appropriated paintings by well-known Polish Conceptual artist Tadeusz Kantor's works, and only revealed her appropriation after receiving a positive evaluation from the examiners.<sup>91</sup> Partum's anti-academic critiques were in part influenced by the curriculum changes that occurred following the departure of faculty members in the wake of the 1968 protests.<sup>92</sup> The written component of Partum's final work took on a different tone, focusing on the dematerialization of art and a turn towards visual-linguistic interrogations and critiques of existing texts and images. Using the "pure field of imagination," the artist sought to reconfigure the relationship between artist/reader/viewer and invite non-conventional ways of seeing.<sup>93</sup> Here "imagination" becomes a tool of resistance to transgress one's material conditions of everyday life under socialist governance.<sup>94</sup> Bordering on performance, dematerializing the art object and relying on confrontation, Partum's diploma work was instrumental in shaping her future works and feminist ethos.

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<sup>89</sup> "Ewa Partum," in *Ewa Partum*, ed. Aneta Szyłak, Berenika Partum, Ewa Małgorzata Tatar (Gdańsk: Wyspa Institute of Art and Wyspa Progress Foundation, 2012/2013), 6.

<sup>90</sup> Karolina Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum's Artistic Practice: An Atlas of Continuity in Different Locations* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 56-59.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

Partum's early career (1965-1974) belonged to the Polish neo-avant garde movement which developed theories and practices of the 1960s Polish conceptual movement. Born out of a reaction against Socialist Realism, Polish conceptualism sought to devalue and dematerialize the art object.<sup>95</sup> Instead, Polish Conceptualists opted to challenge the primacy of the visual in favour of linguistic and semantic play, and the creative use of typography and design. Despite American conceptual trends that also explored language and semiotics, Polish conceptual artists' preoccupations with language and systems of meaning were in part subversive and critical acts targeted specifically against the State.<sup>96</sup> Polish feminist art historian Karolina Majewska-Güde explains that during those early years, "Partum employed tautology and repetition as organizing principles, as she was exploring possibilities for meaning production and subsequently revealing breaks and ruptures within the phantasm of 'pure art'." <sup>97</sup> In other words, Partum's direct association with the Polish conceptual art world inadvertently primed the artist to reject radically disinterested art, and deconstructed Art and its supposed autonomy/objectivity.

Partum's tautological and repetitive experiments demonstrate the artist's growing interest in deconstruction and dematerialization, and the application of these concepts to the body.<sup>98</sup> The

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<sup>95</sup> Martin Patrick, "Polish Conceptualism of the 1970s and 1970s," *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (2001): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576898>.

<sup>96</sup> Patrick, "Polish Conceptualism of the 1970s and 1970s," 35.

<sup>97</sup> Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum's Artistic Practice*, 155.

<sup>98</sup> The term "dematerialization" has a distinct meaning from an art historical perspective. In 1968, art critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler introduced the term to describe the concurrent phenomenon in conceptual art that privileged non-visual art, idea art and action art. The dematerialized art object is one that does not rely on a completed visual art object (i.e. painting, sculpture). Lippard later clarified that "...since I first wrote on the subject in 1967, it has often been pointed out to me that dematerialization is an inaccurate term, that a piece of paper or a photograph is as much an object, or as 'material,' as a ton of lead." My use "dematerialization of the body" and "dematerialized body" refers to the term's rich art historical value, and uses its history to illustrate Partum's transformation of her body into an immaterial idea. Lucy Lippard, "Preface," in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972: A Cross-Reference Book of Information On Some Esthetic Boundaries: Consisting of a Bibliography Into Which Are Inserted A Fragmented Text, Art Works, Documents, Interviews, and Symposia, Arranged Chronologically and Focused on So-Called Conceptual or Information or Idea Art With Mentions of Such Vaguely Designated Areas as Minimal, Anti-Form, Systems, Earth, or Process Art, Occurring Now in the Americas, Europe, England, Australia, and Asia (With Occasional and Political Overtones)* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1973), 5.; Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International* 12, no. 2 (1968): 31-36.

black and white photographic series *Presence/Absence* (fig. 1-5) (1965) comprising of five photographs can be loosely divided into two subseries.<sup>99</sup> In the first subseries, the artist is depicted seated, and leaning backwards on a piece of canvas on a grassy hill overlooking a small village and the Baltic Sea (fig.1). Like a chalk outline at a crime scene, a thick black line delineates Partum’s body and where it would have been lying on the canvas. The second photograph in this subseries (fig. 2) taken in the same location depicts the laid-out canvas with Partum’s outline, this time with a pair of sunglasses and rain boots. The absence of the artist in the second photograph completes the narrative of the subseries, thereby explicitly responding to the title *Presence/ Absence*.

The second subseries (fig. 3-5) similarly explores presence and absence but considers the art object in addition to authorship and the body. In one photograph (fig. 3), Partum stands in between blank canvases while the camera captures the scene from an elevated angle. In the second photograph (fig. 4), the camera captures Partum from above, who in turn casts a silhouette shadow on the blank canvases. The final photograph (fig. 5) depicts Partum in the center of the frame (framing herself in the canvas), kneeling and holding the canvas while gazing directly into the camera. Majewska-Güde suggests that as the artist’s first documented work, *Presence/Absence* functions as an assertion of authorial presence and self-identification as a conceptual artist.<sup>100</sup> However, even in this early work, Partum begins to dematerialize her body and turns it into an indexical sign. The blank canvases simultaneously allow Partum to untether

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<sup>99</sup> Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum’s Artistic Practice*, 135-138. Karolina Majewska-Güde explains that *Presence/Absence* is the documentation of Partum’s performance while on vacation in Sopot, Poland. However, it’s worth noting that Partum herself has claimed this early work was accidental, and more of an experiment. According to the artist, she had intended to paint, but due to the poor weather conditions, she decided to use the canvases in a different way. The “performance” was never repeated and only survives through the photographs, which were exhibited for the first time in a retrospective exhibition in 2001.

<sup>100</sup> Majewska-Güde, “If You Want to Say Something—Speak in the Language of the Language: Ewa Partum’s Model of Conceptual Art,” *ARTMargins* 10, no. 2 (2021): 84-86, [https://doi.org/10.1162/artm\\_a\\_00293](https://doi.org/10.1162/artm_a_00293).

herself from the traditional discipline of painting, while also experimenting with ephemeral and haptic mark-making. Using her body like a tool or medium, the artist casts shadows and touches the canvases to alter their composition which can only exist in the photographs. Partum's spectral body thus plays with its materiality, its indexicality (as mark-making tool), and its transformation into an immaterial mark on the canvas and film negative.

Still working under the theoretical umbrella of conceptualism, Partum continues to deconstruct her body in *poem by ewa, my touch is a touch of a woman* (fig. 6) (1971). The work was first shown as part of a larger series addressing the making of art and self in Partum's Łódź-based Galeria Adres [Address Gallery] during the *Made by Me* exhibition in 1973.<sup>101</sup> Made with the intention of accessibility and easy dissemination, the work consists of a short, printed text on a simple A4 page. Partum's poem, "my touch is a touch of a woman," printed in English in black ink occupies the center of the page, with the artist's name below it. Above the poem is an imprint of Partum's lips in red lipstick. In the context of mail art and letters, the red lipstick refers to the act of signing off a love letter. However, the artist develops the significance of red lips and explains that "In the 1970s, red lipstick started to become fashionable. And it was constantly deposited somewhere: on a cup of coffee, on a spoon, on a napkin after wiping my lips. I noticed that I was leaving these traces... I was intrigued by the creation of a new language of art. I was concerned with constructing a transparent statement. The form of this work is at once its

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<sup>101</sup> Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum's Artistic Practice*, 99. Partum continues to develop her confrontational anti-institutional critiques with Galeria Adres by situating the gallery in the small space under the steps of the ZPAP offices in Łódź. Partum would use the ZPAP facilities without permission, showing works with overt political tones and would publish exhibition texts and manifestos without ZPAP authorization. In 1973, a year after Partum opened the gallery, ZPAP evicted Galeria Adres and recommended that it remain closed. Instead, Partum moved the gallery into her apartment that she shared with her mother and daughter, and declared that "my gallery is a home." For further reading see Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum's Artistic Practice*, 82-88.



meaning.”<sup>102</sup> Like a coffee cup or napkin, *poem by ewa, my touch is a touch of a woman* bears traces of the Partum, whose presence is fragmented by the signification of the red lips.

Here, Partum’s body is dematerialized to the point of a suggestion and linguistic form. As separate elements, the lips imply that a human came in contact with the page. The text similarly implies that the author physically intervened with the page, and that the author’s physical self aligns with “woman.” When considered together, the lips and text force the viewer to imagine the body that left its traces on the page. Without the work’s true referent (the artist), the viewer is left to imagine a “Platonic body.”<sup>103</sup> Partum’s body is thus dematerialized to an abstracted form by literally fragmenting the body and using language to express its corporeality. With its explicit gendered connotation, *poem by ewa, my touch is a touch of a woman* begins Partum’s shift towards feminist art that links dematerialization with the artist’s subjective positionality.

Partum arrives at the zenith of her dematerialized gendered body in the *Self-Identification* (fig. 7) (1980) series. The extension of the artist’s earlier conceptual investigations to her body turned it into what Partum calls “merely a tool” and tautological sign.<sup>104</sup> The black and white photomontage depicts Partum walking naked in black heels along a path in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw. Partum’s legs appear as if they are in motion, about to take another step with her arms resting beside her hips. The artist’s eyes are either closed, or her gaze is directed down towards the path giving the impression of an expressionless appearance. The interlocked path is lined with big stone stanchions with interlinked metal chains between them.

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<sup>102</sup> Ewa Partum, “Na wszystkich szminki ślad: Z Ewą Partum rozmawia Dorota Jarecka [A Trace of Lipstick on Everything: Dorota Jarecka talks to Ewa Partum],” by Dorota Jarecka, *Wysokie Obcasy* [High Heels] addition to *Gazeta Wyborcza*, no. 188 (12-13 August 2006): 12.

<sup>103</sup> By “Platonic body,” I am referring to Plato’s theory of forms. The lips prompt viewers to imagine the body to which the lips belong to, whereas the imagined body has the touch of a woman. Consciously or not, the viewer will have an idealized or pure form of “woman” that is non-physical and will remain non-physical. One can argue that Partum pushes Joseph Kosuth line of inquiry in *One and Three Chairs* (1965) by adding a subjective and gendered dimension in *poem by ewa, my touch is a touch of a woman*.

<sup>104</sup> Majewska- Güde, *Ewa Partum’s Artistic Practice*, 181.

Directly behind Partum is a large, bronze equestrian statue of 18<sup>th</sup> century Polish general Józef Poniatowski placed on top of a stone, rectangular pedestal. Poniatowski wields a sword in his right hand, pointing it towards the left of the frame, while his horse lifts its front right leg. Behind Poniatowski's statue is the courtyard of the Presidential Palace, with the white neoclassical Palace occupying the background of the image. The sides of the frame cut off the Palace and the branches of a barren tree, while the bottom of the frame partially cuts off the interlocked path.

At a first glance, the composition of the photomontage appears well balanced through the upper right contrast between the tree branches and white Palace, and the opposite lower left sun dapples permeating the grey path. Upon closer inspection, the curb of the path, the base of the statue pedestal and fence line do not run parallel to the bottom of the frame, creating a slightly skewed perspective. Furthermore, Partum's body is unrealistically dwarfed by the stanchions and Poniatowski's statue, is inconsistently lit compared to the rest of the scene and bears a slight white edge along its borders. These features suggest that the Palace and Partum were photographed separately, with Partum's body cut out of the initial photograph, placed on top of the Palace photograph, to then be rephotographed as a single image.

Here, it is important to recognize a contradiction and tension in Partum's dematerialized body in *Presence/Absence*, poem by ewa, *my touch is a touch of a woman*, and *Self-Identification*. On the one hand, the works present a dematerialized and impossible body. This body is dematerialized to become an indexical sign and a fragmented body. On the other hand, the artist's body is very much material by virtue of the works themselves. Partum's body reflects Grosz's "outside in" model, where Partum's socio-culturally inscribed and sexed corporeal exterior constitutes her identity. Grosz writes that "...the model of social inscription...implies

that social values and requirements are not much inculcated into the subject as etched upon the subject's body."<sup>105</sup> The author elaborates and explains that the body functions as a text that is placed within a larger narrative within a culture or society.<sup>106</sup> The body thus is not an expression of interiority, but rather "a set of operational linkages and connections with other things, other bodies."<sup>107</sup> However, Grosz rejects Nietzsche and Foucault's assumptions of a blank, or pre-inscribed body and instead argues that the sexual (and racial) specificity of one's body dictates the outcomes of its inscriptions.<sup>108</sup> Partum echoes Grosz and understands that a pre-inscribed woman's body does not exist because it is always inscribed by sexual difference; the artist reckons with her materiality and the identities inscribed upon it.

Partum fully recognizes what a naked female body signifies in socialist Poland and transcends the material and symbolic conditions of her body. For Partum, her body (corporeal exterior) is nothing more than a fleshy costume that dictates her role in society. Majewska-Güde proposes that "the body employed by Partum in *Self-Identification* and her performances was...marked as a female body but not sexualized. It was a body without pleasure and without excess – a body without expression," implying that Partum's body maintains sense of neutrality and objectivity.<sup>109</sup> However, I would argue that the artist's expressionlessness paired with the sexually-coded high heels points to a more satirical and playful use of her body. Every time Partum puts on her gendered skinsuit, she uses stereotypes and culturally produced caricatures to play a game with viewers. Partum is the only one privy to this game and wins by provoking the most shock and confusion.

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<sup>105</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 120.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>109</sup> Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum's Artistic Practice*, 190.

By placing her naked body in front of the Presidential Palace and Poniatowski's statue, Partum prompts a criticism of the gendered identities imposed upon Polish women. These identities include the Polish Mother and the Divine Being, which dictate how a woman participates in and is perceived by the Polish national community. Walczewska explains that the creation of the Polish Mother emerges in the 18<sup>th</sup> century under partitioned Poland and coincides with the development of Polish Romanticism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>110</sup> Romanticism appeared in Poland around 1820 and was created in response to foreign subjugation.<sup>111</sup> Underscored by nationalistic ideologies and a longing for Polish sovereignty, Polish Romanticism included artistic, philosophical, and most notably, literary works.

Romantic literature was in part a nationalistic call to action to free Poland under the guise of knights/noblemen fighting against foreign aggressors who threatened the romantic interests of the characters. While both female and male heroes in Polish Romantic literature expressed and acted upon their emotions, the female heroines were depicted as burdened their melancholic dispositions and were denied any real agency.<sup>112</sup> Apart from the melancholic love interests of the main characters, the only other female character in Romantic literature was the Polish Mother. The Polish Mother, usually depicted in domestic settings with children, fulfills her duty by providing sons to the nation and raises them in a nationalistic spirit, and is unquestionably

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<sup>110</sup> Walczewska, *Damy, rycerze i feministki* [Ladies, Knights, and Feminists], 53; Piotr Koryś, "The Age of Enlightenment Reforms and Partitions of Poland: Economy and Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century (1772-1795)," in *Poland From Partitions to EU Accession* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 54-55. Between 1772 and 1795, the territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were partitioned three times by Prussia, Austria and Russia. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the formerly vast and powerful Poland ceased to exist, and its citizens were left to live under foreign rule.

<sup>111</sup> Katarzyna Filutowska, "German philosophy in Vilnius in the years 1803-1832 and the origins of Polish Romanticism," *Studies in East European Thought* 72, no. 1 (2019): 19-30, p. 27. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-019-09340-7>. The emergence of Romanticism in Poland is attributed to Adam Mickiewicz and the publication of his poetry volume "Ballads and Romances" (1822). Mickiewicz and other Polish Romantic thinkers were influenced by German idealist philosophy.

<sup>112</sup> Walczewska, *Damy, rycerze i feministki* [Ladies, Knights, and Feminists], 33.

ready to sacrifice herself for Poland.<sup>113</sup> Walczewska notes that the identity of the Polish Mother and her responsibility to uphold and build Polish nationalism was especially emphasized during times of crisis.<sup>114</sup> Along with the Polish Mother, the Divine Being identity similarly develops out of Polish Romanticism and forms the basis of male-female relationships in Poland that persist into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The idealization of women and subsequent transformation into Divine Beings began with the melancholic women in Romantic literature. While some 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish feminists were inspired by the heroines' raw emotional authenticity, others claimed that the characters were trapped by eternal infancy and angelism, requiring men's utmost respect and protection.<sup>115</sup> The noble knight saw it as his duty to protect his fictional divine woman, placed her upon a pedestal and infantilized her. Walczewska links Poland's gendered relations to Polish Romanticism, arguing that the noble-knight gender contract is "characterized by the requirement of masculine care for the ladies, the requirement to adore them, to seek their favour by gaining merit."<sup>116</sup> Graff expands on the concept of the woman as Divine Being by explaining that real, living Polish women were replaced by metaphors and symbols.<sup>117</sup> Instead of being a term used to describe real women, the idea of a Polish woman was conflated with the Romantic Polish Mother, the Virgin Mary, and the nation itself.<sup>118</sup> Most importantly, these idealized figures are desexualized and reject corporeal womanhood. Faced with the impossible task of living up to

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<sup>113</sup> It is important to note the relationship between the Polish Mother, the role of Polish women in public life and women's citizenship. Walczewska explains that Polish women proved or earned their citizenship through motherhood and/or through the ultimate sacrifice (death). As a character in Romantic literature (and compared to male characters), the Polish Mother has no biography or name. Her sole purpose is to sacrifice herself and her hypothetical sons to redeem herself and the nation. Walczewska, *Damy, rycerze i feministki* [Ladies, Knights, and Feminists], 46, 53.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>117</sup> Graff, *Świat bez Kobiet* [World without Women], 257.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

divine status, real Polish women must squeeze between expectations of virginity/motherhood while embodying the identity of the nation.<sup>119</sup> By the 1970s, the Polish Mother and Divine Being identities were well established and governed the acceptable behaviours of Polish women.

Partum's placement of her naked body directly beneath Poniatowski's statue and the Presidential Palace satirically critiques the Polish Mother and Divine Being identities from two axes that converge at discomfort and shock. In the first, the artist surrenders to and explicitly performs the role of the Polish Mother against the backdrop of one of Poland's national heroes.<sup>120</sup> Józef Poniatowski was a general during Poland's partition period who took part in numerous battles to regain Poland's sovereignty, and tragically died while fighting for Emperor Napoleon in 1813. Poniatowski and his surrounding myths symbolize patriotism and sacrifice for Poland, exemplifying the zeal of Polish Romanticism's male heroes.<sup>121</sup> Towering over Partum's naked body, Poniatowski's presence in the photomontage serves as an authoritative and almost disciplinary figure. Beyond the unease generated by the size discrepancy and darkness of Poniatowski's statue, his sword, horse, and posture direct an invisible army out of the frame. However, the only "soldier" of this army is the naked artist, whose vacant expression and movement follow Poniatowski's command. Here, Partum's body plays with Romanticism's expectations of women providing the nation's liberators. As a gendered subject Partum could never be an equal soldier, and thus proceeds into battle stripped of anything that may obfuscate her female identity. Partum very straightforwardly demonstrates that like the 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish

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<sup>119</sup> Graff, *Świat bez Kobiet* [World without Women], 265-268.

<sup>120</sup> It is equally significant that Partum engages with the figure of Poniatowski considering that the beginning of the 1968 protests highlighted Poland's struggle for independence during the Partition period. The artist simultaneously engages in malicious compliance while threatening to destabilize public space with her naked body.

<sup>121</sup> Weronika Rostworowska, "Mitologizacja śmierci księcia Józefa Poniatowskiego w świetle praktyk komemoracyjnych z lat 1813–1817 [Mythologization of the Death of Prince Joseph Poniatowski in Light of the Commemorative Practices of 1813-1817]," *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej* [Quarterly Journal of the History of Material Culture] 64, no. 2 (2016): 259, <https://www.rcin.org.pl/dlibra/publication/82339/edition/62872>.

Mother, women in 1970s and 1980s Poland are treated like nothing more than vessels. The artist's seemingly willing acceptance of this role elicits discomfort in viewers, exposing the fallacy of the Polish Mother identity.<sup>122</sup> While Partum's body is in some ways dematerialized, the naked body of the artist is there to show the material reality of women's bodies and desires.

In addition to causing discomfort, Partum's naked body shocks viewers by playing with the asexuality and virtue of Divine Being identity. As explained by Walczewska and Graff, Divine Beings are respected, cared for, and protected by men. In turn, they are expected to maintain their passive roles, remain in the private sphere, and behave like good, Catholic women.<sup>123</sup> Using culturally coded high heels and nudity, Partum emphasizes her female sexuality and its fetishization within patriarchal systems. Moreover, the artist stages her protest against the anaesthetized Divine Being in the public and politically charged space of the Presidential Palace. The *Self-Identification* series was first exhibited on April 29, 1980 at the Galeria Mała PSP-ZPAF [Small Gallery] in Warsaw, during which Partum recited her feminist manifesto, naked with the exception of her high heels (fig. 8).<sup>124</sup> The gallery was located next to the marriage registry office, so when the artist stepped outside after reciting her manifesto, she stood next to a newly married couple (fig. 9). In an interview conducted in 2006, Partum recalls passerby women yelling at her, saying "What would happen if we all stripped like this?".<sup>125</sup> In the accompanying exhibition catalogue, Partum confirms her radical break with the Divine Being

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<sup>122</sup> Majewska-Güde similarly notes the purpose of Partum's naked body: "In her actions, Partum's composed body was the means to produce a distancing/alienation effect, which provoked a rational reflection on women's position in society through the strategy of visual interpellation. It was a practice of situating viewers in the field of meaning production that closely involves the recognition of oneself as a member of that world of meaning. Those who turned their gaze to Partum's naked body has to recognize themselves as either dominant subjects or suppressed objects of the patriarchy." Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum's Artistic Practice*, 186-187.

<sup>123</sup> Walczewska, *Damy, rycerze i feministki* [Ladies, Knights, and Feminists], 93-95; Graff, *Świat bez Kobiet* [World without Women], 266-268.

<sup>124</sup> Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum's Artistic Practice*, 162.

<sup>125</sup> Ewa Partum, "Na wszystkim szminki ślad [A Trace of Lipstick on Everything]," 10.

and refers to the moral discourse surrounding women in socialist Poland. Mentioning the limited roles for women and their patriarchal constraints, the artist writes “...all that effectively belittles or outright deprives a woman of the right to a feeling of freedom, personal dignity and spiritual autonomy, while morality norms clearly discriminate against women under the guise of respect for her.”<sup>126</sup> What fuels Partum’s *Self-Identification* series and later performances like *Stupid Woman* (1980) and *Hommage à Solidarność* (1982) is the disruptive potential of working *within* the system of representation. The artist’s satirical use of her gendered body and play with assumed women’s identities has compelling historical precedents that suggests a lineage of Polish feminism.

The exploitation of gendered realities in socialist Poland was not a unique phenomenon and was used strategically by women in several political crises. During the PPR, Łódź was a textile factory city that predominantly employed women.<sup>127</sup> Following the December 1970 food price increase strikes and tentative agreement between Gierek and the Shipyard strikers, the State maintained its position on the price increases. Discontent with the food prices and the State’s unrelenting position, the textile factories in Łódź went on strike on February 10, 1971. After only five days of the Łódź textile factory strikes, the State rescinded the increases.<sup>128</sup> Compared to previous strikes held just weeks before, the women of the Łódź textile factories took advantage of their perceived weakness, maternal status, and emotional volatility to shame the Party into submission. The Łódź strikers would change from their work clothes so they would appear as consumers and homemakers and would center their hungry children in their protests.<sup>129</sup> As East

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<sup>126</sup> “Ewa Partum/ Ewa Partum, Samoidentyfikacja, 1980 [Ewa Partum/ Ewa Partum, Self-Identification, 1980],” Archiwum Polskiego Performansu [Archive of Polish Performance], Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/archiwum-polskiego-performansu/2521/127180>.

<sup>127</sup> Padraic Kenney, “The Gender of Resistance in Communist Poland,” *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (1999): 412, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2650371>.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 410-411.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 415-416.



European scholar Padraic Kenney notes, the strikers were not beaten or harassed because their appearance “...made it incumbent upon the authorities to treat them not as workers but with the respect accorded women.”<sup>130</sup> According to the Premier’s secretary and a Central Committee member, at a meeting with the Premier, the striking women sat and cried instead of listing their demands.<sup>131</sup>

Like Partum’s gendered performance in *Self-Identification*, the caricature-like displays of femininity by the 1971 Łódź textile strikers were reincarnations of previous women-led actions in Łódź. In September 1947, the same cotton mill began a strike in response to threatened job security and to reassert community control.<sup>132</sup> In response to a rumour that four strikers were killed, and that a pregnant woman was attacked by authorities during the 1947 strikes, twenty-seven women staged a mass fainting.<sup>133</sup> State officials described the women as hysterical and lacking political consciousness, while police complained that they could not identify and arrest the strike leaders.<sup>134</sup> Partum, who was running her Łódź-based Address Gallery in 1971 would have been a direct witness to the protests and their efficacy against the State. The memory of the 1947 strikes would have also permeated throughout the city, informing Partum’s future practice(s). In the context of body art and Polish feminist art of the 1970s, Partum is notable for the use of her body as a tool to transgress its inscriptions and imposed identities. Natalia LL joins Partum in this distinguished group of artists, albeit using her body from a different perspective that maintains its Polish feminist ethos.

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<sup>130</sup> Kenney, “The Gender of Resistance,” 417.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 411.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 415-416.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 416.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.

## Natalia LL

Born Natalia Lach in 1937 in Żywiec, the artist and her family spent most of the years leading up to and during the Second World War sheltered in the Old Castle in Żywiec. The artist initially began her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław in glass design, but eventually graduated from photography in 1963.<sup>135</sup> In 1970, Natalia LL co-founded the *Permafo* (“Permanent Foto”) Gallery in Wrocław with her husband Andrzej Lachowicz, Zbigniew Dłubak, and Antoni Dzieduszycki.<sup>136</sup> Developing out of Wrocław’s Photomedialism movement and from Lachowicz’s “Permanent Art” concept, the gallery’s ethos was rooted in exploring the limits of the medium of photography and to undermine the viewer’s reliance on visual perception.<sup>137</sup> Above all else, the Permafo Gallery focused on the banal and every day, and sought to instill a sense of continuity and endlessness of reality in viewers.<sup>138</sup> Permafo and its tenets would become the catalyst for Natalia LL’s career and the development of her artistic practice.

The inaugural exhibition at Permafo *Intimate Photography* (1971) (fig. 10) was a solo show featuring Natalia LL’s earliest erotic explorations.<sup>139</sup> In this work, photographs of Natalia LL and her husband engaged in sexual intercourse were displayed inside a small box placed within the gallery, while the exterior of the box featured multiple self-portraits of Natalia LL.

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<sup>135</sup> Łukasz Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 70s*, trans. Karen Underhill, Soren Gauger, and Krystyna Mazur (Warszawa: Polski Western, 2009), 94.

<sup>136</sup> Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 70s*, 94.

<sup>137</sup> Adam Sobota, “Medium czy Osoba – Dylematy Sztuki Konceptualnej na Kilku Przykładach [A Medium or a Person? — Conceptual Art Dilemmas Shown by a Few Examples],” *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* [Art and Documentation] 6 (2012): 64-65, 67. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=167609>.; Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 70s*, 82.

<sup>138</sup> Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 70s*, 82.

<sup>139</sup> Sometimes this exhibition is called *Intimate Sphere* or *Intimate Region*. Art historian Agata Jakubowska uses the exhibition title *Intimate Photography* and dates its opening in December 1970. Other prominent Polish Conceptualism art historian Łukasz Ronduda uses *Intimate Region* and claims the exhibition opened in 1971. Natalia LL’s artist website uses the title *Intimate Photography* and maintains it opened in 1971.

Due to its sexual nature, *Intimate Photography* was targeted by state censors and vandals, and labelled pornographic by art critics. The other significant exhibition in Natalia LL's early career was the *Mutants* (1971) group show featuring works by Lachowicz, Dłubak, and Andrzej Dzieduszycki. In *Mutants*, Natalia LL presented her work *Transformation* (1971) that consisted of fifteen visiting cards with her name, surname, address, and profession.<sup>140</sup> Each card removed one letter from the end of her surname to reveal her final name, "Natalia."<sup>141</sup> Following this exhibition, Natalia replaced her hyphenated surname "Lach-Lachowicz" with "LL", and thereafter used Natalia LL as her artistic pseudonym.

Like Partum, Natalia LL's early artistic career engaged with the neo-avant garde and conceptual art movements in Poland. However, Natalia LL's conceptual concerns originated from the medium of photography, the camera's technology, its mechanical quality, and the presumed objectivity of photography. The artist's conceptual predecessor and later collaborator Dłubak was instrumental in pushing the boundaries of the camera through the Photomedialism movement and the idea of the "empty sign." For Dłubak, the empty sign is meant to elicit a crisis in the viewer that destroys conventional ways of thinking and seeing, to instead open the mind to new experiences via imagination.<sup>142</sup> Thus, the art object is devalued and replaced with a new, mental-emotional experience that promotes an analytical approach to art.<sup>143</sup> The Wrocław based Photomedialist movement transformed photography into a research tool that rejected painterly photography and turned towards reality, non-art, and the banal.<sup>144</sup> In the first half of the 1970s,

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<sup>140</sup> Agata Jakubowska, "Natalia. Text, Image, Sound," in *Natalia LL. "Consumer Art" and Beyond*, ed. Agata Jakubowska, trans. Marcin Wawrzyńczak (Warsaw: CCA Ujazdowski Castle, 2016), 85.

<sup>141</sup> Agata Jakubowska, "Natalia. Text, Image, Sound," 85.

<sup>142</sup> Sobota, "Medium Czy Osoba? [A Medium or a Person?]," 65.

<sup>143</sup> Patrick, "Polish Conceptualism," 41.

<sup>144</sup> Andrzej Saj, "Fotografia artystyczna we Wrocławiu: Zarys historii i stan obecny [Fine-art Photography in Wrocław: Outline of history and current state]," *Quart* 62, no. 4 (2021): 118, <https://doi.org/10.11588/quart.2021.4.88965>; Karolina Tomczak, "Fotomedializm Natalii LL – przestrzeń natury (ogród) w fotograficznym metatekście [Photomedialism of Natalia LL – the space of nature (garden) in a

Natalia LL and the rest of the Permafo group created works that aligned with the objectivity and banality of Photomedialism.<sup>145</sup> As exemplified by *Intimate Photography*, the artist was concerned with capturing real, everyday life through the mechanized and objective gaze of the camera, and linking art with everyday life. Natalia LL challenged viewers' perception of art through the tension of the camera's authority, the assumed lack of artistic manipulation, and the art-like exhibition of the photographs.

In the second half of the 1970s, Natalia LL's photography departs from its objective position towards subjectivity, embodiment, ephemerality, romance, intuition, and myth. Whereas previous works emphasized the banal and maintained a critical distance between artist and viewer, Natalia LL's works shifted to center the artist's personal experience and subjective corporeality.<sup>146</sup> By this point, Natalia LL was already using her body and self-portraiture as a central focus in her works, but her turn to subjectivity indicated the artist's use of her body and self-portraiture as a means of constructing her gendered identity. Polish photography historian Adam Sobota demonstrates Natalia LL's subjective progression and argues that "when the artwork's subject is the body, one has to deal with the conceptual barriers that define the body... Of greater value to her was the transcendental symbolism of the body, the connection of its functions with different levels of consciousness or its role in determining one's own identity."<sup>147</sup> Compared to Partum's body-transcendence that viewer's reactions, Natalia LL's body-transcendence demands the viewer's response through *her* interpretations of *her* body. Through her body, Natalia LL asserts her gendered presence and asserts herself as the speaking subject.

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photographic metatext],” in *Ogród – miejsce upraw czy symbol?* [Garden – A Cultivation Site or a Symbol?], ed. Witold Jacyków and Dariusz Rymar (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2017), 108.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>146</sup> Tomczak, “Fotomedializm Natalii LL [Photomedialism of Natalia LL],” 109.

<sup>147</sup> Sobota, “Medium Czy Osoba? [A Medium or a Person?],” 67.

Natalia LL's expression of gendered subjectivity through her body recalls Grosz's "inside out" model, that explains "how the body's outside, or exteriority, is lived and experienced, the ways in which the inside constitutes and accepts itself as an outside, how experience itself structures and gives meaning to the ways in which the body is occupied and lived."<sup>148</sup> Using Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived body, the author explains that the body functions as the medium or midpoint that transmits information and knowledge between the subject and the world.<sup>149</sup> Echoing Merleau-Ponty, Grosz stresses that the body is contingent on its position in space and time, and cannot be taken out of its context.<sup>150</sup> Therefore, one's subjectivity is informed by its relation to the objects and other bodies around it.<sup>151</sup> The author continues to explore Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and the "inside out" model with reference to sexuality: "It is only the sensory, perceiving subject, the corporeal subject, who is capable of initiating (sexual) desire, responding to and proliferating desire...Sexuality is not a reflex arc but an 'intentional arc' that moves and is moved by the body as acting perceiver."<sup>152</sup> Grosz is careful to acknowledge that while the philosopher's theories are useful for feminists, Merleau-Ponty does not consider the significance of corporeal sexual difference in how a subject lives and experiences their body.<sup>153</sup> The following discussion of Natalia LL's works explores the use of her body as perceptive medium, and the significance of her body's sexuality and eroticism to the artist's identity and position in the world.

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<sup>148</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 115.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-92.

<sup>151</sup> In her own writing, Natalia LL verifies this position. The artist writes: "Man's transcendence is revealed in the body and through the body, concrete and personally individual. In the temporal and individual experience, the body is a sensitive seismograph reacting to the changes in the material environment, experiencing a corporate feeling with the human community and touching transcendence." Natalia LL, "Body Art and Performance," in *Texty. Texty Natalii LL o twórczości Natalii LL* [Texts: Texts by Natalia LL On Natalia LL's Creative Work], trans. Henryk Holzhausen, ed. Natalia LL (January 15, 1984; reis., Bielsko-Biała: Galeria Bielska BWA, 2004), 349.

<sup>152</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 109.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

Natalia LL provokes an embodied subjectivity and gendered presence in her *Artificial Photography* series (1975-1978). The entire series, consisting of over 10 coloured images, features the artist in various stages of posing, performing with a banana, and undressing for the camera. The photographic series was accompanied by a film entitled *Artificial Reality* that showed Natalia LL in the same outfits and scenes as the photographs, but either just posing/ changing poses, actively undressing, and posing with a banana. In the selected photograph (fig. 11) (1976), Natalia LL is pictured naked with the exception of black wedges and leaning back on a blue upholstered armchair in the center of the frame. The room is nondescript and plain, with white walls and parquet hardwood flooring, characteristic of socialist Eastern European interiors. Leaning back into the armchair, Natalia LL's legs sprawl in front of the armchair, while her arms and hands rest in between her legs.

The photograph is a double exposure, meaning that the camera shutter was opened twice to expose the film. The artist changed positions between the first and second exposures but kept the armchair in the same position to maintain consistency. Because of the double exposure, there are two Natalia LLs, overlapping and mirroring her legs while obscuring the artist's hand placements. However, Natalia LL's face and expressions are doubled; in one variation, the artist's head rests against the armchair and shoulder and looks softly at the camera. The second variation of Natalia LL's face also leans against her opposite shoulder but stays up to hold a direct gaze at the camera. The artist's mouth is slightly open as her messy hair falls to cover one of her eyes. Combined with Natalia LL's facial expressions, hand placements, and tangled legs, the photograph carries an erotic tone and suggests that the artist is masturbating.

The artist takes advantage of the simplicity of the photograph to draw the viewers' attention to its erotic connotations. The centrality of the armchair and proximity of the Natalia

LL to the camera gives the impression that the viewer is either sitting behind the camera or in front of the artist. The artist's uninterrupted gaze at the camera matches the height of the camera lens, and in turn meets the gaze of the viewer. The viewer is thus implicated by the exchange of gazes; their role oscillates between voyeur (who has been caught by Natalia LL) and participant. The implicit erotic nature of the photograph is further accentuated by the artist's experimentation with double exposure. Natalia LL is animated by the double exposure, making a subliminal reference to video pornography.<sup>154</sup> Ironically, the double exposure prevents the photograph from becoming entirely pornographic and voyeuristic because it masks the artist's vulva and masturbatory gestures.

For Natalia LL, erotic desire functions as material process in her works, where eroticism is a means through which one experiences the fullness and complexity of life. In an interview about erotic themes in her work, the artist explains that erotism and erotic delight permits both "self-fulfillment" and "an experience of oneself and death."<sup>155</sup> Yearning to expand her perceptual horizons, the artist pushes her body's rudimentary sensory abilities through eroticism. In *Space, Time, Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, Grosz expands on the significance of erotic desire on a subject's relationship to the world and others:

Erotic desire is not simply a desire for recognition, the constitution of a message, an act of communication or exchange between subjects, a set of techniques for the transmission of intimacy; it is a mode of surface contact with things and substances, with a world, that

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<sup>154</sup> Although usually associated with the 1980s, video pornography was already circulating internationally during the 1970s. In 1969, Denmark became the first country to decriminalize video pornography, which led to the proliferation of Danish sex films throughout Europe. It's also important to note that the 1970s saw the emergence of the Golden Age of porn, porno-chic, and the rise of the porn star in the United States. Feature films such as *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Behind the Green Door* (1972) revolutionized the porn industry and quickly became the classics of porn history. For further reading, see Isak Thorsen, "'Denmark, Kingdom of Everything Erotic': Danish Feature Sex Films in Britain in the 1970s," *Porn Studies* 9, no. 1 (2022): 10-26, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2021.2000480.; Susanna Paasonen and Laura Saarenmaa, "The Golden Age of Porn: Nostalgia and History in Cinema," in *Pornification: Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture*, ed. Kaarina Nikunen, Susanna Paasonen, and Laura Saarenmaa (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007,) 23-32.

<sup>155</sup> Natalia LL and Wiesława Wierzychowska, "On Art and Eroticism – Interview given by Natalia LL to Wiesława Wierzychowska," Critics, Natalia LL, translated by Joanna Holzman, July 9, 1994, accessed January 9, 2023, <https://nataliall.com/en/on-art-and-erotism-interview-given-by-natalia-ll-to-wieslawa-wierzychowska-1994/>.

engenders and induces transformations, intensifications, a becoming of something other... This is what constitutes the appeal and power of desire, its capacity to shake up, rearrange, reorganize the body's forms and sensations, to make the subject and body as such dissolve into something else, something other than what they are habitually.<sup>156</sup>

Here, the concepts of erotic desire as a mode of contact with the world to becoming other and dissolving into something else is particularly relevant for Natalia LL in *Artificial Photography*. In its display of erotic pleasure and by virtue of double exposure, the artist's body transforms into an alternative, impossible body that does not represent reality. Her alternative body remains in the world of the photograph and is only accessible through eroticism. Natalia LL's "real" body thus becomes the anchor between reality and the photographed reality.<sup>157</sup> It is equally important that Natalia LL is not pictured with her husband as with *Intimate Photography* because it suggests the artist's reflection on her subjective (gendered) experience.<sup>158</sup> In *Artificial Photography*, Natalia LL uses her eroticized body to engage with the emerging feminist and sexual discourses of the 1970s.

Natalia LL's association with the international and Polish feminist movement during the 1970s is both anomalous and fraught. The artist officially debuts on the international Feminist

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<sup>156</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 204-205. In this book, Grosz continues her investigations of bodies through philosophy, but extends her explorations to consider the relationships between bodies, architecture, space and time, knowledge, and desire. The author identifies and discusses a wide range of ideas surrounding corporeality, but the most relevant concepts for my analysis of Partum and Natalia LL's embodiment concern the relationship of sexed bodies in relation to space and time, and the notion that sexed bodies are producers and keepers of knowledge.

<sup>157</sup> Natalia LL writes that "...the photograph, though seemingly reflective, has none of the characteristics of a mimetic imitation of nature. In this connection it can be stated that photography constitutes a particular type of cognition...the photograph is not a record of reality, it is the 'real' meta-reality in which it is possible to make records that cannot exist as real entities in the real world." Natalia LL, "Hypothesis," in *Texty. Texty Natalii LL o twórczości Natalii LL* [Texts: Texts by Natalia LL On Natalia LL's Creative Work], trans. Henryk Holzhausen, ed. Natalia LL (April 5, 1977; reis., Bielsko-Biała: Galeria Bielska BWA, 2004), 329.

<sup>158</sup> During an exhibition of her work at the Contemporary Gallery in Warsaw in 1971, Natalia LL was quoted saying that "In those years [late 1960s-early 1970s], the problem of my identity as a woman and an artist fascinated and occupied my attention." Agata Jakubowska, "Usta Szeroko Zamknięte [Lips Wide Shut]," in *3 Kobiety: Maria Pinińska-Bereś, Natalia LL, Ewa Partum* [Three Women: Maria Pinińska-Bereś, Natalia LL, Ewa Partum], ed. Ewa Toniak (Warszawa: Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2011), 26.



Art stage in 1975, when she participated in the *Frauen – Kunst – Neue Tendenzen* exhibition at Galerie Krinzinger in Innsbruck, Austria.<sup>159</sup> One of Natalia LL's best known works *Consumer Art* (1972-1975) (fig. 12) was featured alongside the works of prominent feminist artists Carolee Schneemann and VALIE EXPORT among others. In the West, Natalia LL's *Consumer Art* was widely understood by feminists as a critique of the sexualization of women and a critique of phallogocentrism. Critics in Poland interpreted the work as a semiotic exercise, a banal, erotic work, and a comment on Poland's economy and consumption through the use of a luxury good (the banana).<sup>160</sup> The artist's use and treatment of the banana is striking because of its obvious phallic reference, but also because it refers to the language used by the State and popular press in the years following the 1968 protests. In an effort to stigmatize participants of the protests, the press would pejoratively call the students the "banana youth". Because bananas were a luxurious commodity, the "'banana youth' indulged in Western luxury products and practiced promiscuous sex," and were therefore adversaries of the State.<sup>161</sup> From that point forward, Natalia LL was invited to participate in future international Feminist exhibitions and conferences and was considered the symbol of Polish feminist art.<sup>162</sup>

In 1977, Natalia LL travelled to New York City as a Kościuszko Foundation grantee where she met with major gallerists and artists like Joseph Kosuth, Hans Haacke, and Suzy Lake, and attended feminist lectures by Lucy Lippard.<sup>163</sup> During her trip, Natalia LL took part in a

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<sup>159</sup> Agata Jakubowska, "The Circulation of Feminist Ideas in Communist Poland," in *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present*, ed. Beata Hock and Anu Allas (New York: Routledge, 2018), 137.

<sup>160</sup> Agata Jakubowska, "The Attractive Banality of Natalia LL's 'Consumer Art' (1972-1975)," trans. Katarzyna Bojarska, *Nordlit*, no. 21 (2007): 243-246.

<sup>161</sup> Agata Jakubowska, *Sztuka i Emancypacja Kobiet w Socjalistycznej Polsce: Przypadek Marii Pinińskiej-Bereś* [Art and the Emancipation of Women in Socialist Poland: The Case of Maria Pinińska-Bereś] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022), 160-161.

<sup>162</sup> Jakubowska, "The Circulation," 137.

<sup>163</sup> Wojciech Szymański, "Być jak Natalia LL. Transfiguracje trickstera [Being Natalia LL: Transfigurations of a Trickster]," in *Natalia LL. Nie tylko "Sztuka Konsumpcyjna"* [Natalia LL. "Consumer Art" and Beyond], ed. Agata Jakubowska (Warsaw: CCA Ujazdowski Castle, 2016), 14.

protest defending the rights of sexual minorities in which she held up a photograph from her *Consumer Art* series. Upon returning to Poland, the artist presented her text “Feminist Tendencies in the Arts,” where she discusses the ideas of feminist curators, critics, and artists, and proclaims that the “most important element of feminism was the attention paid to increasing opportunities for women who are marginalized in the art world.”<sup>164</sup> In the following year, Natalia LL organized an exhibition titled *Feminist Art* at the Jatki PSP Gallery in Wrocław that featured works by herself, Carolee Schneeman, Naomi Meidan, and Suzy Lake.<sup>165</sup> Despite Natalia LL’s international feminist recognition, Feminism and Feminist Art was not seriously explored in the Polish art world.<sup>166</sup>

The failure of art critics and institutions to apply feminist analyses on the works of Natalia LL and others was in part due to the State’s concerted effort to erase gender difference while claiming that gender equality was achieved under communism. Although the State actively discouraged feminist ideas, the porous East-West border permitted the influx of Western feminist texts and theories indicating a local enthusiasm for Feminism. Reflecting on previous critiques written in the 1970s in the PPR, some art critics claimed that they did not use a feminist analysis because feminist discourse was simply not present in Poland.<sup>167</sup> Other Polish critics working at the same time were interested in feminist art but failed to acknowledge feminist art and activities happening in Poland. The lack of feminist analysis alienated artists like Natalia LL, who refused to label herself as a feminist and distanced herself entirely from the feminist movement.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Agata Jakubowska, “The Circulation,” 140.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> See note 10 to understand how I distinguish feminism and Feminism.

<sup>167</sup> Jakubowska, “The Circulation,” 136.

<sup>168</sup> Ewa Partum was similarly alienated in the Polish art world and eventually immigrated to Berlin in 1983. In 1975, Polish art critic Wiesław Borowski published an article titled “Pseudo-Avantgarde” in which he called out both Natalia LL and Ewa Partum (among other artists) for their works. Borowski very aggressively claimed their works were plagiarized, nonsensical, and destructive to Poland’s art and culture. See Wiesław Borowski, “Pseudoawangarda [Pseudo-Avantgarde,” *Kultura* [Culture] 12 (1975): 11.

In her discussion of feminist ideas in the PPR, Polish art historian Agata Jakubowska explains that one possible reason for Natalia LL's distancing from feminism is its association with ideology. Jakubowska writes that "...it [feminism] was perceived as ideology and hard to accept as something that makes art subject to politics. After the trauma of mandatory socialism realism accompanied by political terror, they [artists and critics] supported autonomous high art that they perceived as a guarantee of artistic freedom."<sup>169</sup> It is possible that Natalia LL moved away from feminism and "feminist" art because she wanted to protect her practice in socialist Poland, but the future retrospective interviews and texts reveal a visceral aversion to Feminism. The artist's radical split and aversion to Feminism reveals the fundamental differences between Western and Polish feminism that were carved out in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The loss of Poland's independence in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century created a unique situation where both Polish men and women were placed on the same level in the socio-political hierarchy. Like Polish women, common men no longer had citizenship and their rights were severely limited.<sup>170</sup> Depending on the region and the foreign ruler, the Polish language, customs, and even religious freedoms were ignored.<sup>171</sup> The loss and resulting yearning for Polish culture prompted women writers to publish literary works imbued with nationalistic tones to ease the shock of female authorship that would develop in the decades that followed.<sup>172</sup> The emergence of the Enthusiasts (*Entuzjastki*), a Polish proto-feminist group in the 1830s and 1840s, is directly tied to the increased opportunities for women as a result of Poland's loss of independence. The question of Polish women's citizenship and right to vote was inconsequential because legally,

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<sup>169</sup> Jakubowska, "The Circulation," 146.

<sup>170</sup> Walczewska, *Damy, rycerze i feministki* [Ladies, Knights, and Feminists], 57.

<sup>171</sup> Piotr Koryś, "Between the Consolidation from Above and the Fragmentation of the State: Partitions, Duchy of Warsaw and Polish Lands After the Congress of Vienna (1795-1830)," in *Poland From Partitions to EU Accession* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 83.

<sup>172</sup> Walczewska, *Damy, rycerze i feministki* [Ladies, Knights, and Feminists], 48.

Poland did not exist. Instead, the Enthusiasts advocated for Polish sovereignty (followed by citizenship) through patriotism, self-development, and public involvement for *both* men and women.<sup>173</sup> Ultimately, the Enthusiasts' propositions were disregarded by their male counterparts, but their feminist philosophies carried onwards to the next generation of Polish feminist activists.

Another characteristic of Polish feminism is that women were not looking to be equal to men and that equal rights were not based on the premise that women and men are the same. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish feminists rather demanded that women had equal access to work, education, and political rights.<sup>174</sup> For example, equal opportunity in education meant co-education in schools and universities. Polish feminists claimed that educating students separately based on gender created unhealthy relations between men and women. Moreover, there was a possibility that women-only schools would receive less funding and lower education standards.<sup>175</sup> American feminists on the other hand fought for women's colleges (such as Vassar, Smith, Radcliffe, Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, etc.) so that women would not be dominated by men in a mixed cohort.<sup>176</sup> For Polish feminists, emphasizing gender difference was essential to make space for women and to maintain visibility.

In interviews conducted later in her career, Natalia LL exemplifies the distinction between Western and Polish feminism. When asked about her feminist associations and works in the 1970s, Natalia explains that she did not agree with Feminist manifestos and theories but refrained from criticizing them because she was chosen as their Feminist representative.<sup>177</sup> In another interview, Natalia LL clarifies her relationship with and distancing from the Feminist Art

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<sup>173</sup> Walczewska, *Damy, rycerze i feministki* [Ladies, Knights, and Feminists], 50-51.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Natalia LL and Krzysztof Jurecki, "Interview with Natalia LL, Krzysztof Jurecki, 2001-2002," Critics, Natalia LL, translated by Jarosław Fejdych, November 2001-May 2002, accessed January 9, 2023, <https://nataliall.com/en/interview-with-natalia-ll-krzysztof-jurecki-2001-2002/>.

movement: “In a way, I have come close to the Feminist movement, though I am aware that the xenophobia of feminism is not so much the liberation of woman as imprisoning her in the grip of the vulva and the uterus.”<sup>178</sup> In *Artificial Photography*, Natalia LL uses her body to delight in, and exhibit its gendered subjectivity and difference. The artist’s gaze at the camera is not emancipatory – it does not reverse power dynamics and it does not dominate over the presumed male spectator. There is vulnerability in her expression and in her body language that does not claim superiority; it simply exists. Furthermore, Natalia LL uses her body to participate in Poland’s sexual revolution and anticipates feminism’s later turn to sex-positivity. In spite of the State’s asexual moral politics and the Church’s traditional pro-natalist attitudes, Polish sexology rapidly improved in the 1970s. The developments in sexology during this time promoted non-reproductive sex and a greater focus on women’s pleasure.<sup>179</sup> Women’s emancipation was tied to women’s sexual pleasure and bodily autonomy.<sup>180</sup> For Natalia LL, true feminism and emancipation took place at the site of her body. As Polish curator and critic Zofia Krawiec argues: “Natalia LL liked to show herself as an object of desire. Total equality and freedom also provide the opportunity to fantasise about being objectified.”<sup>181</sup> This position rejected contemporaneous radical Feminist antipornography stances and their denunciation of vanity/sexual objectification.

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<sup>178</sup> Natalia LL and Wiesława Wierchowska, “On Art and Eroticism – Interview given by Natalia LL to Wiesława Wierchowska,” *Critics, Natalia LL*, translated by Joanna Holzman, July 9, 1994, accessed January 9, 2023, <https://nataliall.com/en/on-art-and-erotism-interview-given-by-natalia-ll-to-wieslawa-wierchowska-1994/>.

<sup>179</sup> Agnieszka Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland*, trans. Marta Rozmysłowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 46-53, 79-91.

<sup>180</sup> However progressive Polish sexology was in the 1970s, it still relied on heterosexual relationships and women’s pleasure in relation to men and to heterosexual sexual contacts.

<sup>181</sup> Zofia Krawiec, “Natalia is Sex, Natalia is Medium,” in *Natalia LL: The Mysterious World*, trans. Soren Gauger (Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst GmbH, 2021), 121.

## Conclusion

This thesis examined photographs and photomontages created by Ewa Partum and Natalia LL in the 1970s that explicitly center the female body. In particular, Partum's *Self-Identification* and Natalia LL's *Artificial Photography* demonstrate the artists' concerns with representations of the naked female body and its significance in the PPR amidst social and political struggles. Through an analysis of the artists' early careers leading up to, and the conditions surrounding the creation of *Self-Identification* and *Artificial Photography*, this thesis revealed how Partum and Natalia LL use the body to challenge the role of women in Polish society. Using Sławomira Walczewska's overview of 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century Polish feminist history and Agnieszka Graff's reflections on the gendered realities and consequences of post-1989 Poland, my analysis of Partum and Natalia LL's works prioritized the specificity of Poland's history to the artists' feminist praxis. Through Partum and Natalia LL's photographs, I have argued that it is precisely Poland's complicated history that informs Polish feminism and differentiates it from Western feminism.

While both Partum and Natalia LL reflect on their gendered selves and what it means to be a woman in 1970s Poland, each artist approaches the body in different ways. To best illustrate how Partum and Natalia LL use their body in *Self-Identification* and *Artificial Photography*, this thesis drew on Elizabeth Grosz's metaphor of the intertwined Möbius strip, locating Partum on the "outside in" and Natalia LL on the "inside out" sections. Working "outside in", Partum's body *becomes* woman through external social inscriptions and its sexed corporeality.

Acknowledging the inflammatory potential of a naked female body in public space, Partum uses her body like a costume to reject the identities imposed upon Polish women. Against the backdrop of the Presidential Palace and a statue of Józef Poniatowski, the artist rejects the Polish Mother and Divine Being tropes while quoting women-led protests of 1947 and 1971. By

contrast, Natalia LL works from the “inside out,” where her body functions as the perceptive medium for her psychological interior. Through sexuality and eroticism, Natalia LL uses her body to assert her gendered presence despite the conscious erasure of Polish women’s subjectivity. The artist’s relationship to her body/sexuality and the Feminist movement of the 1970s exemplifies the particular character of Polish feminism and its flourishing in this era.

Reflecting on Partum and Natalia LL’s works nearly fifty years after their creation instills a sense of familiarity, nostalgia, grief, and inspiration. Instead of neatly resolving research questions or blatantly making a claim for an easily identifiable Polish feminism, their works unfold to create new and even messier questions around Polish feminism and women’s roles during the PPR. Partum and Natalia LL recognized an irreconcilable and unspoken haunting that characterized their lives as women and women artists working in 1970s socialist Poland. This thesis is in part an attempt to address this haunting, but to also place Partum and Natalia LL within the genealogy of Polish feminism.

It is also important to recognize the influence of preceding Polish feminist artists working in different disciplines such as Maria Pinińska-Bereś, Alina Szapocznikow, Erna Rosenstein, and Magdalena Abakanowicz. Recent scholarship by Agata Jakubowska examines Pinińska-Bereś’ early works from the 1960s and links their feminist character to local discussions around gender.<sup>182</sup> Within the photographic medium, the magnitude of Partum and Natalia LL’s practice can be felt in the works of celebrated Polish feminist artists Zofia Kulik, Teresa Tyszkiewicz, Katarzyna Kozyra, and Teresa Gierzyńska. However, photographers like Zofia Rydet (1911-1997) have largely been excluded from the Polish feminist art canon despite Rydet’s use of the

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<sup>182</sup> Jakubowska, *Sztuka i Emancypacja Kobiet w Socjalistycznej Polsce* [Art and the Emancipation of Women in Socialist Poland], 9, 306.

female gaze, concerns with embodiment, and the treatment of her subjects. Re-reading the works created by Polish women artists through a feminist lens invites new discoveries and connections to feminist movements in Poland and through East Central Europe.



**Figures**

Fig. 1  
Ewa Partum, *Presence/Absence*, 1965. Black and white photograph, 6 x 9 cm. Photograph from Ewa Małgorzata Tatar, "Pamięć czasownika pisać. Sztuka Ewy Partum [Ewa Partum's Art: The Memory of the Verb 'To Write']," *Obieg*, February 26, 2009, <https://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/teksty/8348>.

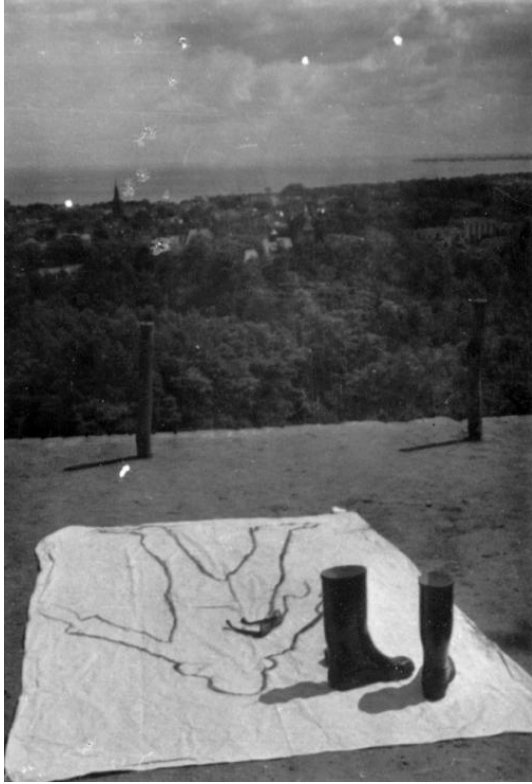


Fig. 2

Ewa Partum, *Presence/Absence*, 1965. Black and white photograph, 6 x 9 cm. Photograph from Ewa Małgorzata Tatar, "Pamięć czasownika pisać. Sztuka Ewy Partum [Ewa Partum's Art: The Memory of the Verb 'To Write']," *Obieg*, February 26, 2009, <https://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/teksty/8348>.



Fig. 3

Ewa Partum, *Presence/ Absence*, 1965. Black and white photograph, 6 x 9 cm. Photograph from Karolina Majewska-Güde, "If You Want to Say Something – Speak in the Language of the Language: Ewa Partum's Model of Conceptual Art." *ARTMargins* 10, no. 2 (2021): 85.



Fig. 4

Ewa Partum, *Presence/ Absence*, 1965. Black and white photograph, 6 x 9 cm. Photograph from Karolina Majewska-Güde, "If You Want to Say Something – Speak in the Language of the Language: Ewa Partum's Model of Conceptual Art." *ARTMargins* 10, no. 2 (2021): 85.



Fig. 5

Ewa Partum, *Presence/ Absence*, 1965. Black and white photograph, 6 x 9 cm. Photograph from Karolina Majewska-Güde, "If You Want to Say Something – Speak in the Language of the Language: Ewa Partum's Model of Conceptual Art," *ARTMargins* 10, no. 2 (2021): 85.

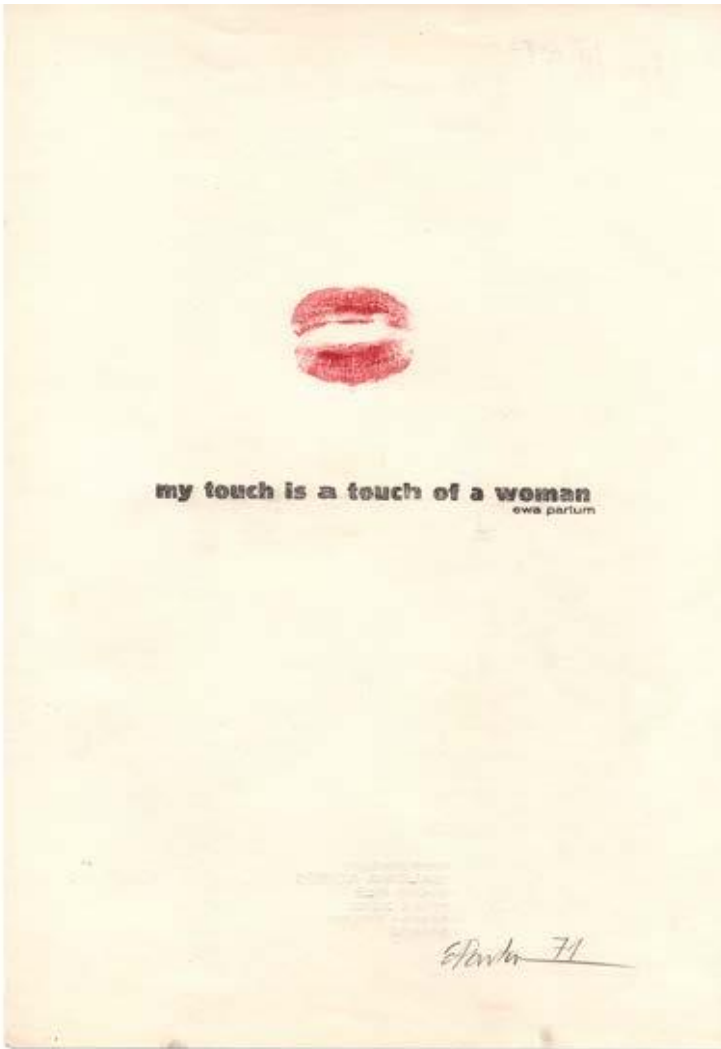


Fig. 6

Ewa Partum, *poem by ewa, my touch is a touch of a woman*, 1971. Black ink, red lipstick, paper, 29.1 x 20.5 cm. Photograph from Majewska-Güde, Karolina, *Ewa Partum's Artistic Practice: An Atlas of Continuity in Different Locations* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 302.



Fig. 7

Ewa Partum, *Self-Identification*, 1980. Black and white photomontage, 150 x 202 cm. Wrocław: Zachęta Lower Silesian Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts.  
<http://www.zacheta.wroclaw.pl/kolekcje/319-samoidentyfikacja.html>.



Fig. 8  
Marek Grygiel, *Samoidentyfikacja*, 1980 [Self-Identification, 1980], 1980. Black and white photograph. Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.  
<https://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/archiwum-polskiego-performansu/2521/127179>.





Fig. 9  
Marek Grygiel, *Samoidentyfikacja*, 1980 [Self-Identification, 1980], 1980. Black and white photograph. Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.  
<https://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/archiwum-polskiego-performansu/2521/127178>.

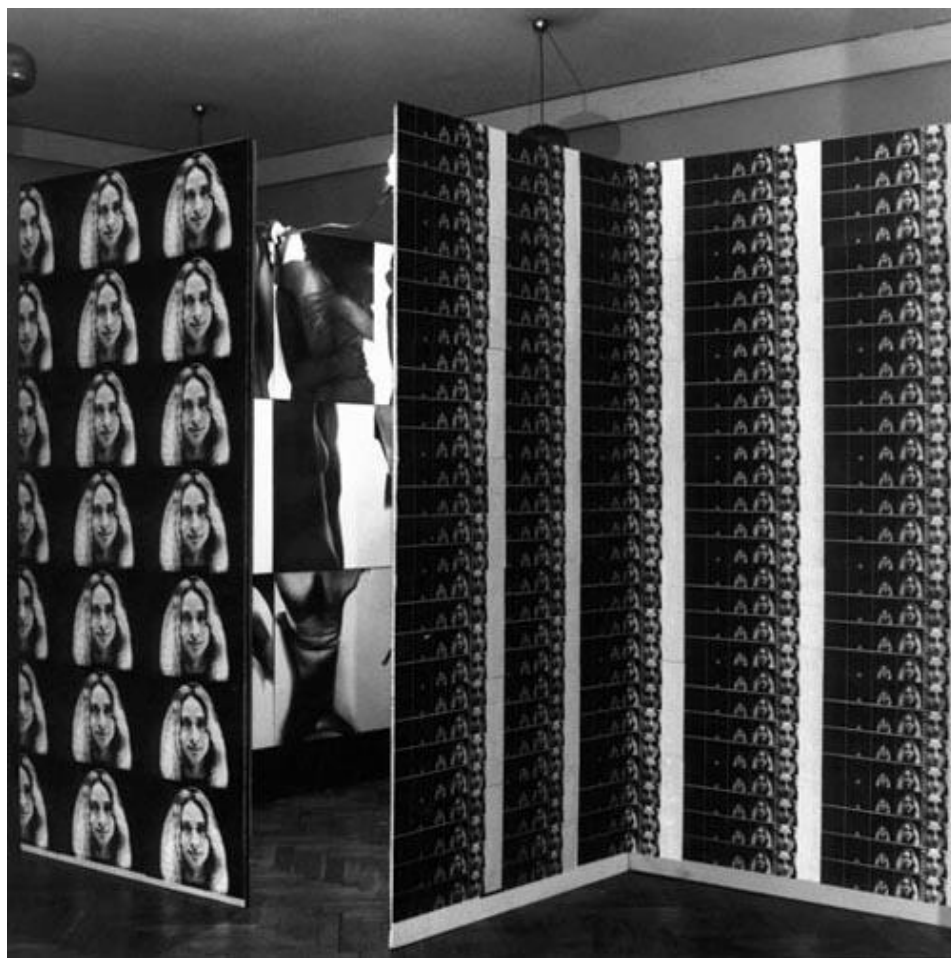


Fig. 10  
Natalia LL, Installation view of *Intimate Photography*, 1971. Mounted black and white photographs, 220 x 200 x 200 cm. Wrocław: Permafo Gallery. <https://nataliall.com/en/the-70s/>.



Fig. 11  
Natalia LL, *Artificial Photography*, 1976. Pigment print on paper, 48.5 x 58.5 cm. Image courtesy of ZW Foundation/ Natalia LL Archive.



Fig. 12  
Natalia LL, *Consumer Art*, 1972-1975. Black and white photographs, 100 x 100 cm. Warsaw,  
local\_30 Gallery. <http://lokal30.pl/artysci/natalia-ll/>.

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