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of Ania Nowak

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Three female performers approach the edge of the stage and face the audience. 'Dear Lover', they say, then each takes a piece of paper from her pocket. They begin to read the content of a letter together – in one voice, in English: 'I am reduced to a thing that wants you. I composed a beautiful letter to you in the sleepless nightmare hours of the night, and it has all gone: I just miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way. [...] Yours, forever'. The stage is completely empty and darkened, which creates a contrasting background for the performers. The audience's attention is thereby focused only on them and their words. A second letter begins with the same wording, 'Dear Lover', but the reading of it has shifted. Each performer reads the same text, but each at her own pace. As a result, if we want to hear the full text, we have to listen to the voice of only one person – or give up and allow it to reach us in piecemeal fashion. With the next letter, the performers go around the various parts of the room, standing close enough to choose a particular person in the audience, who becomes the recipient of the letter: 'Have you ever 'loved' any people or collective – for example the German people, or the French, or the American, or the working class or anything of that sort? I indeed love 'only' my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons. ... Very truly yours'.

The rule becomes transparent: letters begin and end with identical phrases, they all concern love, but the way they approach the topic differs. Though reading them in sequence makes us want to treat them as a correspondence between lovers developing over time, listening to their content verifies the situation. They were not written by one person. Ania Nowak has drawn from many sources, including Karl Marx's love letters, also generating her own letters and referring to the 2013 book *The Posthuman* by Rosi Braidotti. All texts have been rewritten and adjusted, making the identification of original authors impossible. In total, nine letters are read on stage.

After the final one, the performers put away the pieces of paper and approach each other, helping take off their wireless microphones. This is done in silence, but conducted in such a way that it is not the pragmatics of the situation that is important, but rather its intimacy, closeness and sexuality. The performers sit on the floor, very close to each other – almost entwined – with their eyes closed, beginning to cuddle. 'Imagine someone's warm skin, [...] imagine that you have goose bumps on your thighs,' they say. In contrast to the first part of the performance, this

second part is no longer innocent and sexually unspecified. The touch is slow, very delicate but clearly erotic. Performers touch each other's breasts and intimate parts. Their words are also becoming more literal: 'Imagine that your vagina is wet, [...] imagine all five fingers inside of you, [...] imagine that your vaginas are pushing against each other, [...] imagine his penis between your buttocks, [...] imagine that you pee when you come'. We watch a lesbian love scene, but the text itself is ambiguous, evoking different situations and sexual orientations.

It is worth noting that the sequence is visually beautiful. It is arranged in an ideally composed image in terms of colour: the dark, powder pink of choreographer Ania Nowak's one-piece costume and the white of Xenia Taniko Dwertmann's costume are softened by the blue shirt and red pants of Julia Rodriguez. The colours were selected with exceptional taste by costume designer Melanie Jane Wolf. The dominance of soft fabrics with silk structures adds to the nobility and also the softness of the entire performance. The role that costumes play usually belongs to the architecture of space – they constitute part of the performance framework. It is no coincidence that these costumes do not emphasise the performers' gender, giving them a strong androgynous expression.

The production *Offering What We Don't Have to Those Who Don't Want It* refers to reflections on the nature of love taken directly from Lacanian psychoanalysis. The title of the 2015 production already sends a clear signal from one of the best-known definitions of love, formulated by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: 'Love is giving something you don't have to someone who doesn't want it'.¹ Importantly, references to Lacan's proposal are not limited to that single gesture, but are deeply embedded in the structure of the entire production. Nowak uses Lacan to address key issues of non-heteronormative and non-binary sexuality. In this way, she reveals her interest in theories of feminist materialism.

Offering What We Don't Have is a production created at the invitation of the Tanztage festival in Berlin in 2015.² Work on the production began during a residency at the Zamek Culture Centre in Poznań, with the choreographer conducting research she titled 'Love as a strategy for developing knowledge and spending time', devoted to love as a political category. Nowak set up a blog³ where she collected various types of material, such as film excerpts, photos, quotes and interviews. The starting point was her intention to treat love as a sociological category, stripping it of romantic imaginations. According to the description of *Offering What We Don't Have*, love is treated as a social 'muscle' undergoing constant transformation. In this carnal metaphor, one may notice a reference to the perspective proposed in the 1960s by post-modern dance pioneer Yvonne Rainer, who struggled with the modern idea that dance is a form of expression that

1 Jacques Lacan, 'Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis', trans. by Cormac Gallagher, in Lacan, *Seminar XII: 1964-65*, p. 165, <http://www.lacaninireland.com> [accessed on 6 January 2018]. Interestingly, Lacan's definition initially consisted only of the first part.

2 Ania Nowak lives in Berlin, where she graduated in choreography at the Inter-University Center for Dance (HZT). Earlier, she studied Iberian studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

3 <http://technologiesoflove.tumblr.com>

communicates feelings. 'Mind is a muscle'⁴ and 'feelings are facts',⁵ Rainer claimed, trying to reformulate the approach to the medium of dance. If we do not perceive subjective feeling in love, but an objective social fact, we would appreciate its direct translation into the shape of the public sphere. To take this further, the analysis of the colloquial definition of this concept and the cultural ideas associated with it will reveal mechanisms that consolidate the model of heterosexual relations as a norm. The artistic practice of Ania Nowak is constructed against this type of mechanisms, which is why in *Offering What We Don't Have*, the accent is placed on non-normative love and the queer-feminist context.

Although at the stage of Nowak's creating her blog, Lacan functioned as merely one of many contexts, in the resulting production he became a key figure. This choice is not surprising: the theme of love has constantly returned in Lacan's writings and during his famous seminars. The psychoanalyst was interested in how we express love by means of speaking, writing and sexual acts. In the context of Nowak's production, it is important that Lacanian psychoanalysis emphasised the role of love letters as the most effective form of expressing love. In this approach, the letter had an advantage over speech. 'One cannot then speak about love, but that one can write about it',⁶ Lacan proclaimed during the 3 February 1972 seminar. He argued that this is connected, above all, with the materiality of the letter and its durability. We cannot say anything meaningful about love through speech. Which would mean that the feeling, before it is written down, remains elusive to us. At the same time, speaking about love is its production, therefore a kind of performative.

It is worth referring directly to Lacan's writings to take a look at the actual meaning of his definition of love cited in the title of the Nowak production. At the first glance, the phrase 'Love is giving something you don't have to someone who doesn't want it' may be seen as paradoxical. Can you give something you do not have? Can you give something you do not have to a person who does not want it? The contradiction in this definition can reveal itself from another perspective, if we recall the myth from which it had been derived. Lacan refers to the story about the birth of love – Eros – which appears in Plato's *Symposium*. Eros is the son of Penia, symbolising poverty, lack, absence of the source; Poros, who is her opposite, symbolises abundance and fulfilment. Eros was conceived at a feast on Aphrodite's birthday. Penia was not even allowed in, waiting outside. When Poros got drunk on nectar and slept in the garden of Zeus, she took her opportunity and lay down next to him. At a symbolic level, Penia, as poverty, could not offer anything but her own lack – her constitutive feature. So she gave what she herself did not have – to Poros, who did not want it. The complicated sequence of metaphors derived from this story leads Lacan to the conclusion that a man is looking for his own lack in his partner, because he has no other access to his own

4 *Mind Is a Muscle* is the title of Yvonne Rainer's production from 1968.

5 See Yvonne Rainer, *Feeling Are Facts: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 2006).

6 Jacques Lacan, 'The Psychoanalyst's Knowledge', trans. by Cormac Gallagher, in Lacan, *Seminar XIX: 1971-72. ...Ou Pire ...Or Worse: from 8th December 1971*, p. 50, <http://www.lacaninireland.com> [accessed on 6 January 2018].

phallus but through her. And more importantly, it led him to believe that love relationship by definition must be a relationship between a man and a woman.

Nowak, on one hand, developed her production following Lacan's conclusions; but on the other hand, she consistently deconstructs it. This was no coincidence, but rather a deliberate attack on heteronormative structures on which psychoanalysis was founded. In a broader perspective, it was also an attempt to destabilize the binary categories underlying Western philosophy, as well as the dominant ways of defining identity. Nowak achieves this by means of simple but focused measures. Would anything change in the concept of love if a group of women appears instead of a heterosexual couple? This is not aimed at loud protest or at seeking arguments to convince others to accept differing models. Nowak simply demonstrates on stage that there are other models of love and they constitute a part of our reality.

It is also significant that there are three people on stage, and not two or four. This uneven number enables the destabilisation of the idea that we always connect in complementing pairs. That idea has been so deeply rooted in our collective imagination that it does not require any complex evidence. Its sources are also well recognized. It suffices to recall the renowned speech of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, in which he tells how we once were spherical, complete entities who did not lack anything. Zeus, however, cut people into equal halves, and from that moment on people have sought their other halves in order to achieve happiness by connecting with each other. Christian culture has been approvingly reproducing this model of relationships for centuries, encumbering it with numerous encyclicals, and excluding any kind of love relationship except the heterosexual one.

The final part of *Offering What We Don't Have* can be interpreted as a play not only upon binary structures, but also with the concept of dominating and being dominated in a relationship. One performer proposes a movement imitated by the two other performers. Though one person is always leading, the situation is fluid, and the roles of leader and imitators are interchangeable. The performers pronounce subsequent definitions of love, as if the impossibility of creating one definition could be overcome by accumulating many definitions and expanding their meanings. Here, the power is not centralised, but nomadic – it is shifting, which means we are dealing with a structure devoid of axis. An attempt to build a non-binary situation without centre is not coincidental. It is also found in another Nowak production, *Don't Go for Second Best, Baby!* [premiered at Art Stations Foundation in Poznań, 10 December 2016].

The fact that Nowak can speak about lesbian love in a way that makes it indistinguishable from heterosexual love or any other love is one of her strengths. What does it mean? The choreographer does not demand greater visibility for sexual minorities; she simply designs lesbian love as another norm. This is a completely different strategy from those in Polish theatre to date, an important representative of which is director Krzysztof Warlikowski is an important representative, with such productions as *Cleansed* and *Angels in America* (both with TR Warszawa, premiered in 2001 and 2007, respectively) In Warlikowski's productions, homosexual motifs are related to the breaking taboos and revealing sexual

Otherness. Nowak does not see the Other in a lesbian or a gay: she tries to describe the non-heteronormative as the ordinary, nearly indistinguishable from the norm.

As a result, in her productions, one never finds attempts to explicitly demand the rights of LGBTQ communities, or their social acceptance. In *Offering What We Don't Have*, there is no direct formulation defining the performance as being about lesbian love; it is not named at the level of spoken text, therefore it is not imposed as a privileged interpretation. There is no naming gesture in Nowak's production. Instead, there is direct work on definitions. The piece is not reduced to representing only one model of sexual relationship, but its structure remains open to various patterns. It multiplies them. Another issue is that Nowak intentionally selects only women – or, as she calls them, 'non-men' – as collaborators.⁷

In other words, the choreographer is queering definitions. This strategy is close to the approach of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who warned against the fact that frequent pointing and naming problems may paradoxically lead to stimulating those phenomena and consolidating divisions, rather than designing new models of social relations. As Sedgwick wrote: 'But of course it's far easier to deprecate the confounding, tendentious effects of binary modes of thinking – and to expose their often stultifying perseveration – than it is to articulate or model other structures of thought'.⁸

A similar strategy is used by Nowak in the production *Ohne Titel*, prepared as part of the Micro Theatre project at Komuna// Warszawa in 2017. The whole structure is based on a bold, uncompromising gesture. A person comes on stage, whose biological sex is at many levels disturbed or even erased. The heavy motoricity of movement and large feet in white sports shoes and socks pulled up on calves appear clearly masculine, whereas the blue wig and sharp makeup outlining the face are attributes characteristic of drag queens. There is also a white belt with an artificial penis attached to the hips. Only bare breasts (under a blouse made of transparent vinyl) confirm to the gender of the performer (the role is played by Nowak).

The choreographer stands in the middle of the stage, her hands wide-spread as if she were giving an official speech. 'The fact is,' Nowak says, then begins to read words forming groups of four-word associations from sheets of paper held in one hand:

Institution, organization, legalization, law
 Paragraph, article, regulation, standard
 Activity, statute, office, officious cow
 Sejm [lower house of the Polish parliament], regional council, little Sejm, willie
 Boy, man, husband, president
 Woman, mother, daughter, Polish woman
 Man, man, man, man.

7 The dramatist Mateusz Szymanówka, with whom Nowak often collaborates, is an exception confirming the rule.

8 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 2.

These are just several examples from her long list. Cumulatively, they demonstrate how the process of ideological programming takes place at the linguistic level. The play of associations is important here, because in such numbers, they are no longer innocent and light, revealing their potential for violence. It is unsurprising that the word ‘woman’ is so close to the slogan ‘Polish woman’, and the word ‘man’ leads to the word ‘president’. As in *Offering What We Don’t Have*, Nowak infects this system with a virus that makes the structure crack. She introduces elements into the sequence of words that destabilize the whole. Often, just a word is enough for the system to go crazy: ‘Ibuprofen, lisyne, ketoprofen, anal’. In the next part, Nowak takes a few steps forward, approaching the audience with a fiery speech that designs a different reality:

We need
vision, revision, resuscitation.
We need
hospitality, immigration, minority.
We need a revolution [...].

Next, Nowak smoothly moves to the final sequence, in which she lip-syncs along with the song ‘Dziwny jest ten świat’ [‘It Is a Strange World’, 1967] by Czesław Niemen – she imitates lip movements, giving the impression that she’s singing it. As a result, we watch a performance presented in an exaggerated drag-queen convention, but which retains much of the seriousness of this key Polish protest song: ‘Przyszedł już czas, najwyższy czas, nienawiść zniszczyć w sobie’ [‘The time has come, it’s high time to destroy the hatred in ourselves’].

The production *Don’t Go for Second Best, Baby!*, created in 2016 as part of Solo Projekt Plus in the Stary Browar in Poznań, seems even more formal. This work was built around the topic of backup dance – that is, dance performed by dancers accompany the main star, usually in pop music. In the first sequence, the performers – Julek Kreutzer and Julia Plawgo – perform choreography with their backs to the audience. As if the actual audience was on their opposite side, and we only had a view from the back of the last row, of dancers performing group choreography. Nowak, however, reverses these meanings. We don’t lose anything – on the contrary, we finally have the chance to see what’s happening in the background.

In the first minutes of the performance, the choreography is performed to pop music. Later, however, the choreography is repeated in silence. The dancers practice the choreography, and for the rhythm they utilise sounds they make themselves: steps, jumps, snapping fingers. Similarly to *Offering What We Don’t Have*, the title gives a clue: it refers directly to the main source of inspiration. *Don’t Go for Second Best, Baby!* are lyrics taken from Madonna’s song ‘Express Yourself’. The sound layer of the first minutes also suggests this reference to this pop-culture icon. However, there is more to it; the structure here is deeply contextual. Nowak recalls Madonna’s Blond Ambition World Tour from 1990, opening with ‘Express Yourself’. That tour had been criticised by the Catholic Church due to numerous provocations Madonna included in her show. Legend

has it that Pope John Paul II urged Christians to boycott the tour, resulting in the cancellation of her performance in Rome.

During the Blond Ambition World Tour, Madonna repeatedly provided support to sexual minorities. From the stage, she would demand sex education and talk about the need to use condoms. One scene in the tour documentary *Truth or Dare* showed a passionate kiss between two gay men, which led to a huge scandal. It's significant that, in search for dancers to accompany her on stage, Madonna went in New York City to see the off-stage voguing scene. Voguing, which eventually dominated the tour choreography, is a stylized improvised dance evoking movements and poses from fashion shows and lifestyle magazines. It developed since the early 1960s in Harlem dance clubs then in the African-American and Hispanic communities, and with gays, lesbians and transsexuals.

Taking up the topic of backup dancing can be interpreted as an emancipatory gesture – an attempt to highlight it, bringing it in from the shadow of the marginal. To some extent, *Don't Go for Second Best, Baby!* repeats and reinforces the gesture of the makers of the documentary *Strike a Pose* (2016). In it, the traditional division of roles was reversed: the makers focused not on the main star, but on previously anonymous dancers from the second and third lines. Significantly, in this instance, one strategy of rebellion tested by Nowak against the dominating pop-power systems is the refusal to participate. In the central sequence of *Don't Go for Second Best, Baby!*, performers disappear from the stage for a long time. The show continues, colourful lights accompany rhythmic music, but the product is nevertheless much less appealing. What's more, when the performers reappear, they seem to no longer want to dance for someone – only for themselves. As in other Nowak productions, the system holds out, while undergoing transformation.

As may be evident, Nowak's works don't require extensive commentaries, yet they are more interesting when we know their context. A characteristic feature of her artistic practice is that the context secretly influences the form of the performance. Complex ideas with multiple strands are presented to the audience in a radically purified and reduced way. One can argue that we are dealing here with formal minimalism. Also notable are traces of careful observation of the achievements of choreographers a generation older than Nowak, several of whom are mentioned below.

To locate Nowak's works on the map of artistic practices of the twenty-first century, it is worth looking at the specificity of her education and generation. She began choreography studies at the Inter-University Centre for Dance in Berlin, as noted above, in 2011, when the attention of the choreographic community was focused on so-called non-dance performances. The iconic, founding production of this current, *Jérôme Bel* by Jérôme Bel – representative of the entire phenomenon – had been created in 1995. Equally important is *Self Unfinished* by Xavier Le Roy, made in 1998. The creators of 'non-dance' took up the tradition of American post-modern dance from the 1960s, its interest in practising everyday movements. Additionally, they meticulously analysed social and cultural determinants of the concept of dance. Inspired by phenomenology in its French version (Maurice Merleau-Ponty), they asked the question of where dance begins and where it ends, whether even the

simplest movement of the body in space can be considered dance. As a result, their productions were sophisticated, but at the same time minimal, very economical in expression.

Something from that experience is visible in Nowak's works. However, it is also obvious that the artist belongs to the next generation. She systematically uses 'non-dance' tools, works a great deal with text – recognising and using its performative power, but also attending to its literary beauty. While watching her productions, audiences may get the impression of order, referring to the style developed by Forced Entertainment, the experimental British theatre company. *Offering What We Don't Have* and *Don't Go for Second Best, Baby!* are not only precise, but have very exact and closed semantic structures.

One can say that, for a choreographer, Nowak is very theatrical. However, something more can be seen in her choices. In recent years, the concept of post-performance – distinguishing the performance-art tradition in the historical sense from contemporary interdisciplinary activities – has emerged from discussions around the definition of new performance practices. Performance art is about exploring the boundaries of the performer's body, acting on an object, a series of rituals to which performer and audience are subjected. The performer's body is a medium and it is situated at the centre of events. The notion of post-performance covers a much wider field of expression, where there is a place both for choreography and the practice of delegated performance, performed by amateurs according to specific instructions,⁹ as well as for strategies transferred from experimental theatre. This is an interesting context for Nowak's works, an artist unorthodox in every sense of the word, searching for her place beyond stable institutional divisions.

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⁹ See Marie Canet, Marie de Brugerolle and Catherine Wood, 'Talking About: From Performance to Post-performance', *Mousse* 44, 2014.

ABSTRACT

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Androgynous and soft: Non-normative languages of Ania Nowak

This article analyses works of Polish choreographer and performer Ania Nowak in perspective of non-normative strategies she develops in her performances. Starting point is the production *Offering What We Don't Have To Those Who Don't Want It*, in which on the one hand she follows Lacan's recognition of the nature of love, but on the other hand she consistently deconstructs it. It is not a coincidence, but a deliberate attack on the heteronormative structures on which psychoanalysis is built. In a broader perspective – an attempt to destabilise the binary categories which are foundation of Western philosophy, as well as the dominant ways of defining identity. I refer as well to other works of Nowak to reinforce the thesis that the artist does not demand greater visibility for sexual minorities, but simply projects lesbian love as another normative. In the other part of the text, I analyse the structure of Nowak's performances by stressing its formal and minimal character and try to place it on the map of artistic practices of the 21st century.