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Putting on a dress is like changing one's skin. Or, rather, like putting on an unused, long forgotten and ill-fitting costume again that'd been hidden deep in the closet or the attic. A dress – taken out gently, already faintly yellowed, if stored in a cover and washed it can look as good as new.

During three warm weeks of August and September 2011, my meetings and activities with women residents of two small villages in the south of the Mazowsze region – Ostałówka and Broniów – consisted largely of a common search for and taking out and putting on of old wedding dresses. With these dresses came memories, images, special moments and attempts at interpretation. Photo shoots in their wedding veils, examining photos from these sessions, the preparation of a wedding cake, performance actions in the streets and fields around the village. Conversations, dressing up, posing. A play and a processed ritual. Theatrical play with this special costume which causes real and common experience, becoming a starting point for conversations about essential issues, not only for women.

Wide sleeves, now out of fashion, yellowed lace, a partly torn corset buckle. I look at the hands of my interlocutors, shaking slightly, smoothing crumpled material with reverence – movements indicating gentleness and sentiment. There is something of a magical transformation, of summoning ghosts, in the moment when white tulle and flounces wrap around a woman's body. Or, to make perverse use of vocabulary close to queer discourse, something of a subversive spectacle of playing with identity. It would seem that nothing has been exceeded in terms of gender or even, quite the opposite, that the pattern has been followed, confirmed, petrified.

However, this entire action, all this dressing up, revolves around questions about self-definition, identity, its criteria, changes and unsteadiness. Putting on this costume brings back not only the memory of the event but also emotions and specific atmosphere, which appear as a result of recreating the image, of repetition of the gesture. The bride looks into the mirror and observes herself in this strange, familiar, yet still new and unexpected role with a surprise which oscillates between the feeling of a certain impropriety and playful joyfulness. All parts of this outfit – ill-fitting, damaged, exposing changes in the body and passing time – become the attributes of some grotesque nostalgia in which self-irony is mixed with some kind of sorrow. A corset that won't button all the way, a mundane hairdo that doesn't even slightly resemble the elaborate bun,

a hastily prepared bouquet – all these elements heighten the sense of bizarre masquerade, producing something similar to a theatrical effect of alienation. The bride exchanges glances with this strange figure appearing in the mirror: she seems to be her yet someone else, someone from the past, from the alternative world of symbolic images.

Could you reveal yourself in this state in your village, on the village road, in front of the community centre, or even in front of your own house, suspended between the authenticity of re-emerging memories and the sense of blasphemous impersonation, of pretending to be someone you are not at the moment? In a home, this could be explained as play, as girlish dressing up, private recollection; but leaving home means consenting to create new meanings. It is no longer a re-creation, but a rather creation of meaning, performative production of identity, in reference to Judith Butler and her revolutionary (though by now almost classic) concept of gender performativity.[1] The well-known repertoire of gestures, props, behaviours, is used perversely here – not to repeat the ritual but rather to produce a situation at its borders, in the surrealistic logic of conversion, collision and experiment.

Dressed in the old wedding gowns, they go outdoors, one after the other, to the village road, beyond safe private space. In conversations later, they would recollect this as a breakthrough moment. Repeated comments of 'later, I stopped caring' demonstrate the effort and hardship of this moment, as well as the key role of theatrical form, which results in confrontation with the public sphere, with their neighbours' gazes, with the gazes of other women who also decided to participate in the project. They go through the village, alongside one another, in their slightly soiled gowns taken from their closets for the first time since the wedding. The fact that something strange is happening seems evident at first sight: such a procession of women is not commonly seen in the village streets, especially dressed this way. This feeling of strangeness accompanies us throughout the whole event and becomes a pretext for conversation, an impulse to create completely new conditions for the meeting and new roles for participants.

Before we put on the dresses: the origin of the project

The experience described here was the core of the project I initiated in Broniów and Ostałówek, in August and September 2011. The series of actions under the common title or code name 'The Brides' was, on one hand, an attempt to engage younger and older married women from both villages in a common discovery of meanings related to marriage, family or, in a wider sense, community, and, on the other hand, a response to the situation in which I have found myself at the time as a researcher, performer and woman. The process of working with former brides – conversations, invitations, meetings, planning activities – took three weeks. I managed to recognise the situation from a distance then thanks to short visits, during spring. The final event, an elaborate performance consisting of preparing costumes, props and performative actions in the village, as well as individual and group photo shoots, took one day in each village near the end of the project.

1 See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

At the time, I had already known Broniów and Ostałówek for several years. I had come there for the first time in 2006, as a student with a group from my school. We were taking part in the course 'Ethnographer in the Field' supervised by Tomek Rakowski at the Institute of Polish Culture in the University of Warsaw. Ostałówek, in the Radom region, seemed such a distant place, far from everything I had known. I was in the cultural-studies programme but my contact with the culture of small rural communities at the time was rather theoretical, academic or tourist-like at most, and my knowledge of life realities was quite faint. Classic anthropological theories, research reports, inspiring field reports – these all kindled my imagination, but they could not replace the first contact, which I remember most of all in terms of the need to set aside all theoretical categories.

Broniów and Ostałówek are villages in the southern Mazowsze district, at its border with the Pogórze Świętokrzyskie foothills. These areas face deep economic problems, with the most severe, local unemployment, reaching the level of 30 per cent. Local people work intermittently, usually in the black market. Many people move to cities or abroad to look for work. Migration is almost on a mass scale: in virtually every family at least one person, usually several people, have already left or regularly leave seeking work. Farming becomes increasingly unprofitable. In Broniów, practically no one is cultivating the land or keeping farm animals and the landscape is dominated by fallow fields, whereas Ostałówek still remains a farming village, closely linked to the land and traditional farming methods. However, even here the farms become impoverished and often are unable to provide even a modest living to farmers.

Though apparently nothing is happening, a closer, more focused look – the alternative to the judgemental, one-sided, urban and project-oriented narrative of sociological reports and revitalisation programmes – enables one to discern many significant, vivid centres of culture, original and efficient forms of cooperation, self-help, social life and facing everyday challenges. This is not just about local institutions, such as community centres, shops or volunteer fire-brigade units, but includes more ephemeral forms of activity and creativity, sometimes not clearly visible for a person from the outside. This was the kind of gaze we were trying to develop during our research. Its beginnings, however, were far from obvious.

We observed everyday life with interest, we clumsily participated in daily chores and tried to orientate ourselves in the space, which did not seem too friendly if only because of the unfavourable November atmosphere, we talked with local inhabitants about their everyday activities, ways of life and plans for the future, trying to fit what we heard and saw into a familiar framework. The initial feeling of being lost, a lack of the ability to refer to what we usually encounter in our daily life, presented a great challenge. We gradually managed to get used to the specificity of village life, to the way time passes there, the way space is treated and relationships are established. Though at the beginning many of us in the student group wanted to escape, we gradually adjusted our emotions and established relationships. Things took an unexpected turn and, as a result, Ostałówek and Broniów marked our mental map for good.

At the time, in November, I was living with two other students in the house of a member of a local singing group and we spent hours in conversation with people met on the road, in the shop, in their own homes,

to which we were more and more frequently invited. Though the majority of the student group was female, initially we met almost exclusively with men, or at least they were accosting us and talking to us. The need for explaining the purpose of our visit mixed with more or less personal stories about everyday life, family arrangements or, finally, listening to and exchanging views on life, especially relationships. It was obvious that, as a group of young girls, we were attracting attention. Announced marriage proposals – it was hard to say whether they were really serious – emphasised the established order of male-female relations existing in the village. However, situations closer to a peculiar game, a subtle and sophisticated form of realizing accepted norms of communication between men and women, started to happen more often. To simplify the matter, it could be said that the initial view revealed a clear, transparent image of the world in which the roles are ordered according to the patriarchal system.

I remember clearly the first outrage when, during small talk in the vestibule of the community centre, the activity of my interlocutors suddenly increased and physical distance was broken within seconds. Overly familiar gestures such as putting their arms around me or grabbing my hand seemed offensive and objectifying. I treated such behaviour with aversion, only confirming my belief in the patriarchal male domination present in Polish villages. When I think about it today, such views seem naive and superficial, and my attitude too judgemental. The following years brought about many discoveries related to the way the body (male and female) is treated in such a model of relations, how it takes action or becomes a medium for a message. To put it simply: contact, much more direct, with less distance, but in direct use. It is true – in a use which repeats the traditional patterns of femininity and masculinity deeply ingrained in the social fibre but resulting from a different, more straightforward attitude to the body in general. I began to reflect upon it at that time and the willingness grew in me to investigate ideas related to ways in which gender functions in the context of the village community.

At the same time, along with deepened interest in gender issues and ways in which gender is constructed and practices, I was becoming more convinced that the most interesting way of researching social and identity subjects is theatre, along with its related language of performative arts. I used numerous subsequent opportunities to test tools and languages of theatre and performative actions myself. I co-created a student theatre, developed a performance collective, participated in conventions of an alternative-theatre school in which inspirations and materials for work was derived from Polish and European folk traditions. Another such opportunity, again directly related to Mazovian villages, was the project 'Miejsca Wspólne' ['Common Places']. In 2008, part of the ethnographic group led by Tomek Rakowski returned to Ostałówek, this time with a different purpose and in a different role. As creators-practitioners, we decided to engage artistic and animation strategies we used daily to undertake common actions with the villagers.

Again, numerous political, ethical and aesthetic dilemmas accompanied this project. The key place in the discussions was occupied by tensions or relations between ethnography, culture animation and artistic activities. Ethnographers or animators? Creators or researchers? Befriended, settled, familiar, or still rather 'from the outside'; recognising specific potential, but bringing in ideas from another order: academic

theories and urban artistic strategies, social action? The tools of social art or the hermeneutic sensibility of a researcher? Already at that time, resolving such labels, determining a demarcation line between these fields, seemed impossible.

Eventually, however, the very search for answers to these questions proved a very fruitful process for everyone involved. Along with Sebastian Świąder, we worked with children and young people and, to some extent, with their parents, on the subject of a village school that had been closed. We decided on theatrical work, reconstruction, a peculiar reliving of this story connected with semi-legally entering the premises closed by the local authorities. During this work, we realised the incredible affective and critical potential of such actions. Fresh emotions related to closing of the school in Ostałówek (the school had been built by the villagers as their contribution to the community) were revived, along with dense discussions about local policies, the identity-building role of local institutions, attitudes to education, upbringing and, finally, subtle psychological and communal categories were revealed such as pride, feelings of being mistreated and helplessness.

The final demonstration of the work was like conjuring ghosts. Theatre served as a tool for at least momentarily reclaiming a voice and as a kind of causative democratisation of the place which, as the villages felt, had been taken away from them.

This mechanism seems to be explained by the idea of public space developed by two researchers, Ernesto Laclau and Chantall Mouffe[2] – supporters of radical democracy. In their opinion, public space should become a sphere in which a hidden conflict is revealed through action. Mouffe and Laclau disagree with Jürgen Habermas, who believes that the way to implement democracy is through rational debate, deliberation. According to Habermas, the author of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*,[3] there is nothing more public than a conversation, an exchange of arguments. Habermas holds the Enlightenment societies of Great Britain and Germany as the models of democratic space, where meeting, exchange and finally consensus, that is, public agreement, were possible. This concept was widely criticised for its wishful character. This seemingly inclusive public sphere was only attainable by those who had access to the eighteenth-century salon. It therefore excluded such groups as the peasant class, women, national and sexual minorities, migrants, 'people living in the provinces and many others.

Apart from the inaccessibility of such debate to so many individuals, Mouffe and Laclau point to a more fundamental problem: the questionable efficiency of the debate itself and the dubious category – in their view – of consensus, which they regard as a hidden symbolic violence veiled as agreement. In fact, it is always about winning someone's argument or the power of persuasion. Winners usually mastered the discourse better and are at the forefront of the discussion. Instead of dreaming of consensus, Mouffe and Laclau suggest enhancing the status of conflict, which for them does not mean hostile antagonism but rather a lively dispute, an encounter between opposed or sometimes simply different arguments,

2 See Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, New York: Verso, 2001).

3 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

interests, attitudes. Such an encounter is only possible in accessible and visible space, by means of an active body marking its presence and engaging not only in debate but also in action. It would be hard not to notice that what makes the agon different and alive is its theatrical inclination. Something which so far has been unspoken or even unspeakable can find its utterance in action, a theatrical gesture which allows a certain reality to be realised which has been absent and tones to sound which had been muted. Mouffe and Laclau point directly to art as an agonic field: allowing for difference, democratising.

In both cases, during actions in the school which had been closed and, three years later, during 'The Brides', performance and theatrical work were designed to allow for reaching the level of affect, the field of meanings which is difficult to express in language, full of contradictions and, in this sense, non-discursive.

This endeavour was thought out as a series of actions focused around the themes of getting married, wedding, marriage, which at the time seemed to me very authentic and promising categories. There were several reasons for this choice; in fact, the choice was the outcome of several orders, a spontaneously imposing concept.

The first reason, evident from the beginning of our stay for 'The Brides', was the absence of young women in the public space of the village. The intuitive attempt to answer the question of the whereabouts of these girls led us to the conclusion that after finishing middle school they leave or marry men from other villages. This conclusion soon proved not quite accurate and the reasons for their absence proved more complicated. I soon met some women from Ostałówek and then from Broniów. Reaching them was much more difficult than meeting boys or men who appeared by themselves, besieging various accessible places – also for us – in the villages. Areas they occupied included the bus stop, shop surroundings, sports field behind the school, the parking lot in front of the community centre, the firehouse. There were far fewer women in such places. Men of different ages immediately appeared whenever we came to the village (they were hanging around the community centre, came by the shop, talked to us in the street, invited us to a bonfire), but we met women much less frequently and usually in the context of their own homes, to which we were being invited only after some time. 'I do not wander around Broniów too often', I heard as one response to my comment that I had been here three times and we had never met. I was even more surprised by the answer to my question about other girls: 'There is one, across the street, she had her daughter last week, and another one, at the other neighbours, she was pregnant. But I don't know them, I only remember them from school, we don't usually talk'. It turned out that young girls were invisible not only to us, but often also to each other.

This invisibility, combined with the above-mentioned and ambiguous (to me) paradigm of constructing and expressing gender in the context of the village community, became the main axis of the project.

The other reason to take up this subject was my own wedding, in June 2011. This powerful personal experience inclined me to reflect anthropologically upon the character of such cultural performances and social energy generated in these situations. Arnold van Gennep,[4] followed by

4 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

Victor Turner,[5] claimed that events such as weddings are rites of passage; they belong to the sphere of liminal moments. As such, they become the focal point of key experiences of individuals and communities, and subject identity to a process of change. The experience of marriage initiated a series of vivid and significant questions, reflections, observations; it became a certain filter through which I could observe the way particular groups, families and social circles go through this experience, how they organise around it and how they deal with their interests. All these aspects demanded interpretation and became a source of significant cultural knowledge. Our team intentionally used this movement between private experience, its interpretation in terms of anthropological reflection and the inspiration for the further practical creative activity. The subject of the wedding was situated at the intersection of these orders and enabled transfers between them. As it turned out, it also created an opportunity to practice something that might, after Turner, be called performance ethnography.

During discussions with girls and women from the two villages, I gradually discovered that this subject not only rekindled their memory and stimulated their willingness to talk, but also opened a much deeper reflection about their own histories, structures of relations in a village community, models of family and relationships, the entire system of beliefs, traditions and institutions organising their everyday lives and practical management. This subject became a common ground, interesting for the majority of women including the unmarried. There were also doubts. For me, it was crucial to decide whether addressing such issues in a community still strongly related to the conservative patriarchal construction of family would not strengthen those rigid patterns, thus placing my interlocutors – especially those who were unmarried or divorced – in an oppressive or uncomfortable situation. After several conversations, I made sure that the issue of weddings might create an impulse to confront different points of view, stir up the proverbial hornets' nest, create an opportunity to express hidden opinions, to realize or openly manifest reservations, attempts at self-determination or even gestures of emancipation.

The girls, especially from younger generations, openly declared that 'things change, I would not get married just because of pregnancy' or 'though people still look down on young unmarried couples living together, they don't insist that much on marriage, so now you get married because you're in love, because you want to, not because it's appropriate'. Hearing such voices, I decided to take a risk, hoping that this intimate yet socially recognised and significant subject, accumulating meanings, revealing ideas and rekindling emotions, might be interpreted anew and might become an impulse for critical analysis in action; in other words, it might be interesting to everyone. And, in any case, this project was only for women, who were supposed to celebrate among each other the exceptional character of those moments. This was something many girls in the villages were missing. The reflection on the way, that the exceptional aura created around the bride disappears into the closet along with the gown, replaced by a harsh often chauvinistic reality of everyday responsibilities, completed the celebration.

5 See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

At the same time, I felt it was important to undermine to some extent these easy judgements, the language of another oppression describing models of traditional family and male-female relations predominant in the village community as explicitly negative, harmful and mindless. I wanted to start a topic and encourage girls to talk about how they see their families and how women in general are regarded in their environment. To what extent does the role of the bride shape one's identity? Is identity shaped differently without accepting this role? Is it just different or less fulfilled? Are there models other than marriage of fulfilling female identity in a village community? To what extent can the role of wife be freed from the net of the necessities of social acceptance and pressure? Putting on a gown was designed as a kind of verification of collective awareness, but also a play, a game distancing the unambiguity of meanings.

It was important for me to cut through the clear differences determining my position. The demand for participant observation was not so much realised as exceeded, towards a new form of research becoming action. Moreover, this became an openly theatrical action and, at the same time, engaged very powerful and meaningful elements of women's lives. It was supposed to become an experience in which women would be the main actresses in local space, perhaps to the extent they never have before.

Together with my gown, meticulously covered, as fresh as the memory of my own wedding, I packed in my baggage the huge context of my personal life. In addition, for the first time, my husband joined the team.

The beginning of the process: in lieu of rehearsals

The most difficult part is to find the first person, which is why my breakthrough comes the moment I meet Kasia. Kasia instantly grips the idea. She brings her wedding dress down from the attic – she married nine years ago and since then, obviously, hasn't had the opportunity to wear it. In fact, Kasia has the idea to use the dresses as the attribute of action rather than wedding photos. It seems she perfectly understands the concept of dressing up. The idea is being born to put the dresses on simultaneously and walk together through the village. It is apparent from the start that the pretext for the girls' meeting should be something tangible and fun. 'So that they could see that they can do something together. Many of them just stay at home, they don't even know each other'. The mutual invisibility noted above creates a strong communication barrier. In some circumstances, invisibility works as non-existence and deludes society into thinking that certain problems or needs are not there. The slogan from a well-known social campaign sounds remarkably appropriate here: 'Let them see us!'[6]

Sometimes mere visual familiarisation (understood as a set of images which fit into the community's imagination) can provoke changes and

6 I have in mind the slogan of the social action 'Let them see us!' by the Campaign Against Homophobia, which appeared in 2003 on billboards in cities around Poland. Images showed same-sex couples holding hands. The campaign resulted in many protests, especially on the part of conservative circles.

action. Rosalyn Deutsche,[7] the American researcher, attaches great importance to the debated category of appearance and its role in establishing the public character of space. Appearing, Deutsche claims, means opening to otherness – other qualities, beliefs, as well as other subjects and their presence. For Deutsche, the verb 'appear' goes beyond the order of vision. It stimulates and enables contact, relation, acknowledging existence. From this point of view, visibility becomes identical with presence.

To make something visible means to bring something into existence for others, to meet, to see each other. In such contexts, the initial questions of concerned participants, 'Who else is going to be there?', seems an attempt to prepare for the moment of appearing to each other. 'Some girls are always alone, home, kids, husband, in-laws,' Kasia repeats. 'No integration'.

While talking about putting on a wedding dress and the walk, Kasia admits that this is a powerful, intimate subject and suggests that at the beginning we should ask the girls about photos. Indeed, photos become a good starting point. Equipped with my own photos, I go knocking from door to door. Photo albums pulled from shelves, wedding videos, are like good wine – they instantly provoke conversation and become a sincere focus of attention on both sides.

Ania and Grzesiek had their photo session in the park in Szydłowiec, the nearby town. They are excited, a bit nervous, they smile under umbrellas given to them by the photographer. Ania says, looking nostalgically at the photos:

Just before the wedding I said: let's take it easy. In the church, I usually cannot stand, but in that moment I didn't feel the tension at all, I was relaxed. Grzesiek was so happy: I have a wife, I have a wife, I love her so much! That's what he shouted! He is like a child, he jokes all the time. It is very empty without him here.

Right after the wedding, her husband had to go to Sweden to start work. He and his two brothers-in-law: Tomek (single) and Mariusz (the newly-wed husband of Ewa), are employed in a butcher's shop. They work twelve to fourteen hours a day. Sometimes Grzesiek is too tired to even Skype with his sister or wife. 'I remember my occasional conversations with them just before their departure, in the kitchen, in the home of the Madej family, our friends: You have to work, and who will give you a job in Poland?!' Ania kept repeating. The belief in lack of professional opportunities, especially financial, is a hard argument to refute, presented as an indisputable fact, an existential necessity – all plans related to family and marriage are made and realised from this perspective. Therefore, many stories from the 'brides' contain a tone of longing which resounds along with resigned understanding, but also regret. Long-distance marriage does not seem strange to anyone; quite the opposite, everyone nod their heads. 'He has a wife, he has to support his family. And here? In Poland? Family is a serious commitment, so young people are not willing to get married nowadays!", one of my interlocutors

7 See Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Agoraphobia', in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998). The concept of going beyond sight and extra-visual consequences of appearing may also be found in other Deutsche texts including *Hiroshima After Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

from Ostałówek comments. She has three children and her oldest son has just moved to Kielce, a city in the region, to study.

The women observe a tendency among male neighbours to remain confirmed bachelors:

> The boys sit in front of the shop and are not in a hurry to get married. They don't have to work, sometimes they do odd jobs to have money for wine. They live comfortably with their mothers. They go here and there, sit on a bench. There used to be a bachelor tax, which was deducted from a salary if a man did not start a family after turning thirty.

The significant visibility of men in the villages' public space, emphasized above, their characteristic wanderings about the villages, is, according to my interlocutors especially from the older generation, an obvious illustration of their aversion to 'serious matters' and to the way of life accepted there, in the village, as the norm. On the other hand, it is hard not to notice that the majority of those who decide to get married are still condemned to live as if single – a seemingly endless separation. Nobody is inclined to openly question the validity of these choices, except for the growing tendency to become, as they say there, a 'confirmed bachelor', which at least usually allows one to remain there.

When you have a family, things change. There are no jobs, you have to leave. 'Separation is difficult', says Michalina, a bride several years ago, nodding her head. 'For half a year, he was here and I was there', she says about her trips to Italy to pick strawberries. 'First Sundays after the wedding, when I was leaving and we separated – I cried through them. But, well, that's life, what choice do we have'. 'How long do you plan to go on like this?' I ask, one by one, all 'brides' whose husbands go abroad or who look for work abroad themselves. 'Who knows...', they shrug.

The situation of communal looking through photos from the wedding soon encourages the most serious matters to become half-social and half-ethnographic platforms of exchange, where the images I brought are also the subject for reflection and consideration. It turns out that the wedding day in most cases is remembered positively indeed, irrespective of the way the marriage then went – and here the spectrum of experiences is very wide. Communally leaning over the photo album brings back the avalanche of memories and immediately triggers many side topics, often far from the atmosphere of tulle, lace and wedding songs. Children, disappointments, financial problems, housing problems, grey reality, conflicts. But when I ask about the wedding, this harsh, often difficult reality melts again in narratives dominated by the atmosphere of a fairy tale and the sense of uniqueness or extraordinariness. 'It is a great feeling, because everything revolves around you. My best memory: I entered through the front door, and not, as usual, by a side entrance. The stairs leading to the church are so grand, beautiful, wide', a bride from a few years ago recalls dreamily. The topographic figure of the centre, the sense of being the focal point of social energy, keeps coming back. The feeling evoked of unity of the local community cumulating and focusing its efforts, support and rituals around the bride, or in the wider sense around the event itself, is among the memories most frequently recalled. 'They made seven gates on the road, seven [a ceremonial device; see below]. All the village came and gathered for us. How did I feel? At the centre of attention. We come into the church and all eyes are on

me'. The girls keep emphasising that they never felt as important before or after the wedding.

It could be said that they had never been really noticed publicly before this event. The reference to the moment when each felt visible and active was the crucial point for us. Now, putting on their dresses again, we want to do something which would lead to a collective appearance of women, still so inconspicuous outside the context of the farmers' wives association or a singing group. The wedding dress as a costume, sign and attribute can evoke this experience and put it in a new context. 'This was something new, exceptional, there had never been anything like this here before. Now, knowing how I can use this dress, I will never put it back', I hear weeks after our actions. One of the 'brides' recalls, after the action, while looking through photos:

I bake cakes and donuts at work, and you do things like this. Perhaps it is more difficult to explain, but I like it. Both are creative, start something new. I did not fully understand this. Now I see that more could have been done, people could have been persuaded to go outside, do something together, dress up, demonstrate. I did not fully understand this, but I felt that this is a march, a demonstration, that it could not go unnoticed, that we can go together, laugh, do different things together, and everyone is looking at us through the window.

Performance

On the day of the main event, we meet early in the community centre, before noon. The girls bring full bags and packages. Immediately, tables are moved to the walls and the modest community centre changes into a hairdressing salon. Flat irons and professional make-up sets are put into action. Dressing up and getting ready create an atmosphere of preparing for a ball, during which each of them is to be special, but each of them for a moment also becomes an image expert. Neighbourly self-help emerges – so vivid in the context of a village community – but this time in a form which seems to be rarely practised in Ostałówek and Broniów: the girls apply make-up for one another, arrange each other's hair, debating about each client in the salon, comparing wedding photos and fulfilling wishes unfulfilled at that time. Getting ready takes a long time and seems very serious play; though there will be no ball or wedding, the girls fully engage in the situation.

I sense that earlier conversations and planning towards the event led to the high level of discernible reality. The performance has already started, long before leaving the centre and going out into public space, here among curling irons and mascara people are being prepared and stories are being told – about what happens during the wedding dressing and what its vehicle is. It turns out – and this stems directly from conversations between experienced women who are more critical towards married life – that the period before the wedding rides on the powerful tide of social expectation and unconscious pressure. A film of Zbigniew Libera, a Polish artist associated with the critical-art movement, comes to mind: *Jak tresuje się dziewczynki* [*How to Train the Girls*],[8] a twenty-minute video showing the process of changing the body of a little

8 Zbigniew Libera, *Jak tresuje się dziewczynki?* (1987), collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, http://artmuseum.pl/en/kolekcja/praca/libera-zbigniew-jak-tresuje-sie-dziewczynki, accessed: 30 March 2016.

girl into an embodiment of alleged femininity, traditionally conceived according to common canons of beauty, adequacy and elegance. Though putting on make-up in the Broniów community centre is a source of visible pleasure, participants make bitter comments – they notice that along with thick layers of make-up foundation, they accept obediently and uncritically a mask built from stereotypes and culturally binding obligations imposed on women. Now, however, they are able to take advantage of these attributes only for themselves, wasting cosmetics, time, attention and effort in vain, so to speak, only for their own fun, as a gesture of working through these expectations. They do not contribute to a social ritual well established in imagination and in the homoeostasis of collective order, but to an action which is artistic, which is to say it is suspicious and not necessarily understood by others.

In our group, understanding is the equivalent of engagement, and engagement grows along with subsequent stages of preparation. With beautiful hair and amidst full wedding entourage, preparation of the wedding cake begins. The best recipe has been selected earlier. Several layers of cake, cream, fancy meringue, marzipan decorations. We bake in joyful anticipation of joint consumption. The idea appears to make the eating of the cake one of the core elements of the action, along with elements planned earlier, such as the procession, traditional wedding gates and songs. Greedy individual eating of the cake would be followed by slicing it pieces and bringing them to other women in the village: those who are married and those who have not yet been, are not any more or are simply unmarried. Democratically, without pointing fingers or guesses concerning their unmarried status. Dressed in wedding gowns and with the wedding cake in our hands, we walk out of the community centre. We form a group and line up on the centre's stairs, as if for a wedding photo. Still a little hesitant, a little curious, a little concerned with the potential response. Indeed, the first people who spot us – mostly men – react as if we were ghosts. They stop, observe from a distance, not believing their own eyes. White brides in a group is an unusual sight for at least two reasons. First, this is not an everyday outfit and the artificial, theatrical form of this phenomenon is immediately obvious. The other reason is, however, the distinct presence of a group of women in a public place. Women who are not in a hurry or attending to daily affairs but standing together, exposing themselves, posing. The gazes of passers-by are like mirrors – we look at ourselves in them and with each surprise, concern or sneer which we accept and return, we grow in self-confidence and playful or even teasing power, which enables not only not withdrawal, but going on.

At the stairs of the community centre, we sing a wedding song which we have learnt earlier. One verse, expressing openly the readiness to be an independent bride who can celebrate this day without men by her side, is spontaneously added. We begin to walk, proudly carrying the wedding cake in a procession. People go outside or lean out to see what is going on. Most of them freeze in dismay – perhaps they think this is a dream. We stop the procession in front of the gates, so that the villagers would not regard us as some ephemeral illusion, a meaningless dream. We confront their gazes, often full of confusion, with our presence, with our appearance. We want them to see us, to have to deal with this sight and everything it means. The realised over-visibility becomes the reverse of a previous invisibility. There is still a lot of anxiety – it

surfaces especially when we pass the girls' homes. The girl whose home we pass usually hides behind the procession. Younger and older boys provoke us. 'Are you crazy?' we hear from one window. 'These girls are nuts', two men standing outside the shop with beers comment. 'Let's go', the brides encourage one another. 'They don't know what to say, so let's give them something to think about. Let them watch' – their words sound like battle cries, they confirm the validity of their actions. And there are many nice responses, supportive – especially when we knock on doors and offer cake.

'Why do you do this?' asks one of the older former wives, licking the cream off the decorative plate. She gives our group a surprised but kind look. 'We want to invite all the women outside. We want to show that there are plenty of us and we're not only visible on our wedding days'.

'If everyone expects you to be a beautiful, visible and fulfilled bride', Kasia will say on our way back to the community centre, 'they should support women at every stage of their later lives and all their needs, not only those which are in favour of men or conform to family expectations'.

Several times during the procession, we manage to create a so-called gate. This refers to a tradition, still present in Polish villages, to create barriers for the wedding party on their way to the wedding. The traditional gates, sometimes huge structures, are often genre scenes in themselves. They tell stories, illustrate social notions (often vulgar or trivial) about marriage, femininity and masculinity, the future life of the newly-weds. The bride has to bribe the gate-keepers in order to continue. Usually a half-litre bottle of vodka is enough. The idea that our procession should create gates appears at the beginning of our action and is probably the best illustration of its subversive nature. Asked their opinion of the tradition of gates, participants of the project respond: it is about power, jokes, to show that wedding is an important event for the entire village. 'But sometimes it can be a little harmful, unpleasant', adds Ania, a recent bride, after a while:

We were half an hour late to our wedding ceremony because of these gates, I felt they were having fun at our expense and nobody thought about our feelings, that I was hot, my make-up was melting and I was afraid the priest would leave. Anyway, it is the same during marriage – everyone is willing to drink for the couple during a wedding, but when things go wrong in the family later on, nobody wants to interfere.

In Broniów, the gate created on the road by the brides initially generated curiosity, merriment, but later also anxiety. 'What am I supposed to do?' asked a young man delayed there, cockily. 'Well, I don't know, perhaps give us a half-litre', we respond impertinently. The price is not set in advance, there is no password or magic spell opening the gate. Each time the girls build a fancy barrier, and wait for reactions. This confrontation, examining reactions and verifying the behaviour of people met on the way, is the driving force and question mark here. People usually turn back. But they often engage in conversation – not always pleasant, sometimes harsh, brusque. This harshness is almost always related to confusion – there are no arguments, but usually rather inarticulate snorts. Usually there are no insults.

'He's lost', giggles one of the 'brides' after seeing her father turn back from the road because he cannot relate to the situation. 'If I was "wearing civvies" he would definitely give me a piece of his mind, but when

he saw the white dress, he wasn't sure if it was appropriate. We tricked them'.

'Go home, whores', we hear suddenly from behind. There is nobody in the road. Only the moving curtain reveals someone's presence and gaze. 'If you are so smart, come out and face us', the girls cry. There is a commotion in the group. 'Come on, leave it, let's go' two 'brides' say, trying to tone down the situation. These confrontations are not easy. There is no illusion that one action, even supported by an earlier process, would change the strong power relations, even in terms of symbolic power. 'He was afraid to appear' Michalina comments. 'I don't even know who it was. It is easy from behind the curtain, anonymously. This is not equal – we are visible, we are not afraid to show our faces'. I think again about the category of 'appearing' and the campaign 'Let them see us!' And right after that I think about aggression on the Internet, rooted in tension between the violence of personally directed aggression and invisibility of the aggressor.

It is slowly growing dark. We marched through the whole village and ate all the cake. After many meetings, conversations, memories and even several spontaneous additions to our group, the time comes for photos.

Portraits and stories

Agnieszka has been living by herself for a long time, raising two teenage sons. She talks about marriage with a sneer and militant aversion. She joins us in the middle of our action, when the cake is ready and we are about to begin our march through the village. At first, Agnieszka joins us spontaneously, she participates in posing for photos, brushing her friends' hair. After a while, she disappears and comes back in a dress, elegant, not a typical wedding dress but similar to a formal outfit worn during civil ceremonies. At first, she is careful, covering her arms with a purple bolero jacket, but when the photo shoot begins, in different places selected by the girls around Broniów, she takes off the jacket and pins a veil to her hair. She begins the uneasy story of her marriage. Of naivety and disappointment. Some of her gestures and boldly formulated thoughts leave no room for doubt: she will not sentimentalize.

As in case of other girls, we shoot Agnieszka's portrait with a crêpe-paper rose in her hand – the brides prepared these wedding bouquets a day earlier, this time by themselves, without anyone's help. The photo seems very powerful – for a moment, a tone of regret and disappointment shows in her eyes, in her dynamic, confident, energetic look. As if at the moment of taking the photo some unhealed memory suddenly came back to her. Later, we talk for a long time and realise how the camera can become a powerful tool of generating meaning. When Agnieszka looks at her photo, she is full of doubts, whether she looks too serious, too artificial. But you can hear satisfaction in her voice. 'Women should meet, spend time with each other. I could finally do something for myself', she declares, and I feel that she has in mind both these few moments of joy and play with the 'brides' and the moment the shutter was released – in that second, the memories came back with the belief that now her female identity is built on something completely different than on her wedding day.

'Nobody believed in this marriage"', says one of the oldest participants of the project. 'I was there, he was here. We were introduced by a friend, this was my second husband. I was alone and I said to this friend – do

you have someone I could meet? Because I was afraid I would become eccentric. And she said: I know a guy, he is a postman. I thought: she lost her mind. But then... So now I never say that some idea makes no sense, even the strangest one'. She looks at the photograph we took in September in front of her house with explicit satisfaction. Beautiful dress, wide English sleeves and the photo from her wedding in her hands. Photograph on photograph. 'I wanted to do this for myself', she says. 'To wear this dress one more time. This closes a certain period in my life, I will not wear it again'.

Some other women from Ostałówek, also older, say that for them, putting on this dress was an opportunity to look back. 'How everything changes, everything looks differently', says one of them thoughtfully, posing in the photo with her fairly grown-up children. She talks at length about how life gradually verifies your expectations and teaches you the everyday reality. It seems that this costume, the wedding dress, belongs to a different world she had left behind.

However, no one says explicitly that this older world, hidden in a closet together with their veils, was better, that they miss or regret it. Though the tone of the narratives about marriage is less dreamily fairy tale-esque than the tone of wedding narratives, the deeply rooted, undeniable belief is clearly present that marriage is the right way and that it is indissoluble, even if it gets difficult. Here, in the countryside, it is still a dominant perspective.

'You are only born once, you only get married once and you only die once. That's it', Bożena responds, holding in her hands a picture of the Holy Mother – part of her dowry from many years ago. 'I knew how it would be, I knew it's not going to be ideal. But I went for it, and that's all'. During the photo shoot near the chapel, her daughter-in-law, Ewa, talks about the way the relationship changes. 'The husband is forever. He says: forgive me, this will not happen again. And you have to forgive, there is no other way'.

This is different than the story of Agnieszka who, in her short, white, elegant outfit, emphasises that breaking up her marriage was the best decision of her life. As a 'bride' in our action, she celebrates this particular gesture, to which she most willingly comes back in her memories. The repeated photo shoot in her case seems not so much a recollection, but rather a symbolic confirmation of the act of establishing herself as separate, single. This photo – of her with a veil and a flower in her hands – is the most explicit sign of emancipation.

The following portraits of 'brides' are the moments of intimacy. When we follow each of them behind their homes, to the garden, field or pond, we sense that we are taking part in a very personal journey, which could not have taken place during conversation or even looking through old photos. In Ostałówek, we did not manage to organise a procession and convince the 'brides' to walk together through the village, so the project there is reduced to individual photo sessions with each 'bride'. Releasing the shutter is only one element of this process, which should be thought of as a performance rather than a visual action. The journey to a chosen site, usually in the company of children, often friends or neighbours, becomes itself a pretext to formulate and utter their stories. Everyone – me, my husband, who was taking pictures, and all the people accompanying this special moment on the site – becomes a spectator, or rather a witness

to this intimate performance, which enables the shift of a private story to a public space, even a limited one.

Ethnography and performance: resonating spectacle

Interestingly, in the context of ethnographic research, the notion of performativity appears as a methodological postulate developing a certain model of engaged anthropology. Awareness of a certain framework, a role within which an ethnographer or a researcher functions, and a role in which their encountered interlocutor exists, allows the perceiving of the entire situation in terms of a peculiar spectacle not expressing pre-existing meanings but rather producing them in these particular conditions created by both sides. A discovery that the situation of ethnographic encounter is a creative moment of producing new meanings, new tensions, and not deciphering the hidden, internal, immanent, unchangeable, motionless content; that it changes the perspective and leads to reformulation of working in the field and, what is more, legitimises combinations which several decades ago would be considered a methodological travesty and anarchy.

The authors of the essay 'Refunctioning Ethnography: The Challenge of an Anthropology of the Contemporary', Douglas R. Holmes and George E. Marcus, diagnosed a crisis of ethnography, both as field research and academic discipline taught at universities, and emphasise the necessity to create and realise multidimensional projects. They also suggest that 'the concept of complicity as redefining the core relationship of collaboration in fieldwork on which authoritative ethnographic claims to knowledge have always depended'.[9] These claims seem inadequate in the face of changing optics in which the field is perceived as a dynamic, pulsing reality where the researcher becomes a factor as equally active as other 'actors' in the situation. This is a postulate of showing one's hand and turning the research into a spectacle. A similar view may be found in Victor Turner's ideas resulting from the intersection of his theatrical intuition and deepened sense of the field. Turner, author of *The Ritual Process*, explicitly proposes performing the ethnographic materials instead of just reading and commenting on them.[10] This idea can be further radicalised. The method would be not only performing the ethnographic materials, but creating situations, in which – through action, gesture, bodily presence - these previously unheard sounds of local knowledge and imagination can resonate.

The perspective of anthropology of the spectacle taking shape as the theoretical horizon has developed for years at the Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw is inspired by the central category of the cultural performance proposed by Milton Singer, who joins a pantheon of initiators: Turner, Geertz and Duvignand. Singer proposes the idea of cultural performance as a social meta-commentary, a story which

9 Donald R. Holmes, George E. Marcus, 'Refunctioning Ethnography: The Challenge of an Anthropology of the Contemporary', in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2005), p. 1103.

10 Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982).

a given community tells about itself.[11] However, if the performance becomes not only the object of research but also its framework, a paradigm intentionally generated by the researcher/creator and members of the community, the category of meta-commentary is not sufficient here. It is too strongly related to words and their descriptive functions, it suggests some distance, a position external to meanings which it highlights. Performance born as a project – a multilevel attempt to access knowledge but also to generate it and become aware of it, creating a new quality previously absent (for example, the quality of meeting), demands some other category. Here, the metaphor of resonance comes to mind, in particular a sound box which gathers, enhances, reflects and makes it possible to hear sounds.

The 'brides' gathering on the streets and roads of Ostałówek and Broniów recalled not only their weddings and everything around those events. They also reflected upon a common endeavour, since they met closely in action. The ideas of further, more long-term cooperation appeared, of crafts workshops or creating a children's corner. The idea of establishing an association also appeared. The dresses went back to the closet, but our portraits and photos documenting our actions still hang on walls in the visible parts of our homes – on fridges, cupboards, tucked into frames. Taken exactly the way the 'brides' wanted, unlike the actual wending sessions. On cars, with favourite pets, by a road sign. 'Now that I know how I can use it, I would never give the dress away', one of the girls says. 'This is an incredible feeling, to wear it after all this time, you think about other things, but you don't see this change in daily life. This dress is a time machine'.

Returning to these villages several months after these events is surprising for me. It seems that I see more girls and women in the streets and in public spaces. As if they suddenly appeared, or perhaps just became visible for me. Perhaps the crucial effect of this action was creating relationships which enable contact at a different level. This new network of relations initiated between them was the most important result of the action. A new quality which cannot be explicitly named or classified as ethnographic knowledge, artistic value or animation process. I prefer to think about it as a new sound extracted from a sound box of these orders.

Annex

During 'The Brides' project, an accompanying action consisted of working with young teenage girls in Ostałówek. We talked about weddings, marriage, their views on these matters, their projections, expectations, rejection or affirmation of certain models of living in a relationship, within a family or without one. These meetings resulted in a textual collage, created an assembly of comments, stories, poems, written thoughts expressed by the girls. This poem is yet another voice: polyphonic, varied, bittersweet in tone. The bride and her imagined figure appears here as a peculiar multi-headed monster, which becomes

11 See Leszek Kolankiewicz, 'Teatr jako wehikuł', in *Wielki mały wóz* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2001). Milton Singer introduces this concept in *When the Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1972).

a focal point for a wide variety of emotions: from rage, repugnance and contempt to desire, hope and joyful anticipation.

Translated by Monika Bokiniec

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ABSTRACT

Dorota Ogrodzka

Returning Bride: Performative Re-creation of Identity and Space

This article is an account of a creative action combining elements of social art and ethnographic study involving female inhabitants of two villages of the Mazovian region, Ostałówek and Broniów. Dorota Ogrodzka conducted in-depth conversations with married, single, widowed and divorced women about their views on marriage, wedding, relationship models and family, and their ideas concerning the role and position of women. Meetings and conversations were the starting point for performative actions designed to recreate wedding preparations: putting on old wedding dresses, hairstyle modelling and make-up, and selected elements of a wedding. These performative actions became a peculiar 'performance', 'production' of local knowledge concerning the changing model of marriage and family, gender and related ideas, including beliefs and meanings.

The author analyses the critical potential of her project as revealed in the process of naming and discussing the situations, notions and categories which in everyday practice are accepted as neutral and non-negotiable. The ethnographic perspective the project assumed enabled appreciation and inclusion of all kinds of experiences as authentic and significant.