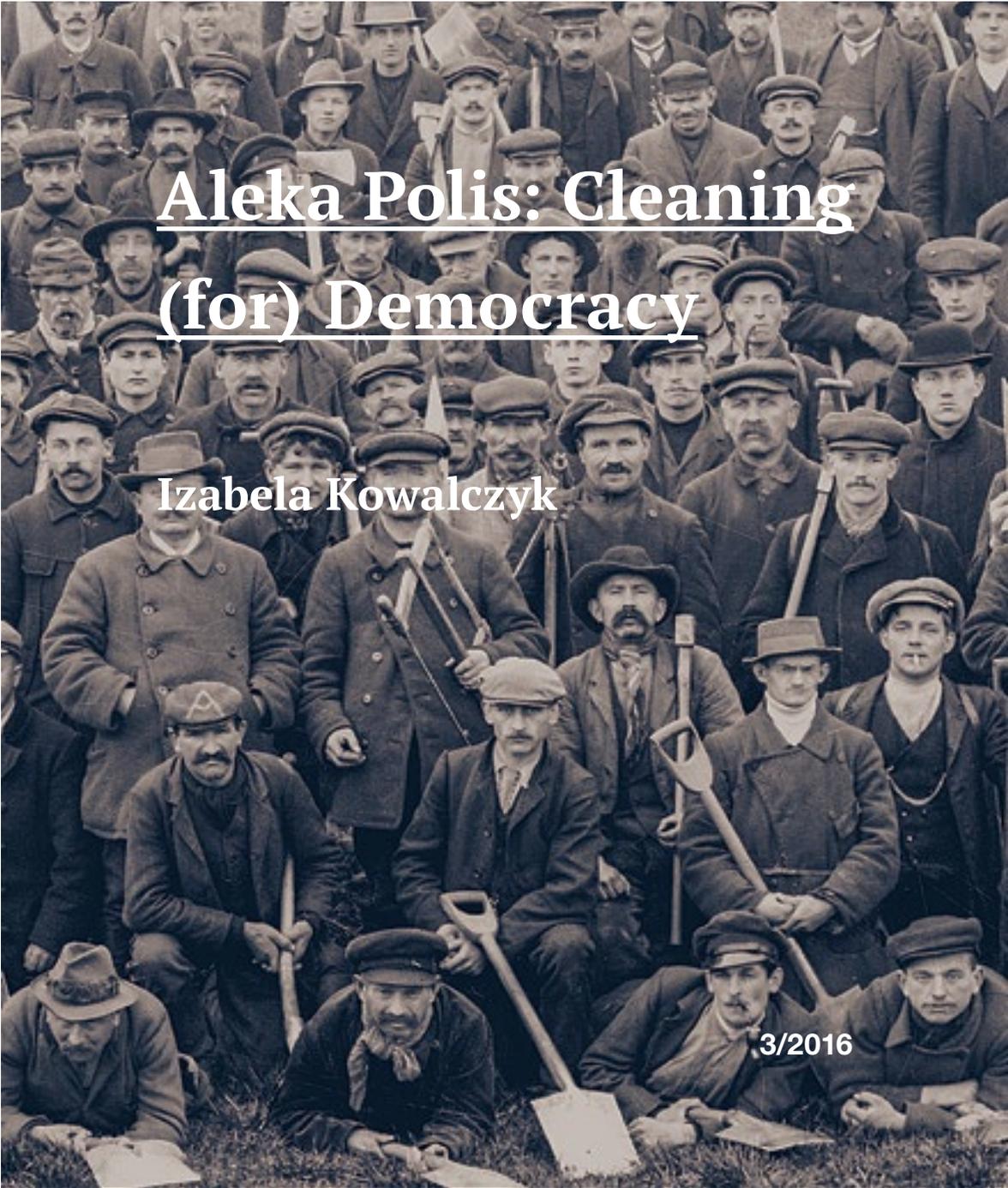


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Aleka Polis: Cleaning (for) Democracy

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In January 2016, Ola Polisiewicz, also known as Aleka Polis, was trained in cleaning the rehearsal room in the “Cinema” Theatre in Michałowice. Under the watchful eye of theatre trainers she practiced a series of gestures and moves to help her clean effectively. With the certificate that she received from Katarzyna and Zbyszek Szumski she set off on a tour of Poland to clean public art galleries. Her plan is to tour the whole country. So far she has cleaned the BWA gallery in Jelenia Góra, The Awangarda gallery in Wrocław as well as galleries in Bytom, Lublin, Opole and Wałbrzych. Cleaning one art gallery takes her several hours, sometimes even the whole day. She says that if one wants to do it properly one should put a lot of effort into it. Every event leaves behind cloths for cleaning the floor that are then sealed and signed by the gallery directors, thus becoming visible signs of the work that usually remain invisible. An

impetus for undertaking such activities was the need to react to what has been happening in Poland since the election in 2015.

The performance by Aleka Polis is entitled *Rosa Rotes Städtchen* which is a reference to Rosa Luxemburg who stressed the value of every type of work, even the least prestigious ones. The title also refers to the way of describing the German left-wing by German right-wing parties (it is supposed to indicate that the Left is not only red, but also pink, that it is linked with sexual minorities). The performance was, however, directly inspired by the fact that the artist had read *Hibiscus Town* which tells the story of a woman who lost her job during the Chinese Cultural Revolution and took to cleaning the streets. Cleaning was at that time an occupation that numerous artists were forced to undertake.

Cleaning has its own place in the history of feminist art. In 1973 an American artist named Mierle Laderman Ukeles organized a performance titled *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside* while raising awareness of assigning women to the sphere of services while highlighting the connections between feminism and fighting for workers' rights. In Polish art we might want to take into consideration the works of Maria Pinińska-Bereś, well-known for a performance titled *Washing Feminism* (Pranie feminizmu, 1980). Cleaning became one of the later performances entitled *Woman with a Ladder* (Kobieta z drabiną, Poznań, 1995). During artistic shows that

accompanied the feminist conference, the artist was bustling around with a ladder and a broom inside Eskulap, a club in Poznań. She was sweeping the floor, removing cobwebs from less accessible places and crumbs from underneath the guests' feet. In this way she made the activity of cleaning the subject of her work while showing that what is regarded as trivial and banal constitutes the basis of our everyday existence. I saw her performance in the context of the words of Jolanta Brach-Czaina: "Bustling around brings to life a delicate, exhausting tissue of everyday existence on a fragile basis and sentenced to temporary existence. [...] The aim of their efforts is the actual fight for everyday existence created and renewed with every trivial activity"¹. In the case of the artwork by Pinińska-Bereś, the everyday routine was transformed into artistic feminism.

Another Polish artist named Teresa Murak touched upon the topic of the tedious activity of cleaning in her performance entitled *Visitandines' Rags* (*Ścierki wizytek*) which took place in the Dziekanka Gallery in 1988. She placed pieces of cloth on the floor. The cloth was extremely thin and frayed as it had been used by the Visitandines for cleaning their monastery. The artist then planted cress there. Andrzej Kostołowski wrote: "Those rags of the Visitandines turned out to be amazing pieces of cloth made of hemp fibre that had been grown in the monastery garden. Having been used excessively for wiping the floors they were now peppered with holes. When spread out on

¹ J. Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, Kraków 1998, p. 73.

the floor the sheets are openwork to such an extent that the surface of the holes often grew larger than the warp and thread itself. Those holes in the monastery rags were created as a result of excessive wiping of the floor when removing the dirt”².

A different approach to the topic of cleaning is shown in Hanna Nowicka’s performance entitled *The Column of Dust* (Kolumna kurzu 1988-1993). For a long time the artist had been collecting dust in her own flat in order to fill a 170 centimetre plexiglas container (the height corresponding to the height of the artist). The dust gathering went hand in hand with regularity, tediousness, as well as disgust related to touching dirt. Nowicka’s only tool was a vacuum cleaner with a permanently attached material bag so she had to remove, touch and move the dust manually. The sight of dust and dirt might put one off and cause the feeling of disgust. Dust is a part of us, as it is produced among others by our epidermis peeling off (the reference to us as dust “producers” is clear in this performance also because of the already mentioned height corresponding to the human height). It is terrifying, though, that its presence is unavoidable and our efforts when cleaning are wasted since dust keeps “re-growing”.

In performances related to cleaning, contemporary artists first of all stress the issue of invisible work of women also in art institutions. This topic, with reference to the already mentioned Mierle Laderman Ukeles, was undertaken by an

² A. Kostołowski, *Intymność ujawniona*, [in:] *Teresa Murak, katalog wystawy*, Bielsko-Biała 1998, following: <http://ninateka.pl/film/scierki-wizytek-strych-teresa-murak> (16.06.2016).

artist called Annette Krauss within an educational and artistic performance aimed at *Unlearning*. When analyzing the spatial and symbolic situation of art institutions, Krauss points to the fact that in their “front” there is usually the director of the institution, a curator and artists displaying their works, while in the back there is some space for the educational department, administration, editors, janitors and obviously cleaning ladies³. Prestige and money, however, are only in the front. In the backroom there is a lack of visibility, hard work and low wages, while it is also the backroom that contributes to the success of the institution. In photographs that are the outcome of the workshop conducted together with Casco Team in 2015 a reversal situation is presented: women standing by the entrance to the gallery are pouring water on the stairs, thus showing what usually remains invisible.

At the same time, Norwegian artist Gitte Sætre in her performance in the series *Woman Cleaning* (2014-2016) highlights the need to clean after what could be described as the male-war culture which leaves behind dirt, pollution, industrial and military waste, etc. The environmental context is significant here since the artist sets to clean such places, as for instance a polluted ocean, rubbish in Jakarta, a beach in India, even the Norwegian salmon. She also tidies places and monuments relating to one’s national identity while revealing the male-centric cultural constructions and the symbols characteristic for national identities.

³ Compare: Casco Projects, <http://cascoprojects.org/casco-case-study-2-site-for-unlearning-art-organization-0> (14.06.2016).

All these performances aim at making visible what is usually unseen and ignored; what is perceived as trivial and banal. This also happens in the case of Aleka Polis, but her performances include gender, social, institutional and political references. Aleka Polis, similar to the artists mentioned above, tackles the problem of women's invisible work since it is usually women who are occupied with cleaning while at the same time providing services with no opportunities for promotion and, moreover, are very poorly paid. Recently, companies have been getting rid of their cleaning staff and turning to outsourcing. In 2014 in Poznań, both the Adam Mickiewicz University and the District Court started to use such services, but the company employing the cleaning ladies failed to pay salaries for two months of work. Even though they sought justice in court in February 2016 the court ruled that in this case, the workers' rights had not been violated. Last May, because of a protest organized by students in Szczecin, the world learned about the exploitation of the cleaning staff in the Fine Arts Academy in that city. An external company pays them four PLN per hour (about one euro); it is late with payments and the staff is deprived of rights to paid holidays and medical insurance⁴.

It is the women themselves who are more often faced with precarious work (meaning work that is uncertain, deprived of security). The problem of unpaid domestic work of women combined with the problem of a per-

⁴ Wyzysk sprzątaczek na uczelni w Szczecinie. Studenci mówią „Dość”, *Newsweek.pl*, 23.05.2016, <http://polska.newsweek.pl/wyzysk-sprzataczek-na-uczelni-w-szczecinie-studenci-protestuja,artykuly,386187,1.html> (14.06.2016).

ception of housework as not being work contributes to greater gender inequality. Danuta Duch-Krzystoszek writes that “women devote more time than men to (paid and unpaid) work and have less free time, less money and have inferior financial security for old age.”⁵ Work at home and in services, usually tedious and strenuous, as well as being deprived of any prestige and appreciation is culturally assigned to women. It is also linked to the problem of poverty. Poverty is gender-oriented which results from the feminization of poorly paid jobs, pay discrimination, traditional division of gender roles according to which the professional career is assigned to men while caring for children to women. Another argument is that women do not often have a permanent contract and are frequently employed in the grey economy where they enjoy no legal protections. Female poverty also tends to be the aftermath of family problems: “Women, victims of domestic violence, when freeing themselves of their perpetrators, are often forced to flee home and leave behind all their life possessions.”⁶

The invisible work of women as well as their low salaries also appears in the world of art since it is women who more frequently become a part of the so-called dark matter of the “art world”. According to Gregory Sholette, this dark matter is made out of the individuals standing behind the great masters, students, assistants, minor

⁵ D. Duch-Krzystoszek, entry “Nieodpłatna płaca kobiet”, [in:] *Encyklopedia gender. Płeć w kulturze*, Warsaw 2014, p. 344.

⁶ I. Desperak, M. Rek-Woźniak, “Feminizacja biedy w Polsce” [in:] *Raport. Kobiety dla Polski. Polska dla kobiet. 20 lat transformacji 1989–2009*, Warsaw 2009, p. 66.

creators working in the masters' workshops; all those people who are assigned work but their names are never revealed. Yet, they are also women, the artists' wives who would usually secure their background; that is with care, cleaning and full maintenance. In other words, they would provide unpaid services for them. This group also is made up of the models, predominantly female models, originating mainly from lower social classes, usually anonymous individuals whose work, even when paid, is usually paid very poorly. If we take into account the historical gender division related to art creation it seems that most frequently it was women who were a part of this "dark matter".

Therefore, the female artists' work, their functionality within an institution or the discrimination on the art market becomes significant. In this case, the issue of combining artistic work and domestic work, both often unpaid, is key. Domestic work is defined as invisible work, while artistic work, as indicated by Joanna Bednarek during her lecture at the Artistic University in Poznań, oscillates between invisibility and hypervisibility: on the one hand there is "invisibility (free work, 'out of affection', hoping for a great success in the future), whereas on the other hand there is hypervisibility (the success is enjoyed by a tiny group of winners [even less often female winners])"⁷.

⁷ J. Bednarek, "Rób to, co kochasz, Kochaj to, co robisz: kreatywność jako technika dyscyplinarna," a lecture, UAP, 11.05.2015, transcript courtesy of the author. See also J. Bednarek, "Rób to, co kochasz, Kochaj to, co robisz: kreatywność jako technika dyscyplinarna," *Zeszyty Artystyczne* 28/2016, p. 11–26.

For some time now in Poland there has been a fight for fees for male and female artists; some art galleries have signed an agreement regarding this issue which was proposed by the *Civil Forum of Modern Art* (Obywatelskie Forum Sztuki Współczesnej). Unfortunately, numerous institutions still organize exhibitions and offer no payment for the artists; there are also no resources for employing curators whose work could support the artists. Therefore, artistic work is still not treated as work but rather as a kind of hobby or self-fulfillment.

Male and female artists, with very few exceptions (first of all individuals employed at academies), have no permanent income and are most often deprived of security or the right to retirement. Therefore, even though in terms of prestige, the professions of a cleaner and an artist do differ and are differently perceived by society, both are connected in terms of insecurity related to the future, instable financial situation and most often low wages, as well as some social rejection (both professions also have negative connotations, the first one is associated with poor education and laziness and the other with a deviation and executing one's own *idée fixe*). Ignoring one's creative work takes its origin in the stereotypical thinking that cultural outcome, including art, is not the result of a particular job but an element of self-fulfillment, a hobby, something one does for pleasure. It is also worth pointing out that in the case of women artists, the frivolous treatment of their art is also subject to tradition and, first of all, the ambivalent status of the historical

construction of subjectivity of a woman artist. Already towards the end of the 19th century, women who took to creative activities were attributed with emotional deficiencies. In their case, art was treated as a whim, something that they would take up out of boredom, to kill the time, a triviality and, at the same time, something not worthy of payment.

Obviously, the problems described above are still underestimated and discredited as unimportant which is well shown in an article by Piotr Bernatowicz entitled “Krytyk powinien być krytyczny także wobec siebie” (“the critic should be critical also towards him/herself”)⁸ published on the online Szum portal, where the author makes an attempt to argue with my article: “Krytyka powinna być krytyczna” (“criticism should be critical”)⁹. It is symptomatic that Bernatowicz as many as three times refers to Aleksa Poliszewicz’s performances described in my blog *Straszna sztuka*¹⁰, while trying to discredit not only the article but also the artist’s activity and its problematic nature. He writes: “it is precisely because of applying the ideological criteria, the authorities and critics, such as Izabela Kowalczyk, that led to the situation where public institutions support artists whose ideas are banal (the case of Aleksandra Poliszewicz) but in line with the ideological key

⁸ P. Bernatowicz, “Krytyk powinien być krytyczny także wobec siebie” *Szum*, 8.05.2016, <http://magazynszum.pl/krytyka/krytyk-powinien-byc-krytyczny-takze-wobec-siebie> (14.06.2016).

⁹ I. Kowalczyk, “Krytyka powinna być krytyczna”, *Szum*, 27.04.2016, <http://magazynszum.pl/krytyka/krytyka-powinna-byc-krytyczna> (14.06.2016).

¹⁰ Eadem, *Aleksa Poliszewicz o niewidzialnej pracy, Straszna sztuka*, 4.02.2016, <http://strasznasztuka.blox.pl/html> (21.03.2016).

that can be perfectly connected with trendy slogans that theorists are using like: gender roles, criticism of institutions, precariat, etc..”¹¹.

I would be interested in learning from where this attempt to discredit the indicated problems comes. The author is the director of the public Municipal Gallery Arsenał in Poznań so possibly he is trying to completely silence any potential discussion regarding the conditions of the employees in his institution, as well as the gender inequalities or also ideological (sic!) program of his gallery. In accordance with a dictionary, *banal* means deprived of originality, plain, of little significance, trivial, very easy. This is exactly how the work of the lowest level of staff, as well as the domestic work and care work are commonly treated. However, this work must be done. Without it there is no possibility of tackling the supposedly “higher” issues. Therefore, valuing between the “banal” and the “higher” conceals the hierarchy of authority. That is why the accusation of banality with a reference to Aleka Polis’ performance, I regard as completely missing the point and paternalistic at the same time. Even if the artist is consistent with the feminist agenda mentioned at the beginning, her performance is organized in a totally different context of institutional and political functionality of art where the issue of precarity of artists’ work, as well as depriving them of financial resources is becoming an increasingly pressing issue. This is also due to the fact that the Ministry of Culture and National

¹¹ P. Bernatowicz, “Krytyk powinien być krytyczny...”

Heritage decided not to award a grant to museums of modern art, which is a huge blow first of all for the artists whose works were to be purchased for the collection. This issue is neither common nor insignificant and in the case of some artists might even have dramatic consequences. The same is for the cleaners who are not paid their salaries or in the case of low hourly rates of the cleaning staff.

Under the current political situation it might soon turn out that modern art, especially when critical and socially oriented (including feminist works), as a result of “the good change” might no longer be needed in Poland. Hence, it will be “cleaned up” ... After all, the government must find the money for it 500+ Program somewhere, and there are also politicians who would like to find funds for Tadeusz Rydzyk’s private college. According to them, art should express “beauty” and “goodness”. In this context, the filthy rags of Aleka Polis gain a metaphorical meaning, namely: art as a rag, the European Union flag as a rag, the Constitution as a rag ... in the current political discourse everything that is important and serves the purpose of maintaining the democratic order is turned into rags.

We cannot define Aleka Polis’ performance as very simple since it requires a lot of physical effort, being in good shape, as well as the effort put in convincing the gallery directors where the cleaning takes place to the idea which is, let’s be honest here, linked with criticism of

the institution. Directors who give their consent to this type of performance and also participate in it, at least partially, prove to be open for criticism. I'm afraid that Bernatowicz is deprived of this virtue and he only wishes to demonstrate his contempt for artists' work, women's work and, first of all, for the least prestigious work deprived of respect and with the lowest salary. Nevertheless, Aleka Polis should clean the Poznań Arsenal gallery!

Possibly there is also reluctance towards bringing up the issues of economic exclusion that led to the victory of the party currently in power. David Ost, when pointing to class divisions in contemporary Poland, wrote about the problem of people subjected to be losers under the new regime: "They were the ones taken over by the Right. And it was the Right that has been the voice of the excluded since 1992. At the same time, it has been feeding them with absurd recipes when claiming the situation was bad since Poland had been in the hands of aliens in the form of post-communists, liberals, atheists. There were also voices claiming that we must reunite around the nation"¹².

It is in this mechanism that Ost sees the reasons for the expansion of the ideologies of the right and development of political populism. When referring to his de-

¹² A. Leszczyński, "David Ost o ćwierćwieczu wolnej Polski: Nie byliście głupi"
Interview in *Gazeta Wyborcza. Magazyn Świąteczny*, 27.06.2014, http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,139186,16233248,David_Ost_o_cwiercwieczu_wolnej_Polski__Nie_byliscie.html (1.03.2015).

liberations, Jan Sowa argues that “populism could be eradicated if the anger of the victims were not directed towards an arbitrarily created Evil Other (a secret police guy, a communist, a Jew, a homosexual) but towards the actual source of the problems, namely the economy”¹³. After all, economic exploitation is the issue which should unite the society (since on the one hand there might be cleaners, Amazon staff, employees of closed down work places, but also artists and even scientists as precarity of work is becoming an increasing problem at universities). Meanwhile, the current government is using the antagonizing rhetoric: us vs. them; octopi vs. patriots; those taken away from the troughs vs. the true Poles; “very cultural mafia” vs. “normal artists”; the rhetoric that is a far cry from the reality but aims at sustaining the state of a permanent outbreak of social conflict created by the current government. Antagonizing the society around ideological issues is most useful for the government since such a society can be easily manipulated.

Aleka Polis is against this agenda in all of her performances when travelling around Poland and cleaning galleries. The artist is certain that the current crisis in Poland, spreading also on the field of art and affecting the institutions, has clear economic grounds. If we fail to notice the problem of poverty and exploitation, any mention of democracy is deceitful. It is the artist who reveals, shows what is invisible, upsetting for the eye,

¹³ J. Sowa, *Ciesz się, późny wnuku! Kolonializm, globalizacja, demokracja radykalna*, Kraków 2008, p. 444.

and underestimated. But what next? Are we going to see history repeat itself like in case of the Chinese Cultural Revolution when some artists will be forced to take up a different form of employment, perhaps cleaning...?

translated by Justyna Chada