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## TRAINING FOR ART AND FEMININITY: ANALYSIS OF LIFE STORIES OF CONTEMPORARY POLISH ARTISTS

**Abstract:** The article is an analysis of life stories of female visual artists connected with the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow (Poland). It explores the specificity of women’s experiences and constitutes an attempt to examine the role models and gender hierarchies which dominate the artworld. The article emphasises two analytical categories – uncertainty and struggle – to demonstrate how they organise the life stories of female artists, and tries to explain how such life stories can lead to re-evaluation of the perception of art as a male profession and contribute to a greater appreciation of women’s activity in the artworld.

**Keywords:** life stories, gender relationships, dominant role models, struggle, uncertainty

### Introduction

For women, telling and writing their own life stories is a multi-faceted act whose meaning reverberates in many, often interconnected dimensions: educational, literary, herstoric, example-setting, etc. The critical culture studies’ perspective<sup>1</sup> that I have adopted highlights also the stories’ emancipatory potential. It draws attention to their capacity for change and suggest that they can be interpreted in complex ways. Since, as noted by Carol Gillian, “the initiation into patriarchy is driven by gender and

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<sup>1</sup> See: S.R. Steinberg, *Critical Cultural Studies Research: Bricolage in Action* [in:] K. Tobin, J. Kincheloe (eds.), *Doing Educational Research: A Handbook*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam–Taipei 2006; M. O’Neill, *Feminist Knowledge and Socio-cultural Research: Ethno-mimesis, Feminist Praxis and the Visual Turn* [in:] T. Edwards (ed.), *Cultural Theory: Classical and Contemporary Positions*, Sage, Los Angeles–London–New Delhi–Singapore 2007.

enforced by shaming and exclusion,” and “[i]ts telltale signs are a loss of voice and memory, an inability to tell one’s story accurately,”<sup>2</sup> it is even more important to listen to such female stories, which often differ significantly from the dominant narratives, and to foster and encourage their articulation, writing, and publishing.

In this article, I look at the life stories written at the end of 2019 by female visual artists living in Poland, all graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts (ASP) in Krakow. In my analysis, I want to draw attention to their two main organising categories: uncertainty and struggle. I chose these two categories because they were highlighted by the artists themselves. The artists report that various forms of uncertainty, often related to gender, have plagued them from an early age. On the other hand, they see struggle as a direct or hidden expression of opposition and actions that do not meet the approval of the environment. In the article, I consider the role that these two types of experiences play in shaping the artistic paths of women and the narratives about their lives, both as women, and as visual artists. In order to be recognised (also in her own eyes) as a visual artist, a female artist must align her life with the already established biographical narratives about artists,<sup>3</sup> which is why I also analyse the dominant stories and models which the artists reference in their writing. Focusing on the analysis of the biographical attitudes adopted by the artists, I ask to what extent uncertainty and struggle constitute specific types of both female and artistic experiences. In other words, how do they determine the lives of female artists as female artists? And, consequently, are these categories emancipatory in this context?

I agree with the authors of *Researching Life Stories* who wrote that “life stories [...] tell us much about individual and collective, private and public, structural and agentic, and real and fictional worlds. Stories occupy a central place in the knowledge generated by societies.”<sup>4</sup> The analysis of life stories provide us with a better understanding of the reality of particular individuals, their actions and ways of thinking, as well as relationships and various cultural circumstances. Importantly, the life story is not just an overview of a life, it is a life arranged into a narrative by its author.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it must be interpreted in the socio-cultural reality in which it was created.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, narrative research, which includes analyses of life stories, allows researchers to explore information which remains important for people, but is less

<sup>2</sup> C. Gilligan, *Chodźcie z nami! Psychologia i opór*, trans. S. Kowalski, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2013, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. Klein, *Biography as a Concept of Thought: On the Premises of Biographical Research and Narrative* [in:] H. Renders, B. de Haan, J. Harmsma (eds.), *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, Routledge, London–New York 2017, p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> D. Goodley, R. Lawthom, P. Clough, M. Moore, *Researching Life Stories: Method, Theory and Analysis in a Biographical Age*, Routledge, London–New York 2004, p. IX.

<sup>5</sup> K. Plummer, *The Auto/Biographical Society* [in:] J. Goodwin (ed.), *Sage Biographical Research*, vol. 1: *Biographical Research: Starting Points, Debates and Approaches*, Sage, London 2012, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> S.G. Magnússon, *The Life Is Never Over: Biography as a Microhistorical Approach* [in:] H. Renders, B. de Haan, J. Harmsma (eds.), *The Biographical Turn...*, op. cit., p. 72.

noticeable from the outside, which is also significant for the feminist perspective whose tenants remain close to my views.<sup>7</sup>

## Methodology

The analysed material consisted of 9 autobiographical stories. I received them directly from the artists. Iwona Demko was the person who first told me about these writings and also provided me with the contact details for the women. Demko is an artist and lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. She initiated and coordinated the celebration of The Year of Women from the Academy of Fine Arts<sup>8</sup> in 2019. Demko collected life stories of women connected with the Krakow school as part of this very project. When she published her invitation to submit life stories on Facebook, she wrote as follows: “I would prefer the life stories not to be too ‘official sounding’, describing only professional successes. Honest and personal stories (as much as you can open up like this), describing the ups and downs of private and professional life, will be of great value.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, she proposed a set of supporting questions and topics (e.g. Who are your parents? Your first love? Your opinion on the ASP in Krakow? What do you think about marriage, husband, and children?). Some, but not all of the life stories have been based on these prompts. The biographies have between 7 and 26 pages, and one of them included also photos from different periods of the artist’s life.

Written due to the invitation of Iwona Demko in a specific context (celebrating the Year of Women from the Academy of Fine Arts, but also being a kind of document confirming their presence in the Krakow institution), these life stories are organized to a greater or lesser extent around the academy. The academy thus becomes an important point of reference. It might not have resounded so clearly if the life stories had been recalled in different circumstances. Moreover, the academy – as it is clear in the stories of the artists over 40 – is not a friendly place to women and their creativity.<sup>10</sup> All the more so, their presence in the artworld and their professional activity in this

<sup>7</sup> T. Miller, *Doing Narrative Research? Thinking Through the Narrative Process* [in:] J. Woodiwiss, K. Smith, K. Lockwood (eds.), *Feminist Narrative Research: Opportunities and Challenges*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2017, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> The Year of Women from the Academy of Fine Arts (Rok Kobiet z ASP) was proposed by Iwona Demko to celebrate the 100-year presence of women in the academy (including its first female student, Zofia Baltarowicz-Dzielińska). The celebratory year was officially established on 20 November 2018 by the Senate of the ASP in Krakow and celebrated throughout 2019, ending in March 2020.

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.facebook.com/events/3038786912805433/> (accessed: 1.08.2020).

<sup>10</sup> The oldest artist describes her experiences with the academy that took place in the second half of the 1980s, four artists – in the 1990s, three of them – in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and one – in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Of course, these 30 years of difference do not mean only changes in the artist’s approach to institutions, but it is also an indication of changes in the institution itself, although these changes are much slower.

field should be considered as an achievement, a kind of success (despite the ambiguous nature of the latter concept in the artworld). Finally, the shape these stories took, is combined with the professional situation of female artists and the course of their professional career: those who had the opportunity to devote most of their adult lives to creating art devote more space to art in their stories than those for whom art is just an occasional practice. In this context, the chosen form of life story – if it is more like a tale about getting to professional success or more like a story about everyday life where art is important, but it is only one occupation among others (which is more often) – is also reflexion of their very actual image of their own life.

As I am aware of the variety of approaches and the rich tradition of life stories' studies,<sup>11</sup> I use the terms “life story” and “autobiographical story” interchangeably, treating both expressions to mean stories which the authors wrote about their own lives in a specific order, with an emphasis on certain events or affective states. These stories are therefore self-reflective, purposeful, and structured by their authors. And these stories as autobiographical can be read “as a creative, interpretive act.”<sup>12</sup> Although life stories are often elicited in the course of interviews and then written down by the researcher, I use this term to refer also to the stories which the authors have written down on their own in order to emphasise the lively, personal, intimate, and sometimes even confessional dimension of those texts, which are usually not literary, and have not been professionally edited. They also retain, to a greater or lesser extent, their quite direct character, typical for spoken language (which often results from the fact that spoken/written language is for the artist a secondary tool of expression, as they tend to express themselves foremost in more professionalised visual language). What is more, the stories have not been published,<sup>13</sup> contain many grammatical and punctuation errors, and their status is still fairly private (although they were written with the intention of making them available to a wider audience).

The analysed life stories were submitted by visual artists – women who are actively involved in creating various kinds of art: paintings, graphics, illustrations, drawings, book designs, animated films, installations, and objects. The youngest of them was 28 years old when she wrote her life story, while the oldest was 53. All of the artists have graduated from the ASP in Krakow; some of them still live in the city, others have moved (but all of them remain in Poland).

In interpretation of these autobiographical stories, I draw upon the findings developed within the fields of feminist narrative research,<sup>14</sup> feminist qualitative data

<sup>11</sup> B. Harrison (ed.), *Life Story Research*, vol. 1–4, Sage, Los Angeles–London–New Delhi–Singapore–Washington 2009; J.L. Peacock, D.C. Holland, *The Narrated Self: Life Stories in Process*, “Ethos” 1993, no. 21 (4), pp. 367–383.

<sup>12</sup> S. Smith, *The Impact of Critical Theory on the Study of Autobiography: Marginality, Gender, and Autobiographical Practice*, “a/b: Auto/Biography Studies” 1987, no. 3 (3), pp. 1–12.

<sup>13</sup> September 2021.

<sup>14</sup> J. Woodiwiss, *Challenges for Feminist Research: Contested Stories, Dominant Narratives and Narrative Frameworks* [in:] J. Woodiwiss, K. Smith, K. Lockwood (eds.), *Feminist Narrative*

analysis,<sup>15</sup> and life story research.<sup>16</sup> It was important for me to understand the life story as a story told from the perspective of a specific moment in the author's present. This means that life is reinterpreted and appropriately structured by means of references to the current biographical situation (e.g. getting out of sickness, presenting works at an exhibition after a long absence in the artworld, gaining a respected position in a public institution). It shapes the way the past is seen and described (in the above-mentioned examples: as a constant struggle for one's health; as a search for oneself in various roles - from a care provider to a person developing their own passions; as going through the stages of artistic initiation). Thus, a life story tells us a lot about the current situation of its author and the issues she considers to be important in her life at the moment.<sup>17</sup>

The feminist perspective plays an important role in my analysis. I focus on the specificity of the female experience, exploring the aspects of life that the artists see as part of their female socialisation and identities. Paying special attention to the inequalities and injustices experienced by women, I also look for feminist values: sisterhood, solidarity, and care. Using this perspective, I explore the categories of uncertainty and struggle, which I consider to be extremely important not only for the analysed stories, but also for feminist theories, including feminist research on autobiographical stories. For me – using this perspective also means investigating these texts, what was passed over or marginalised. It also means a need for an appreciation of female effort to become an artist and not to give up on this.

## Uncertainty and fears

When reading the stories, I noticed that the authors expressed many doubts. Some of them diminished their own achievements or competences, others stated that men, mainly members of artistic circles or their families, undermined their decisions. Marta (46), a graphic artist,<sup>18</sup> wrote as follows:

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*Research...*, op. cit.; L. Stanley, B. Temple, *Narrative Methodologies: Subjects, Silences, Re-Readings and Analyses* [in:] J. Goodwin (ed.), *Sage Biographical Research*, vol. 2: *Biographical Interviews, Oral Histories and Life Narratives*, Sage, London 2012, pp. 47–54. .

<sup>15</sup> C. Kitzinger, *Feminist Approaches* [in:] C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium, D. Silverman (eds.), *Qualitative Research Practice*, Sage, London–Thousand Oaks–New Delhi 2007, pp. 113–128.

<sup>16</sup> S. Smith, J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis–London 2001; D. Goodley, R. Lawthom, P. Clough, M. Moore (eds.), op. cit.; M. Erben, *The Problem of Other Lives: Social Perspectives on Written Biography*, "Sociology" 1993, no. 27 (1), pp. 5–25.

<sup>17</sup> G. Rosenthal, *Badania biograficzne*, trans. A. Pawlak [in:] K. Kaźmierska (ed.), *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii. Antologia tekstów*, Nomos, Kraków 2012, p. 282.

<sup>18</sup> Although the artists' biographies I received were not anonymous, I wanted to focus more on the common aspects of their life experiences – the things that connected them – rather than on individual differences, which is why I only mention their names, age (as of 2019) and (if possible) their dominant field of visual arts.

After receiving criticism from a male professor that I really respected and valued, I gave up. Even now, I still miss painting.

Anna (44), a multimedia artist, skipped drawing classes because “her male teacher liked her lace top a bit too much.” Ewa (40), a painter, was shamed and scolded by her own mother when she draw a naked couple touching each other when she was 10 years old. Criticism from a teacher or parent, or sexist attitudes experienced at school or academy, even if they ultimately do not result in the artists abandoning her creative endeavours, may change the nature of her works, but also undermine her convictions, provoke doubts, and even humiliation. The above-quoted statements reveal that experience of negation, questioning and rejection of the current work (both by others and by herself as a result of the behaviour of others) is always carefully noted and remembered, and probably also associated with shame. Marta has switched her field of art, and Anna made a similar decision. Ewa, without her mother’s support, felt – as she later wrote – uncertain in dealing with her peers and “uncomfortable” when she started to menstruate. Uncertainty is understood here as the lack of conviction that you are doing something correctly or that whatever you do, you can do it, even if you make mistakes. To a large extent, it is caused by the artist not receiving support from people that she values, or, as in the case of Anna, is connected with desire to avoid unpleasant contact with a teacher. The artists described their own actions as reviewed by important Others whose opinion affects their sense of confidence (or lack thereof) in their own capabilities and their self-perception. This way of seeing the reality and the people who are embedded in it and valued by young female artists-to-be (or artists that are only starting their artistic careers) is connected with what Carol Gilligan identified, in reference to adolescence of girls, as “the loss of their ordinary courage.” This phenomenon is linked to separating girls’ voices from their experiences; the moment when the girls stop saying what they know, and, with time, stop being aware of what they know. They experience their own feelings as unreal or fabricated. It leads to privatisation of their experiences and weakens the development of women’s political voice and presence in the public sphere<sup>19</sup>.

When female artists, especially young ones who aren’t well-entrenched within the artworld, whose rules clearly define the codes and behaviours acceptable in given circumstances, “speak, using their own voices,” they are often disqualified and rejected. When authority figures, first parents and later teachers, undermine and downplay a female artist’s version of creativity, they indicate that they do not trust her way of seeing the world and do not treat it seriously. In consequence, such figures strip the female artist’s experiences of their importance within the external context. What is more, by treating female artists as objects (as in the case of Anna), those important Others discourage them from engaging in art, indicating that their bodies, as female bodies (marked by sexuality), are more interesting than their work.

<sup>19</sup> C. Gilligan, *Innym głosem. Teoria psychologiczna a rozwój kobiet*, trans. B. Szelewa, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2015, p. 28.

In the absence of clear external support, this uncertainty is also internalised by the artists who undermine their own work. This is how Grażyna (43), a painter, put it:

There was also a chance to learn traditional techniques, [artist's surname] was an assistant back then; he was good at realistic painting, while I still didn't feel like an artist, more like an imitator of reality, and I really wanted to learn how to create paintings resembling photographs.

Ewa also had doubts about her own capacities:

She asked me if I wanted to work with them. I was a bit afraid that I would disappoint them, but they gave me the best words of support.

The state of “not feeling like an artist” and worrying that one may turn out to be a “disappointment” may be linked to the need to constantly improve one's skills and not believing that one is good enough. It seems, however, that self-depreciation is particularly closely linked to gender in the context of acquiring professional competences and may be related to the fact that an artist is still commonly imagined as a man (this belief is reinforced by Polish art academies, including the Krakow one, which I will describe in detail below). Female artist often internalise the belief that their professions are inherently “male” (as it happens with other jobs which have been most frequently performed by men<sup>20</sup> or technical professions, such as an electrician or industrial mechanic<sup>21</sup>). They are not certain if they are up to the task, and often base their assessment of their competences on the opinions of others.

Kirstin Hulme points to two reasons explaining why women are still underrepresented in trades and industrial occupations. In my opinion, these factors may also explain why women occupy worse and less privileged positions in the artworld.<sup>22</sup> Hulme explains it as follows:

The first is that the work itself is gendered or sex-typed. It is viewed by most people, almost without second thought, as men's work. The trades and industrial occupations are, by their very nature, understood to be masculine because those who fill them ‘have a gender and their gender rubs off on the jobs they mainly do’.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> S. Graham, *A Gender Paradox: Discourses on Women in UN Peacekeeping*, “Irish Studies in International Affairs” 2016, no. 27, pp. 165–187.

<sup>21</sup> K. Hulme, *Making the Shift from Pink Collars to Blue Ones: Women's Non-Traditional Occupations*, “Labour / Le Travail” 2006, no. 57 (Spring), pp. 143–165.

<sup>22</sup> M. Krajewski, F. Schmidt (eds.), *Wizualne niewidzialne. Sztuki wizualne w Polsce. Stan, rola i znaczenie*, Raport końcowy, 2017, <http://wizualneniewidzialne.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Wizualne-Niewidzialne-Raport-kon%CC%81cowy-v2017.pdf> (accessed: 1.08.2020); A. Gromada, D. Budacz, J. Kawalerowicz, A. Walewska, *Little Chance to Advance? An Inquiry into the Presence of Women at Art Academies in Poland*, 2015, [https://www.academia.edu/32792028/Little\\_Chance\\_to\\_Advance\\_An\\_Inquiry\\_into\\_the\\_Presence\\_of\\_Women\\_at\\_Art\\_Academies\\_in\\_Poland](https://www.academia.edu/32792028/Little_Chance_to_Advance_An_Inquiry_into_the_Presence_of_Women_at_Art_Academies_in_Poland) (accessed: 1.08.2020).

<sup>23</sup> K. Hulme, op. cit., p. 143.

This phenomena influences how female artists choose their fields of activity, especially in the area of traditional arts, such as painting and, in particular, sculpture, which is still seen as “not meant for women,” because it requires physical strength (this stereotype echoes also in the autobiographical stories of the female artists who wanted to study sculpture, but did not decide to apply, because they were afraid that they might not be able to deal with the physical demands of the studies).

Hulme suggests also that there is a second factor explaining the persistent dominance of men in the above-mentioned occupations:

[this factor] is a ‘de-gendering’ of women as women by the workers themselves, unions, and the labour market. Women often believe that gender should be an irrelevant factor in the workplace and that all jobs should be unisex. As a consequence of this de-gendering, they are able to ignore sex-typing.<sup>24</sup>

The same is true in the case of visual arts. Female artists, even when they practice feminist art or explore topics related to female experience, often avoid referring to their works as women’s or feminist art. On the one hand, it results from the desire to see their art in broader terms, as touching upon more “universal” topics, and on the other hand, it is associated with the fear that the artist might get trapped in the female or feminist “ghetto,” get pigeon-holed, and negatively affect their artistic development (in the world in which art created by men is privileged and where art is believed to have no gender – there is simply good and bad art).

The issue of lack of faith in one’s own abilities and constant uncertainty, which some artists manage to overcome only with great effort and support of others, is also explored by the pioneering report titled *Little Chance to Advance? An Inquiry into the Presence of Women at Art Academies in Poland* (2015). Taking into consideration the specific nature of art academies, the research team analysed e.g. differences between the attitudes of male and female students towards their own artistic endeavours, or the support that male and female students receive from the academic faculties (bearing in mind that the higher the position in the academic hierarchy, the more likely it is to be occupied by men). In doing so, the team formulated, inter alia, the following statement:

As a key element of self-concept, confidence is an important asset in practically every sphere of life. Yet, in the world of art it might gain additional significance. Being an artist requires an extraordinary dose of confidence, trust in the merit of one’s work, the ability to present one’s vision and to sustain criticism, which in art is likely to be more frequent and more personal. If over twice as many female students declare that they do not believe in their skills, this situation is likely to affect the positions they aspire to and apply for as well as the way they are perceived by others.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 144.

<sup>25</sup> A. Gromada et al., op. cit., p. 39.



It is therefore not surprising that both young and older female artists admit to feeling insecure in their biographical stories. In fine art academies (related to visual arts), most executive posts are occupied by men who constitute the majority of professors.<sup>26</sup> Young women don't have female role models and rarely receive the same level of support as their male colleagues, etc. Although this situation is gradually, albeit very slowly, changing (the number of female faculty members is growing), the model of a male artist is still the dominant and most visible one. Unable to reject this false universalisation of male role models, the women who graduate from fine art academies remain without consolation in their doubts and uncertainty, and, despite e.g. excellent education, often question their own abilities.<sup>27</sup>

The uncertainty which is noticeable in the women's life stories reveals their worries and fears and point to a sense of insecurity and fragility of their existential situation (not only in its material and professional, but also personal and private dimension, as they are often inseparable from one another). Even when insecurity ceased to dominate their everyday lives, it still remained a familiar and common experience (instilled in women not only as part of their socialisation to femininity, but also artistic education). Even in adulthood, it is difficult for women to completely eliminate this feeling when working as artists, as men are much more visible in the field of art.<sup>28</sup> What is more, even when women become artists, their work is still treated as an activity conducted in a male field.<sup>29</sup>

## Uncertainty and capabilities

This above-described uncertainty, which has been made reflexive and has been in some way processed (through therapy, art itself, improvement of one's financial situation, or thanks to support provided by people close to the artist), appears also in a slightly different version in the analysed autobiographies. Not as uncertainty that makes it more difficult to act and overwhelms the artist, but as uncertainty that becomes a motivation for searching for something new, for a change perceived as an opportunity, and a sign of acceptance of doubts and mistakes, which, paradoxically, give artists strength. This kind of uncertainty was describe by Ann Snitow as the force that defined her way of life, but also constituted the value that allowed and encouraged her to write and engage in feminist activism. It forced her to question herself and deal with unpredictability of the future, which necessitated seeking new

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Of course, the phenomena is also affected by such factors as a strong presence of gender stereotypes during socialisation, the promotion of "traditional" gender roles in school education, and the anti-gender policy of the Polish Catholic Church, which plays an important role in Poland.

<sup>28</sup> M. Krajewski, F. Schmidt, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. I. Pitti, *Being Women in a Male Preserve: An Ethnography of Female Football Ultras*, "Journal of Gender Studies" 2019, no. 28 (3), pp. 318–329.

solutions, tools, and ways to change the social reality, but also cooperate with others. It kept her in constant motion. From this perspective, uncertainty is presented as a kind of ambiguity, an indeterminacy that ensures freedom of action, rather than paralysing numbness.<sup>30</sup>

And although Snitow described this category in the context of feminist activism, I believe that her approach can be fruitfully applied to the analysis of the life stories of female visual artists. In such contexts, uncertainty is identified in situations which require considering various possibilities, looking for the best solutions, imagining different future scenarios, and adopting responsibility while simultaneously adjusting the chosen forms of action to the currently experienced situation. This conceptualisation of uncertainty is well-illustrated by the story of Małgorzata (47), a graphic artist, who, after graduating from high school was not admitted to her chosen art academy, and a year later sat down for an entrance exam in another city, but ultimately walked out of it, disappointed with the way the exam was conducted. Still, she tried for the third time next year, this time successfully.

I remember asking my parents if I could try again. They, for their part, were concerned and said that they were afraid that I had given up my dreams. They were great support for me.

Agnieszka (39), a graphic artist, noted that uncertainty inspired her to experiment, try innovative solutions, allowed her to take into account various forms of activities, gave her freedom and openness to new possibilities, and encouraged her to think outside the box. Importantly, just as in the case of Małgorzata, uncertainty can be seen as positive, because she received the support of other artists, who showed her understanding and accepted her choices. The support of her loved ones and colleagues also allowed Anna to switch freely between different fields of arts, enjoy her own work, and look to the future without fear. It allowed for experimentation and “[seeking] new forms of self-expression.”

In the life stories, the latter kind of uncertainty is noticeable when female artists talk about the support they received from family, friends, institutions (scholarships, permanent jobs), teachers or other female artists, and situations in which they were recognised at the academy, won competitions, and had their works shown at exhibitions. In such safe conditions, uncertainty, associated with vulnerability, turned into acceptance of the possibility of having doubts, creating a space marked by indeterminacy which allows the artist to go beyond the usual patterns and boldly chart new paths. Of course, these conditions are not always permanent and stable, but, even if only temporarily, they reassure the artists in their choices, convincing them that their decisions were correct. Importantly, this conceptualization of uncertainty usually comes after the artists rewrite their lives into an autobiographical story. Looking

<sup>30</sup> A. Snitow, *Feminizm niepewności. Dziennik rodzaju*, trans. M. Bokiniec, Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa, Warszawa 2018, p. 392.

back they see their own experiences differently – and as more meaningful, that have brought them to where they are currently.<sup>31</sup>

As the analysed stories demonstrate, undermining female experiences, treating them as unreliable, uninteresting, iconoclastic or failed, is an element of female-artistic socialisation – part of the process of becoming a female artist and learning to function in this role. But the uncertainty that leaves the female artist vulnerable becomes much less threatening when the artist receives support from important Others. And although in the artworld, male artists' self-esteem is also often challenged, their belief in their own value as artists is higher than that of their female counterparts already during their studies.<sup>32</sup> It is also easier for them to emulate the gendered model of a male artist which is respected and cultivated at art academies, both during the studies and in their further artistic careers. Thus, the nature of the uncertainty accompanying male artists is less ambiguous, and more often translates into openness to experimentation and creative doubt, rather than into questioning (by themselves and others) of their artistic choices, ideas, and actions.

## Struggle

Struggle is the second dominant category with a strong presence in all of the female artists' life stories, although in each case it is explored in a different way. It is related to several biographical situations, including:

- a) A refusal to accept the male artist as a universal model.
- b) At work, striving to attain position which has been previously treated as a “post for men”.
- c) Contracting an illness or dealing with an illness of a relative.

Struggle results from disagreement with the existing or projected situation. It means taking actions aimed at improving the quality of life of the female artists, so whenever struggle is evoked the world refers primarily to its individual dimension. It is a struggle for something – when an artist wants something better or different than she has/receives, but also a struggle against something – a person, institution, or situation that has in some way worsened the artist's way of life or has made it more complicated/difficult. In analysing their own lives from the vantage point of a given moment, the authors of the biographies noted the importance of both of these types of struggle, and wrote about the associated agency. They indicated that there was a need to take action, even if it was not possible to implement, and emphasised the effects of changes which appeared when they made relevant decisions, even if it became noticeable at different times. Their lives were full of situations in which they were forced to fight for their values and for the opportunity to be an artist (persistence in pursuing one's goals seem to be one of the most important qualities of actions

<sup>31</sup> Cf. G. Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

<sup>32</sup> A. Gromada et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 34–35.

undertaken by female artists). And although various female artists differed in their assessment of the struggle – seeing it as difficult, exhausting, but also full of hope – the struggle is a force that, to a large extent, organises their life experience, demonstrating that the work of a visual artist requires effort, tedious work, courage to speak and act in accordance with one’s values, keeping a watchful eye both on their own needs and on possible external threats. To struggle means also to exert effort in a persistent – even if not always continuous and consistent – manner which is sometimes full of sacrifices, but sometimes also full of support or happiness. It means striving to occupy and maintain a position in the artistic field that remains dominated by the values of the patriarchal world.

Ewa’s life story shows clearly how difficult it is to keep creating art. In her adult life, Ewa has entered into a romantic relationship with a much older man, who shared her profession, and she sacrificed her art for this relationship:

I defended my diploma in 2004. I did well, I even got a medal for it. However, one I finished my studies, painting took a bit of a backseat. Sometimes I painted something at home, but [the man’s name] was involved in so many endeavours, which he also dragged me to, that I painted less and less frequently.

After parting ways with that man, who, as she claims, thought her a lot, but also “in some way deprived [her] of her independence”, she entered into a relationship with another partner who would later become her husband and father to her children: “I started painting again. I would submit my works to competitions – with poor results.” Then, she became pregnant and gave birth to twins. Later, she went back to painting again:

It wasn’t until the girls were about a year, or a year and a half, that I started thinking about painting once more. But because of all this time that I wasn’t painting, it was as if my hands had forgotten how to do it. As if I was starting to learn everything from the beginning.

She was twice encouraged to paint by other women – other female artists and gallery owners. Thanks to their support, she began to regain some of her self-confidence and create again. Ewa’s story shows a long process of becoming a painter (fighting with oneself and others to be able to paint). It indicates that an artistic experience must include ordinary life experiences related to work, gaining one’s autonomy from parents, starting a family, and finding one’s place within or outside the framework of the traditional female roles. Finally, other women became part of this story, reaching out in solidarity, offering help, believing in her and giving her their support. Ewa’s biography also shows that it is easier for men to pursue their passions and callings, and that despite romantic or family relationships, they always find time for work. It is the woman who adjusts to their needs. For her, any attempt to realise her own autonomy, enjoy her freedom and fulfil her passions becomes a struggle, a fight for scraps of free time, which often ends with letting go of making art, often simply out of fatigue (for women, the need for self-fulfilment is easily transferred to care and

organisational activities). Combining this need for self-realisation with art required not only the support of other women, but also dealing with more basic duties, such as taking care of children. Only then, Ewa had time and chance to paint.

## Struggle with the current artist's model

When describing their studies, the artists very often recalled situations involving male lecturers who tried to convince them that as women they were not meant to practice art, who questioned their ideas or abilities, and did not try to understand and support their ways of creating and performing art. Marta wrote that studies were not easy for her, as she had to

[...] face many critical comments from serious, fairly elderly professors. It was even more difficult, because there were these long-bearded old men everywhere around me, and no female support.

Something similar happened to Agnieszka after her graduation:

[...] my fellow male graphic artists tried to make women realise that they are physically weaker and too delicate, and, in addition, will probably get married soon and will not have the time and determination to do graphic arts.

A model artist that personifies such features as strength, stubbornness, individualism, abstract thinking, and self-confidence is, in accordance to the attitudes still promoted at art academies, a man. He is the one who has time to devote himself fully to artistic work, remains independent and can also ruthlessly sacrifice everything for the sake of art. The romantic tradition also plays an important role in developing and maintaining this archetype,<sup>33</sup> which is particularly persistent in Poland. According to the tradition, a rebel-artist is an individualist that fights for his ideals against the whole world. He may be misunderstood, but he is ruthless and uncompromising. He fulfils his goals with conviction. He has the right to reject social norms and obligations in the name of higher values he professes in art. In the case of this male model, the most important thing is the artist's "ego," his way of perceiving reality, his vision. What is more, he has the strength and the necessary support of other male artists who, like him, create "important" art, but also do not let themselves be distracted by matters of everyday life (which is in line with the dominant mode of male socialization in Poland in which a man learns to be a "leader" or the "head of the family," learns to lead the group, but does not get involved in ordinary matters of its everyday life<sup>34</sup>). He is autonomous, independent, and self-reliant.

<sup>33</sup> M. Janion, "...I święci kanonier ostatni" [in:] eadem. *Prace wybrane. Romantyzm i jego media*, vol. 4, ed. M. Czermińska, Universitas. Kraków 2001, p. 198.

<sup>34</sup> It is one of the dominant concepts of masculinity in Poland and, of course, not the only one. There are more discourses on masculinity, although each of them has a different visibility; cf. K. Lennon, *Gender and Knowledge*, "Journal of Gender Studies" 1995, no. 4 (2), p. 135.

On the other hand, when female artists write about their lives, they focus on relationships. Their writing, as women's writing, is part of "the community of experiences", and their voices cooperate with other subjects' voices.<sup>35</sup> When describing their professional paths, the artists talk about their parents and grandparents, romantic relationships and friendships. They write about their children and female colleagues, devoting space to the description of professors and other female artists who inspired them or influenced their lives in a very significant way. This construction of the narratives is in part influenced by the prompts proposed by Demko which included questions about other people who were important in the female artists' lives. Still, when they are introduced, the artists do not merely describe their relations (what they did together, where did they go together, or how such people raised them, etc.), but also talk about their gratitude, influence, and support. They identify the presence of such people in their lives by categorising the relationships that developed between them, even temporarily, emphasising their own situations in relation to others and with others, within the social world. These are not stories created as autobiographies of outstanding individuals who owe their own success only to themselves, their own uncompromising attitude or any special calling that elevates them above others. These life stories can be seen as an alternative to the well-known narratives of the "Great Artists" that have dominated Polish culture since the Romantic era (from the national poets – Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki – to painters Jan Matejko, Jacek Malczewski, or in more contemporary contexts, such artists as Tadeusz Kantor, or Jerzy Nowosielski). What is more, the female artists write directly about their struggles against the dominant narrative of a male genius dominating at the Academy of Fine Arts and within artistic circles,<sup>36</sup> against the concept of male greatness,<sup>37</sup> and the male role models that supposedly define art and artistic choices:

Grażyna:

The professor [surname] at the Academy of Fine Arts used to say that "you cannot paint with one hand and stir the soup with the other." Nothing could be further from the truth. I have created a lot of great works in the kitchen and cooked a lot of tasty meals.

Anna:

The professor used to say that a child sucks all talent out of a painter, and that painters who are mothers end their careers. In my case, it was always the opposite, pregnancies, deliveries and children resulted in intensification of creative activities. I never wanted to give in to what [the professor's surname] said.

<sup>35</sup> A. Grzemska, *Matki i córki w polu autobiograficznym*, "Teksty Drugie" 2018, no. 6, p. 79.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. C. Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Abrams Press, New York 2019, pp. 99–103.

<sup>37</sup> L. Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Thirty Years After* [in:] M. Reilly (ed.), *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, Thames & Hudson, London 2020, p. 312.

The refusal to adopt the male behavioural model may be reflected in the art created by the female artists. It can mean that their artistic works include/produce the type of power that is missing from the artists' everyday lives. As Beata (53), a painter, notes:

All I had to do was to write an appeal. I couldn't do it. They humiliated me at the dean's office and brought me to tears, so I sat on the curb in front of the Tower and cried. I went home on the first train. I'm not a strong woman, I paint them.

And although in such cases, the struggle takes place mostly in a symbolic dimension, it still becomes a tool for undermining the dominant, normative narrative about the male artist and contributes to creation of cracks in the image of art as an autonomous (in the modernist sense) and non-gendered sphere.

## Struggle for access to "male" positions

Just as the struggle against the domination of male artist models in the world of art, the struggle for access to positions which have been traditionally occupied by men constitutes a conflict with the patriarchal culture.

Although Agnieszka does not write what it cost her to attain her current status, and the post she is holding, she emphasised the importance of this position and begins her life story by mentioning it, although, chronologically, it was not her last achievement:

[...] I took up [this] position [...] after many years of studying and gaining knowledge and experience in the profession, and after passing a difficult exam. [...] I am the first female artist who has been allowed to hold such a demanding and responsible office. Before me, this specialised position has been held only by men.

The artist does not write directly about her struggle, but in further parts of her life story, she mentions that her male colleagues would undermine her competences because she was a woman. When describing her artistic path, she depicts it as full of effort and hard work, which ultimately allowed her to reach such an important post. Małgorzata also earned a prestigious position. After 15 years of working as a freelancer, she secured full-time employment at an academy. She was awarded her habilitation (dr. hab. title) and became a professor two years later:

Working at the Academy gave me the opportunity to spread knowledge from my own perspective, which is also a female perspective, take care of a new generation of students, in the artistic sense, and open a new chapter in science and art at the university level.

As the artist points out, it is important to be able to "share knowledge from a female perspective." Earlier in her autobiographical story, Małgorzata emphasised the role of an important well-established female artist who had a great impact on her:

I can't remember why I took my works to her. I think that the lack of female professors at the academy and the fact that [the artist's name and surname] wrote books were very important to me.

At the ASP in Krakow, during Małgorzata's studies (in the 1990s), there were only few women employed as teachers, and she admits that she has always felt a strong need to seek female role models among artists to share perspectives and experiences. This is why it is so important that after many years she began working as an academic teacher at another university in Krakow, accepting a post that used to be held by men, and getting a chance to become a role model for female art and design students. The artists perceives her appointment to a position which has been previously traditionally perceived as "masculine" as a success. It is also a proof of her diligence, effort, and courage, and indication of the struggle she often had to go through in the culture that rewards male values by treating them as universal.<sup>38</sup>

## Struggle with an illness

The biography of Katarzyna (32), a painter, is an example of a life story affected by an illness, memories of a difficult past, and her attempts to come to terms with what happened. It is a very deliberately written story about recovery,<sup>39</sup> which takes place in the context of the artist's difficult economic situation (she had to move back into her family home several times due to lack of financial resources and was forced to take up physical work as a cleaning lady or a security guard). Katarzyna did not give in to her illness, finding the strength to fight it, thanks to her mother who offered her constant support:

From then on, my mother took care of my health. Tablets in the morning and evening. Mania and depression. Pain and palpitations. Mom was always there and provided me with support. It's a miracle she survived it, and we both came out of it unscathed.

She also found strength to fight her illness in painting, which over time brought her success:

Painting itself makes me feel free and gives me an insight into myself. I look into this space of thought and silence that I am and think. I'm convinced that if it wasn't for my mother and painting, I would have broken down completely.

Although life in the artworld is riddled with uncertainty, often precarious, and very unstable, Katarzyna, just like Beata and Grażyna, who are also struggling with their own serious illnesses, are all convinced that art plays an important role in their lives. They do not give up and constantly find ways to survive as artists. Unable

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<sup>38</sup> C. Criado Perez, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> J. Woodiwiss, op. cit.



to rely on the institutional support in the world of art, they rely on themselves and their relatives. The possibility of creating is worth their sacrifices and persistence. Even when the female artists do not continue struggling at all costs, their persistence and support of Others makes it possible for the act of creating art to become for them a source of strength, sometimes a form of self-therapy, and a source of satisfaction and happiness.

## Conclusions: The feminist dimension of the autobiographical story

I treat the above-listed two categories: uncertainty and struggle as feminist and emancipatory values. Although the analysed life stories are not focused only on these two types of affects and experiences, they remain under their strong influence. By showing how uncertainty can be interpreted in these autobiographies (in reference to what kind of experiences), I demonstrated its systemic nature, as undermining the voices of girls and women is a constant element of the patriarchal culture, here, additionally reinforced by the artworld, in which artistic aspirations and achievements are constantly put to different kinds of tests. On the other hand, adopting the positive re-evaluation of uncertainty proposed by Snitow to the analysis of the life stories, I highlighted the experimental and libertarian aspect of uncertainty, which allows female artists to engage in innovative and non-conformist activities (provided, however, that uncertainty of the first kind is largely eliminated thanks to the support of Others and a stable financial situation, at least for some time; and also uncertainty is perceived as such probably after some time). I would like to draw attention to one more aspect of uncertainty that can be seen by looking at all the collected life stories. The very act of sharing uncertainty, admitting to their mistakes, feeling threatened, experiencing fears, and lack of faith in their own abilities, but also allowing themselves to feel weak, impotent, doubtful, or imagining and producing things that deviate from the norm, artistic patterns or even accepted tastes, allowed women to turn their life stories into emancipatory narratives. The fact that the female artists write about struggling with (broadly interpreted) uncertainty makes their female autobiographical stories relatable to many artists, including young ones who are just starting their own struggles with the artworld and everyday life. Although uncertainty may be sometimes embarrassing, it is also a very ordinary feeling, and in this dimension, it has great feminist potential. The life stories marked by uncertainty demonstrate that change is possible, and that female artists may follow their own artistic choices, although it may be associated with some difficulties. Such perception of uncertainty is combined with opposition to the neoliberal values that determine the individualistic path of an artistic career which celebrated an individual success.<sup>40</sup> The presence of uncertainty in the life stories of the female artists, and the fact that it is named and identified as an important emotion occurring in everyday life, make it possible to no-

<sup>40</sup> Cf. C. Arruzza, T. Bhattacharya, N. Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, Verso, London 2019.

tice such patterns and motifs in the life stories that may seem familiar, ordinary, and relevant to many other women who want to develop artistic careers. In consequence, art loses some of its mythical, exclusive, individualistic, and elevated dimension. If uncertainty is a part of life for female artists who, just like other people, experience it and boldly talk about it, it may cease to be seen as an area reserved only for the initiated (with appropriate economic and/or cultural capital). Choosing not to escape from uncertainty (in both of its dimensions), the female artists also shape their autobiographical stories in opposition to the dominant narratives about great male artists.

Their autobiographies show often how private life full of care of others and also filled with care which they experience when women are its subjects – is an equally important, equally legitimate way of realizing oneself as an artist – as in the case of the model of an artist as a loner or as a fighter for his own autonomy from the expectations of society. Moreover, the model focused on caring and mindfulness of not only one's own but also others needs – in this context seems to have greater power to rearrange the social imagination, because it is more strongly embedded in society, and it can be a tool for recognizing affects that bother people and naming for their difficult experiences. Researching life stories of female artists not only makes this women's writing more visible, but also reveals and to some extent disseminates the values behind it. Analysed life stories can be also interpreted as a won fight with powerful art institutions: despite many unpleasant experiences, systemic symbolic violence or lack of female authorities female artists still keep creating art, do not give up. And in this context their stories seem to be emancipatory too.

The here-discussed life stories also indicate that struggle is commonplace in the artists' daily lives. Even if the family, class, and health situation allows an artist to find her own space in the artworld quite easily, gender prejudices (attitudes of professors, cultural patterns which present artists as men, art institutions dominated by men, etc.) force her to either take up a fight or give up on her chosen goals (the issue of earnings is, of course, an important aspect of this struggle, but very often the possibility of living off art, its sales, exhibitions, projects, and not just engage with it in the sphere of education, is also tied to gender<sup>41</sup>). In the world that universalises a white, middle-class heterosexual man, and his expectations and needs, even the mere act of caring for herself, and recognising and following her own aspirations, may turn out to be quite a challenge for a female artist. Therefore, even if not identified as such by the authors, their fight for themselves within the artworld (fought on many levels, usually intertwined), for the possibility of being active artists, for space for their own art and ways of seeing the world, is, in my opinion, a feminist struggle. Emancipatory changes are also noticeable in the more long-term perspective. The female artists gain strength and self-confidence, share their experiences with other women, are able to

<sup>41</sup> Cf. K. Sikorska, *The Need for Visibility: Working Modes of Contemporary Female Visual Artists*, "View: Theories and Practices of Visual Culture" 2018, no. 21, <https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2018/21-invisible-labor/the-need-for-visibility.-working-modes-of-contemporary-female> (accessed: 1.08.2020).

support each other and act together, practising solidarity with other women and other disadvantaged people.

Paradoxically, the autobiographies of the female artists indicate that their weakness turns out to be their strength – e.g. the ability to recognise their own fears, unpreparedness for class promotion, and concern for others that distracts them from the pursuit of individual success. And although in a patriarchal culture such aspects may define weakness, they also define the framework of the struggle that female artists content with in their daily lives. It is a struggle that contrasts them with traditional male cultural patterns and which results in lives led in a manner that is consistent with the artists' own values, establishing and reinforcing new female ways of being an artist. When some air is let into the male artist model and women share life stories describing different trajectories of artistic careers, showing how they have freed themselves from the male norms, it results in creation of emancipatory stories, whose presence in the public sphere is necessary to change not only the discourse and institutions of the artworld, but also social circulation of the knowledge and cultural hierarchies of the values they replicate.

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