

POLSKI UNIWERSYTET NA OBCZYŹNIE
W LONDYNIE

ZESZYTY NAUKOWE

SERIA TRZECIA, NR 10, 2022

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EVERY REVOLUTION NEEDS FEMALE ARTISTS – ABOUT THE DANCE DURING POLISH WOMEN’S STRIKE IN 2020

On 22nd October 2020 the Constitutional Tribunal in Poland issued a horrid sentence regarding total ban on pregnancy termination in cases of severe and irreversible foetal abnormalities. This decision polarized Polish society even further, and hundreds of thousands of Polish women and men hit the streets. The protests took place in big cities and small towns and were very peaceful. The protesters’ faces, however, clearly showed dissatisfaction. The events were covered not only by Polish but also international media. BBC wrote about the Polish situation:

The decision means terminations are only valid in cases of rape or incest, or to protect the mother’s life. Opponents say it puts women at risk by forcing them to carry a baby that is unlikely to survive birth. But supporters insist it will prevent the abortion of fetuses diagnosed with Down’s syndrome. The ruling cannot be appealed against but only comes into force after it is published in the official gazette though it is not clear when that will happen (BBC, 2020).

The Constitutional Tribunal published the official ruling on 27 January 2021. It stated that the so-called 1993 Abortion Act was unconstitutional. The moment the sentence was published, all hospitals where abortions had been car-

ried, were banned from continuing the procedure. The eyes of the whole world turned away for a moment from the global pandemic and focused on members of Polish Women's Strike who openly opposed this decision. „The New York Times”, CBS and CNN wrote and spoke about it. The events of the end of 2020 and beginning of 2021 encouraged writers, journalists and columnists to discuss again the topics connected to women's rights.

MANY FACES OF THE STRIKES

It is worth noticing that Polish Women's Strike was created a couple years before the before mentioned Constitutional Tribunal ruling. This feminist social movement was established in 2016 in order to protest against the rejection of „Save Women” act proposal by Polish lower house of the Parliament. The world got to know the Polish Women's Strike thanks to the Black Protest – a black umbrella became the most popular symbol of the manifestations. This random object appeared when most protests in most towns and cities happened during rain. Later, an umbrella was placed e.g. on posters encouraging to participate in Polish Women's Strike. At that time, demonstrations were held in 147 Polish cities simultaneously.

Apart from demonstrations, the strike also organized many different actions. In Poznań, a group of bicycle riders rode through the city carrying banners with „Riding for abortion! You are not alone!”. Car protests (due to the pandemics) as well as so called walks blocking streets and pedestrian crossing became extremely popular all around the country. Candles and flowers were laid in front of regional Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) Party headquarters and churches to symbolize dissatisfaction with the decision made (Wójcik, 2020). All these actions were noticed and covered by international media. German broadcaster Deutsche Welle informed about another action connected with the strike:

Employees across Poland took part in a nationwide strike on Wednesday to protest a controversial top court ruling on abortion. The Women's Strike, which has been leading the opposition to the bill, called the strike under the slogan: „We are not going to work”. Local media reported on female and male employees of public institutions, universities and private firms, taking a day off work to show solidarity with the protesters (DW, 2020).

All these activities were taken to involve as many people as possible in order for the government to notice that united society has great power.



1. Polish Women's Strike, Wrocław, 26 X 2020; photo Łukasz Wesołowski

Women blocked Poznań. The centre is jammed. The tam driver applauds, gays dance Polonez (Żytnicki, 2020) – it was a title of the article published in the „Gazeta Wyborcza”. It became trending in the social media. Young people who were the majority of protesting citizens in Poland liked it at once. Paweł Kielcer, author of satirical music pieces, included it in a song written about the protesters. Growing popularity of the article also meant higher approval of polonez among young people. This Polish national dance was performed a couple of times during the demonstrations. We could say that this spontaneous action united protest participants even more and allowed for a breath of fresh air in the horrifying reality.

Tense situation in our country still creates space for the artists to present their original skills. To quote Swedish philosopher Brian Holmes (2009, p. 75): *What we look for in art is a different way to live, a fresh chance at coexistence*, which also means that everyone can manifest their opinions in different ways. Various cultural phenomena appear around Polish Women's Strike which make it stronger and support its ideas. These ideas become more popular because of art. This way new social movements are created but also new trends in art. In the article, I focus on dancing, where the movement is the most significant and carries with itself incredible aesthetic and symbolic value.

THREE DANCES

Can we present our view through the dance? Can we express anger and rebellion through movement? Let's start with looking at some examples of dance happenings organized during Polish Women's Strike.

On the eight day of the strike, a small group of women showed up not with banners with brave slogans but with fans. It was a dance group who planned a theatrical performance. They used a prop inspired by an original war fan from Far East, whose history is very important in order to understand this dance style. In ancient China women units were trained to carry out special tasks ordered by the rulers. They used secret weapons for the attack. In the reality dominated by men, fans seemed very delicate and gave women the sense of power. The female warriors were trained not only to use this weapon – they also had to learn how to seduce and dance. This was their way to win the trust of the enemies of the state. Pretending to be courtesans, they obtained information and then killed them. Dancing with the fans during the strike was therefore a demonstration of power and disagreement for the reality where women's rights are disrespected.

The same day Izabela Barska-Kaczmarczyk (2020) published a video with a group of dancers performing a group dance. Young women are dressed in black, thigh and non-constraining outfits and have red lightnings (the symbol of the Polish Women's Strike) painted on their bodies along with crooked lines symbolizing scars. We can hear Cynthia Nixon's words in the background of the dance. The famous actor recites a poem by Camille Rainville *Be a Lady They Said* which speaks about contradictory expectations towards women and is tightly linked to the choreography. The dancers present to the audience a full range of emotions: from powerlessness when they lean against each other or fall to the floor to anger which is especially visible in silent scream at the end of the recording. The choreography is based on the aesthetics of modern dance. The style derives from ballet but does not follow its rigid principles which means that the dancer has much more freedom in creating the movement. It is very significant to show emotions, to tell a story skilfully to the audience. The dancers created their own artistic manifesto which was to show their support to the strike as well as express their opinions.

Almost simultaneously, a different recording was posted on the same portal (Pacykowska, 2020). In the beginning, the film summarizes the last events in Poland and informs about public mood. Next, a group of women dressed in



2. Polish Women's Strike, Wrocław, 29 X 2020; photo Łukasz Wesołowski

black and red appears dancing to Christina Aguilera's song *Can't hold us down*. The author of the introduction suggested to pay extra attention to the lyrics – it is a song which wants to unite women in their fight against sexism and unfair treatment. Strong language message is clearly reflected in the dance. The girls with red lightnings painted on their palms perform a very energetic dance routine. They move fast and charismatic, it is Dancehall Queen, a street dance style originating from Jamaica which is characterized by exceptional sensitivity to individual sounds. Dancehall Queen is also very womanly and full of sex appeal. There is anger and willingness to fight on the faces of the dancers as the choreography reflexes the situation to which this dance is a sort of manifesto.

The key element of the strikes was the fact that they were massive, enormous. People experienced such deep dissatisfaction with the Constitutional Tribunal's decision that they decided to stop whatever they were doing and join the protest. Holmes, the philosopher I have already quoted, stated that *artistic activism is affectivism [...] a split from the private self in which each person was formerly enclosed, and from the social order which imposed that particular type of privacy or privation* (Holmes, 2009, p. 75). This observation is very significant because it concerns the mechanism of groups becoming bigger communities. The dancers gave up their subjectivity and became part of the team which is a part of a bigger whole. Rejection of particularism is connected to common power, to the roots of the rebellion.

DANCE AS ENGAGED ART

Incredibly strong relationships are established between people taking part in Polish Women's Strike. These relationships lead to creation of new movements, and in case of dance also to creation of new styles. Such situation took place in Los Angeles in the 1970s when the LGBTQ+ people were pushed to social margin. Wacking/punking was born in underground clubs – very energetic, very sexy and female dance style which was popularized by men. Wacking was expression of freedom, celebration of life and at the same time opposition towards disco culture which pushed any diversity away from the mainstream.

While watching a recording of Dancehall dancers, we need to pay special attention to two gestures. One is a raised fist and the second is an open palm showing „stop” in the direction of the camera. The first one is a symbol of women fighting for their rights, the so called fighting fist, the second one represents the objection towards human rights violation and freedom limitations introduced by politicians. These symbols were incorporated into the dance, emerge from movements and together constitute an integral whole. Dancehall has very specific steps, with own names and origin. The women in the group, being revolutionaries, decided to incorporate into the dance symbols of women's fight for their rights which resulted in creation of a new step, a connection of two different discourses. In the remaining two happenings, the integration with borrowed cultural code is not so clear and visible. However, it can be noticed in fact that particular dance is being used in the protests. This context itself imposes a new dimension on the gestures – passivity in the movement equals sense of powerlessness, and the fan strengthens its meaning as a symbol of femininity and fight.

We need to also note that these three dances are a commentary to the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling. We can, therefore, consider them as socially engaged art. Katarzyna Niziołek (2015, p. 140) writes about this trend:

The artists active in socially engaged art make use of different media from visual to performative art. They do not limit themselves to artistic activities only. They are no strangers to organizational, didactic, documenting, informative and publishing tasks. They are active in the world of arts but also outside it. Because of this institutional, formal and tactical ambiguity, engaged art is defined not through direction, style or convention but through the function. It is a form of criticism aimed at homogeneity of mainstream culture and present power relations. It provides alternative pictures, metaphors and information. Introduces to public discourse voices which were earlier excluded.

The dancers reached wide audience with their actions. The researcher notices that the main assumption of the engaged art is its close connection with life, and inspiration to artistic activities should come directly from the society. Whereas, the spectator facing a piece of art should not have any problem to see this relation. The first condition is fulfilled because the dancers openly join the Women's Strike. More complicated is the question of potential spectators. In case of the fan dance, there are not a lot of doubts because this performance was carried out during the demonstration. However, the recording of the other performances were uploaded to the Internet. How can we see the relation to the Polish Women's Strike? There are in the recording clearly marked symbols such as the graphics of black umbrella and red lightnings drawn on the dancers' bodies. Thanks to these, even if the video is deprived of context descriptions, which can happen in the space of social media, the relationship will be still visible. In this case the rebellion is „the ignitor” to start something much bigger, it is the beginning to introduce some particular signs in our culture and everyday reality. We are already able to decode these symbols and decide what groups use them.

ARTISTS – DANCERS – REBELS

Everyone who has ever been in a hall where dancers practice knows that it is an almost holy space. Practicing this art is usually perceived by the society as trivial entertainment or sport. Practicing instructors and dancers are of different opinion. For them it is a style of life. Dance very often teaches not only awareness of one's body but also self-acceptance, increases self-esteem and helps to establish new relationships with others. The author of *The Affectivist Manifesto* also mentions this feeling at the end of his text:

And so finally we reach the scale of intimacy, of skin, of shared heartbeats and feelings, the scale that goes from families and lovers to people together on a street corner, in a sauna, a living room or a cafe. It would seem that intimacy is irretrievably weighted down in our time, burdened with data and surveillance and seduction, crushed with the determining influence of all the other scales. But intimacy is still an unpredictable force, a space of gestation and therefore a wellspring of gesture, the biological spring from which affect drinks. Only we can traverse all the scales, becoming other along the way. From the lovers' bed to the wild embrace of the crowd to the alien touch of networks, it may be that intimacy and its artistic expressions are what will astonish the twenty-first century (Holmes, 2009, p. 76).

The intimacy mentioned by Holmes is present in all discussed three dances on many different levels. The relation between the dancers was built before, during training, shows or competitions. Next, it moved to virtual world where thousands of people had contact with the artists. Created bond is visible in common ideas, understanding of gesture and word.

Women decided to use dances from different parts of the world to show their solidarity with protesters and emphasize attachment to various cultures – traditional Chinese dance, Dancehall originating in Jamaica and modern dance. They managed to connect Polish Women's Strike with the art of dance, which might seem impossible but it is their own resistance, reaction to reality which they refuse to live in. These groups' dance is a rebellion targeted at authorities and their decisions. We can call this happening a manifesto. Rebellion as a phenomenon does not mean rejecting all and negating reality. These performances bring much more – the need to change for the better.

Dance can be called a silent rebellion. It is not as spectacular as uprising or manifestation but, without doubt, it is the beginning of something great, it gives people the strength to fight. It is a tradition cultivated in slavery, allows to be oneself but most importantly, dance gives people hope for better tomorrow.

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KAŻDA REWOLUCJA POTRZEBUJE ARTYSTEK
– O TAŃCU PODCZAS OGÓLNOPOLSKIEGO
STRAJKU KOBIET W 2020 ROKU

STRESZCZENIE

Autor podejmuje tematykę związaną z wydarzeniem zapoczątkowanym 22 października 2020 roku – Ogólnopolskim Strajkiem Kobiet. Omawiając sytuację, kieruje swą uwagę w stronę tańca, który jest szczególnie interesującym środkiem wyrazu. Jednak w tym obszarze są zauważalne spore braki w literaturze naukowej. Jednym z niewielu specjalistów badającym ten temat jest Brian Holmes, do którego autor się odwołuje. W artykule zostały wyszczególnione trzy przykłady tego, w jaki sposób akty ruchowe mogą wspomóc działania społeczne. Różnorodność przybliżonych prezentacji tanecznych pozwala podkreślić, że taniec jest sztuką zaangażowaną. Trzy opisane performance ruchowe są swego rodzaju komentarzem do wyroku Trybunału Konstytucyjnego. Autor w szczególności uwypukla rolę kobiet jako buntowniczek wobec zaistniałej sytuacji społeczno-politycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, bunt, sztuka, taniec