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## Meetings: Exhibitions of Women's Art Curated by Izabella Gustowska

Exhibitions of women's art,<sup>1</sup> i.e. collective exhibitions which by definition embraced only works by female artists, are counted among the essential artistic phenomena of the 1970s. They were not a brand-new idea, of course, as similar exhibitions began to be organised in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Since then, however, the reasons for putting special emphasis on women's art changed many times, as they were to a large extent dependent on how women's art, as well as women's position in society, were perceived in a given period. Exhibitions organised in the 1970s were inseparably connected with the feminist movement, which was then developing worldwide.<sup>3</sup> This movement laid the ideological foundations for a new type of exhibition even when the female artists and curators of these shows did not consider themselves a part of it. The original strategic aims – which were present practically since such exhibitions had been instituted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and derived from the female artists' perception of themselves as a professional group sharing similar problems – were still important. Yet, in addition, other issues, ones that had almost entirely been absent from such exhibitions in the past, gained in importance, the chief one being the community of experiences arising from being a woman. This, in turn, related to the subject-matter of the exhibited works, which very often pertained to female subjectivity, corporeality and spirituality, as well as to the social roles imposed on women and contested by them.

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1 The essay is based on research carried out in the framework of the grant entitled "History of the exhibitions of women's art in Poland" (National Science Centre grant no. 2013/09/B/HS2/02065).

2 A monograph concerning this phenomenon has yet to be written. The book by Mary Pepchinski, *Feminist Space: Exhibitions and Discourses between Philadelphia and Berlin 1865–1912*, Weimar, 2007, is certainly one of the most interesting publications pertaining to the early exhibitions.

3 See e.g. J. Sorkin, "The Feminist Nomad: The All-Women Group Show", in: *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, eds. C. Butler, L. G. Mark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007, pp. 458–471.

Several exhibitions and publications organised and issued in recent years have attempted to chronicle the connections between art and feminism and to anchor their history in the mainstream account referring to art.<sup>4</sup> Archive research pertaining to those exhibitions and the analysis of their character are an important part of this tendency. Such research attempts, in relation to both the connections between art and feminism and to exhibitions of women's art, are still a novelty in the practice of art history and art-exhibition historiography in Poland. The current essay partakes in this research tendency by proposing an analysis of a similar phenomenon from the art scene in Poland: exhibitions of women's art curated by the Poznań artist Izabella Gustowska organised since the late 1970s until the present day (the first exhibition was in 1978, the most recent one in 2011). The essay presents the results of a primary enquiry into this thus far non-researched curatorial project (this is how I propose to perceive this cycle of exhibitions). It also offers an analysis of how the concept of creating exhibitions showing works by female artists only has evolved over time. What we are dealing with, after all, is an extraordinary project, considering that staging the exhibitions was not a one-off event but an action undertaken consistently, over a period of several years and in changing circumstances, by the same person. Additionally, it must be noted that the circumstances in question embrace not only the artistic development of the artist-cum-curator herself, but also the socio-political situation in Poland and the ongoing feminist debate.

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The first Polish exhibitions of women's art were organised in the year 1978. The one entitled *Trzy kobiety. Ania Bednarczuk, Iza Gustowska, Krynica Piotrowska*<sup>5</sup> (Three women. Ania Bednarczuk, Iza Gustowska, Krynica Piotrowska; Fig. 1) opened at the Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Poznań in February of 1978. In April of the same year, the exhibition *Women's Art* opened at the Galeria PSP Jatki in Wrocław.<sup>6</sup> The character of these shows differed to some extent; a shared element was that they both presented works associated with the already mentioned themes; the manner of selecting the participating women

4 In addition to the aforementioned exhibition *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, cf. e.g. *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism* (Museo de Bellas Artes De Bilbao, Bilbao, 2007) and *Rebelle. Art and Feminism 1969-2009* (Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem, 2009). An interesting analysis of the political dimension of those exhibitions is found in Hilary Robinson's "Feminism Meets the Big Exhibition: Museum Survey Shows since 2005", *On Curating*, May 2016, no. 29, <http://www.on-curating.org/index.php/issue-29-reader/feminism-meets-the-big-exhibition-museum-survey-shows-since-2005.html> [accessed 14 July 2016].

5 The exhibition was open 6–23 February 1978.

6 Both the Polish and English versions of the title are found in the literature on the subject.



**Fig. 1.** *Trzy kobiety. Ania Bednarczuk, Iza Gustowska, Krystyna Piotrowska* [Three women], exhibition catalogue, Galeria Arsenał BWA, Poznań, 1978, Izabella Gustowska's archive

artists was different. The Poznań exhibition was prepared jointly by three artists who were friends. All three were graduates of the State College of Fine Arts in Poznań; the first two were also employed at that college at the time. Years later Krystyna Piotrowska explained: “We discovered that we were exploring an entirely different set of themes than the gentlemen were and through this exhibition we wished to somehow document this community of ours”.<sup>7</sup> The exhibition held in Wrocław, in turn, was initiated and organised by Natalia LL, who decided to exhibit works by four women artists: Carolee Schneemann, Suzy Lake, Noemi Maidan and her own. This exhibition did not feature artistic collaboration, instead, it had an international character as it originated from Natalia LL's earlier endeavours, namely her participation in feminist exhibitions in Europe, her visit to the United States, her personal acquaintance with American artists, and the resulting desire to make the new artistic phenomenon of feminist art, and her own place in it, known in Poland.

Natalia LL failed to continue her actions aimed at promoting feminist art; the Wrocław exhibition remained her only endeavour of this kind. Not so in the case of the two out of three women artists who took part in the Poznań exhibition, namely Izabella Gustowska and Krystyna Piotrowska. The exhibition

<sup>7</sup> Krystyna Piotrowska in the commentary “Kobiece rewolucje” [Female revolutions], by Aleka Polis, 2011, <http://www.obieg.pl/obiegtv/20909> [accessed 14 July 2016].

*Trzy kobiety* was a starting point for two cyclical exhibitions that they have been organising practically until today, entitled *Odbicia* [Reflections] and *Spotkania* [Meetings]. Works by Gustowska and Piotrowska, which reflect their continuing artistic dialogue and friendship, are jointly presented at *Odbicia*.<sup>8</sup> *Spotkania*, in turn, are exhibitions prepared by Izabella Gustowska (initially in cooperation with Krystyna Piotrowska) presenting works of women artists whom she invites to participate.

*Spotkania* is not a closed, precisely defined cycle of exhibitions. At one point, Gustowska began to refer to the exhibitions under her curatorship entitled *Spotkania* with the additional word *Obecność*, i.e. presence, and successive numbers; after a while, however, she discontinued this practice. The resultant exhibitions were *Spotkania – Obecność I* (1987, Galeria Kontakt, Galeria ON, Poznań), *Spotkania – Obecność II* (1989, Galeria ON, Poznań<sup>9</sup>) and *Spotkania – Obecność III* (1992, Ethnographic Museum, BWA “Arsenał”, Galeria ON, Poznań). It is mainly my own interpretative approach to select, from a number of exhibitions of which Gustowska was the curator,<sup>10</sup> those where exclusively works by women were exhibited, i.e. the already mentioned *Trzy kobiety*, as well as *Spotkania – Obecność I* and *III*, *Presence IV – 6 Women / Obecność IV – 6 kobiet* (1994, Galeria La Coupole, Rennes) and *Osiem dni tygodnia* [Eight days of the week] (2011, Galeria 13 muz, Szczecin), and to analyse them under the joint title *Spotkania*. This approach is based on the observation that, in this case, Izabella Gustowska’s actions comprise a consistent project. Even if the artist-cum-curator herself linked its separate elements only in some periods, the analysis carried out from the perspective of time and in the context of her artistic output clearly indicates that these exhibitions are stages of actions in support of women artists that are consistently being carried out by Gustowska. My preference for the title *Spotkania* [Meetings] and not *Obecność* [Presence] results not only from the fact that Gustowska herself tended to use it in the context of these events, but also from my conviction that their special character to a great extent relies on the recurrent gesture of creating an opportunity for women artists to meet, hence meetings, and to engage in a dialogue.

As has already been stated, the exhibition *Trzy kobiety* comprised works by three friends who had a clear perception of their output’s distinctiveness in relation to art created by men and who wished to demonstrate this fact at an exhibition. The presented works focused on images of women, usually based on a photographic portrait or self-portrait. This was then transferred to a graphic medium (by Gustowska and Piotrowska) or to a textile (Bednarczuk), and transformed in such a way as to accentuate a slightly

8 These exhibitions were the subject of my paper given at the seminar *Historia wystaw sztuki kobiet w Polsce* [The history of exhibitions of women’s art in Poland], 10 December 2015, Institute of Art History, Adam Mickiewicz University, Stary Browar, Poznań.

9 *Spotkania – Obecność II* presented sound art created by both men and women artists.

10 The full list is at the [http://old.gustowska.com/index\\_pl.htm](http://old.gustowska.com/index_pl.htm) website [accessed 26 November 2015].

different aspect each time. One of the shared elements was the issue of everydayness and the ways of experiencing and recording everyday life, which Bednarczuk expressed by means of a hospital record card or a calendar, Piotrowska by references to her perception of her own reflection in the mirror, and Gustowska by turning her likenesses into memoranda (e.g. *Zmieniam się* [I am changing]).

Two reviews prompted by this exhibition indicate that this distinctiveness, which was so strongly felt by the artists, was not observed, or considered important, by everybody. It was noted by Jacek Juszczuk, who wrote: "Only women feel this kind of need for self-definition, which is to a large extent a form of self-irony that no artist of the other gender would be brave enough to attempt".<sup>11</sup> Sławomir Magala, in turn, in his analysis of features considered modern, i.e. their serial character, the combination of photography with other techniques, and the elements of body-art, which he had observed in the exhibited works, concluded that "the exhibition by three women, even more than an exhibition of 'women', exhibits certain tendencies in art tired of Hyper-realism and Popart".<sup>12</sup>

The artists themselves, however, clearly saw the point of organising exhibitions whose essence would lie in issues associated with the female experience, because in the year 1980 they organised a festival entitled *Sztuka kobiet* [Women's art] (Fig. 2). It was prepared only by Izabella Gustowska and Krystyna Piotrowska since Anna Bednarczuk, as Piotrowska would later recall, "chose a different path", which is to be understood as her departure from the issues of female identity.<sup>13</sup> Gustowska and Piotrowska decided to extend their interests outside their own circle and the Poznań milieu and invited other women artists who focused on the topic of female identity: Natalia LL, Anna Kutera, Ewa Partum, Maria Pinińska-Bereś and Teresa Tyszkiewicz. Each participant presented a performance and exhibited some works. Similarly to the preceding exhibition, all of the presentations were linked with the topic of the portrait/self-portrait and the presentation of the female body; in addition, they pertained to women's status in society and to feminism; for instance,<sup>14</sup> Ewa Partum presented a performance entitled *Kobiety, małżeństwo jest przeciwko wam* [Women, marriage is against you], Anna Kutera showed *Fryzury* [Haircuts] from the cycle *Sytuacje stymulowane* [Stimulated situations] (1978) with the slogan: "My haircut is my decision, not that of the glossy-magazine fashion dictators", Natalia LL showed photographs from her performance *Piramida* [Pyramid] with a record of her dream, Teresa Tyszkiewicz –

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11 J. Juszczuk, "Anna, Izabela, Krystyna", *Gazeta Zachodnia*, 24 February 1978, p. 3.

12 S. Magala, "Trzy kobiety", *Sztuka*, 1979, no. 1, pp. 34–39.

13 Krystyna Piotrowska in an interview dated 30 March 2015.

14 A full analysis is currently being prepared by Ewa Tatar in her doctoral dissertation at the Art History Institute of the Jagiellonian University, supervised by Prof. Maria Hussakowska. A part of her research was presented at the seminar *Historia wystaw sztuki kobiet w Polsce* [History of the exhibitions of women's art in Poland], op. cit.



**Fig. 2.** View of the *Sztuka kobiet* exhibition, Galeria ON, Poznań, 1980, in the foreground Krystyna Piotrowska's work *Potwierdzam i zaprzeczam teorii ciężenia* [I confirm and deny the law of gravitation], Izabella Gustowska's archive

a sensual film *Ziarno* [A seed] (1980), and Maria Pinińska-Bereś – a group of her sculptures.

The exhibition *Sztuka kobiet* was housed at Galeria ON, which had been established in 1977 as a students' gallery under the auspices of the Socialist Association of Polish Students. In 1978 Krystyna Piotrowska became the gallery's director, joined in the following year by Izabella Gustowska.<sup>15</sup> As many other galleries of this type, Galeria ON had a personalised programme. Writing about the operation of such galleries in Poland, Bożenna Stokłosa points out that authors' galleries, similarly to artistic groups, were "socio-artistic creations whose existence was aimed mainly at producing creative approaches and behaviours by means of mutual influence".<sup>16</sup> The key role was played less by the art presentations addressed to an outside audience – which was the case

15 They directed the gallery jointly until Piotrowska's emigration in 1983, then Gustowska directed it alone until 1994.

16 B. Stokłosa, *Artystyczno-społeczna problematyka zrzeszeń plastyków w Polsce w latach 1946–1976 (grupy twórcze i tzw. galerie autorskie)* [Artistic and social issues concerning artists' associations in Poland in the period 1946–1976 (creative groups and the so-called authors' galleries)], doctoral dissertation, Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences, presented in 1982.

of, for instance, the BWA, where the exhibition *Trzy kobiety* had been held – than by the artists' gatherings which offered an opportunity for a direct exchange of ideas. This was precisely the nature of the *Sztuka kobiet* exhibition at Galeria ON in 1980. The gallery was not only a place where artworks were shown – even though the exhibition was organised – but also a gathering point, a locus for social relations and cooperation. For this reason the event was often described by its initiators as a “festival”.

*Sztuka kobiet* was special, among other reasons, because Gustowska and Piotrowska arranged a meeting that transcended divisions within the milieu. They were not interested in the existing connections between galleries or groups, and the women artists they had invited came from diverse milieus. Some of them tended to meet one another at various events in the circles of the so-called Neo-avant-garde, but they did not meet Gustowska or Piotrowska there for these did not attend those events. With regard to issues of women's identity as undertaken in their works, these artists most often constituted isolated cases in their own milieus, because such issues were rarely pondered upon and often altogether ignored there. The Poznań meeting was an opportunity to bring these problems to the fore and to initiate a dialogue with other women artists who considered similar issues in slightly different contexts.

In that era the idea of sisterhood, understood as “a feeling of closeness and a sense of connection between women unrelated by blood, referring to the community of experiences arising from being a woman”,<sup>17</sup> was crucial to the “female”<sup>18</sup> and feminist actions undertaken worldwide as a part of the broader women's movement in the arts. The authors of the first significant (because it was widely read and reacted to) texts referring to sisterhood, i.e. Robin Morgan or Gloria Steinem,<sup>19</sup> underlined that sisterhood was to be a counterpart to brotherhood, an alternative to this seemingly universal, but actually male-oriented social contract. Upholding the sisterhood constituted an element of the rebellion against male dominance. Initially, the dominant trends were separatist, i.e. aiming at constructing a distinct female culture, and essentialist, i.e. emphasising the homogeneity of female experience regardless of the differences between individual women. However, these trends were soon submitted to criticism which came from non-Western, non-white and non-heterosexual women, who were quick to point out the distinctiveness of their experiences.<sup>20</sup> In place of sisterhood as an expression of women's identity there appeared

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17 A. Mrozik, “Siostrzaństwo” [Sisterhood], in: *Encyklopedia gender. Płeć w kulturze* [The gender encyclopaedia: sex in culture], eds. M. Rudaś-Grodzka et al., Warsaw, 2015, p. 511.

18 I put the word “female” in inverted commas to indicate that it refers here to actions undertaken by women, not actions possessing features considered female.

19 *Sisterhood Is Powerful. An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. R. Morgan, New York, 1970; G. Steinem, “Sisterhood”, *Ms.*, spring 1972, pp. 46–49.

20 See e.g. B. Hooks, “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women”, *Feminist Review*, spring 1986, no. 23, pp. 125–138.

sisterhood as a political strategy: an element of actions undertaken by women having different experiences but partially convergent interests.

It would be difficult to consider the actions of Gustowska and Piotrowska, and then of Gustowska alone, as an actualisation of the idea of sisterhood, either in its initial, more essentialist perception or in its later, revised perception as a strategy. Gustowska and Piotrowska invited various women artists who were interested in similar issues; this could have potentially led to the emergence of some community – but this did not happen. Individualism prevailed and, as a result, it was a one-off event. Subsequent exhibitions prepared by Gustowska would not be directly connected with it and it would always be she, not any group of women artists, who would initiate them. No form of cooperation whatsoever emerged either during or after the event. Each artist exhibited her individual project. Only its initiators and organisers, Gustowska and Piotrowska, would later put up joint exhibitions, the already mentioned *Odbicia*. I analyse these in another essay,<sup>21</sup> but one of their essential features is worth mentioning here. Although Gustowska and Piotrowska did not create joint artistic projects, they were featured in each other's works (especially Piotrowska in Gustowska's) and these works entered into a dialogue in the exhibition space. This was far less so at the exhibitions described here as *Spotkania* [Meetings]. In the first events that I include in this group, i.e. the already discussed *Trzy kobiety* and *Sztuka kobiet*, the distinctiveness of each artistic proposal was obvious from, among others, the way the catalogue was constructed. In both cases each artist had her own page, and these were folded into a joint publication (cf. Fig. 1).

The political situation in Poland in the early 1980s did not favour the development of “female” and feminist initiatives. As has been pointed out by the observers and researchers of the culture of that era, other issues came to dominate the public and artistic discourse.<sup>22</sup> Yet the so-called “festival of Solidarity” in the year 1980 was a period of vigorous initiatives of a feminist nature and only the suppression of these freedom-fighting tendencies and, ultimately, the introduction of martial law put a stop to them. These events influenced the joint activity of Gustowska and Piotrowska as well. In 1984, Krystyna Piotrowska emigrated from Poland and settled in Sweden, where she soon became intensely active in the Swedish artistic milieu. Consequently, while the two women artists continued to exhibit their works jointly (*Odbicia*), their joint curatorial activities came to an end. In the later 1980s Gustowska, who all the while had been a director of Galeria ON, returned to organising exhibitions of women's art, but now on her own. Her participation in the

21 A. Jakubowska, “Nie siostrzeństwo a przyjaźń. ‘Odbicia’ Izabelli Gustowskiej i Krystyny Piotrowskiej” [Not sisterhood but friendship: Izabella Gustowska and Krystyna Piotrowska's “Reflections”], *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, autumn 2016, no. 15, pp. 71–78.

22 See e.g. E. Kondratowicz, *Być jak narodowy sztandar. Kobiety i Solidarność* [To be like a national flag. Women and Solidarity], Warsaw, 2013.



exhibition *Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn, Internationale Ausstellung aktueller Kunst von Frauen* organised at the MUMOK in Vienna in the spring of 1985 seems to have provided her with a new and important impulse.

The concept of the Vienna exhibition, which had been prepared by two female curators, Silvia Eiblmayr and VALIE EXPORT, relied on the conviction that the position of women artists had changed since the preceding decade.<sup>23</sup> The curators underlined that women were no longer the victims; hence thinking about art as a “medium of self-determination” was more important than the “aesthetics of resistance”, demonstrative protests or “ideological sincerity”. They still associated art with social change, as had always been done in feminist actions; but it was individualisation that was supposed to result in the liberation of society.

It is difficult to state unequivocally whether this manner of thinking about women's art influenced Gustowska's curatorial activities at that time or whether her thinking developed along the same lines autonomously and the Vienna meeting provided her with valuable support. In any case, the exhibitions she organised since the middle of the 1980s were conceptualised in a very similar manner. Emphasis on individual expression had already been seen in her (or rather, then, still “their”) earlier concepts. Compared with earlier exhibition projects, a difference is evident in two interrelated areas: the set of women artists who were invited and the subject matter they undertook. Gustowska made use of her sojourn in Vienna and the acquaintance she had struck there by inviting two women artists whom she had met there – Eva-Maria Schön from West Berlin and Adriena Simotová from Czechoslovakia – to Galeria ON for the next presentation of women's art that she prepared in 1987.<sup>24</sup> The other artists who took part in *Spotkania – Obecność I* [Meetings – Presence I] were Izabella Gustowska, Aleksandra Hołownia, Danuta Mączak, Anna Płotnicka, Krystyna Piotrowska, Anna M. Potocka, Joanna Przybyła and Lidia Zielińska.<sup>25</sup> Two facts are noteworthy: the set of names was entirely different than that at the *Sztuka kobiet* exhibition in 1980, and most of the artists had never been associated with women's issues or feminist art. This decision may have been influenced by the Vienna exhibition, where Polish women artists who had already participated in feminist exhibitions before and whom

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23 VALIE EXPORT, “Vorwort”, and S. Eiblmayr, “Einleitungand”, in: *Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn. Aktuelle Kunst von Frauen*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Moderner Kunst / Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna, 1985, pp. 7–9.

24 In this period Gustowska allocated much space in the gallery's programme to art created by women. In 1986 (19 February) Eva Maria Schön (West Berlin) presented three cycles of drawings and a performance; (26 February) Teresa Murak presented a performance entitled *Pragnienie, czuwanie, czynienie* [Desire, vigilance, activeness]; (9 April) Anna Nawrot presented an installation entitled *Odczytanie* [A reading], and Irena Nawrot a work entitled *Małe i duże, wspólne i niczyje* [Small and big, shared and no-one's].

25 With a presentation of films by Márta Mészáros.

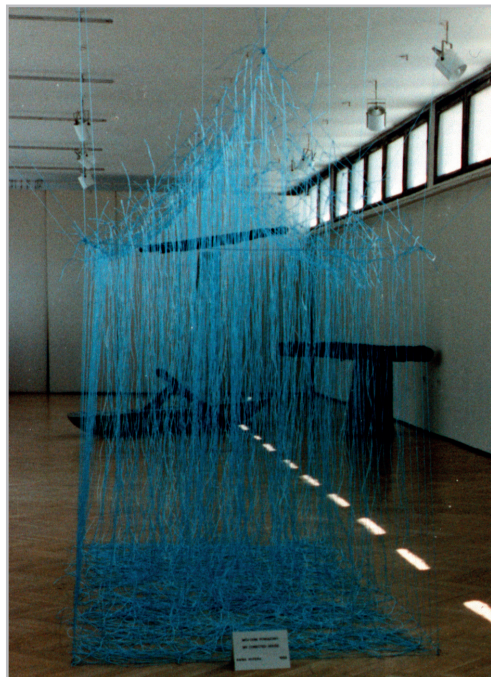


**Fig. 3.** Joanna Przybyła, *Rysunek* [A drawing], view of the *Spotkania – Obecność I* exhibition, 1987, Poznań, Galeria ON, Izabella Gustowska's archive

Gustowska expected to be there (e.g. Natalia LL, Maria Pinińska-Bereś), were absent.<sup>26</sup> Of course, the selection of participants had an impact on the subject matter represented at the exhibition. In contrast to the earlier meeting, the issues of female identity, the female body or the roles ascribed to women in society were no longer dominant. This does not mean that they were entirely absent but rather that they were far less obvious; for instance,<sup>27</sup> Joanna Przybyła exhibited a monumental installation entitled *Rysunek* [A drawing], which bisected the gallery; it was made of planks that continued as a drawing on the wall and as a reflection in a mirror (Fig. 3). Anna Płotnicka exhibited *Ciemna noc* [A dark night] – a “living installation” that was her dialogue with a tape-recording that went on as long as she was able to hold a flame in the palm of her hand. Krystyna Piotrowska exhibited monumental works from the *Lustra* [Mirrors] cycle, in which the precision of a photographic image is combined with its fragmentariness, thus referring to issues of memory and relationships with others as marked by distance.

26 Izabella Gustowska in an interview dated 20 April 2015. The exhibited works were by Gustowska and by Jolanta Marcolla.

27 For a full list of works and their short descriptions, cf. *Zeszyty Artystyczne*, a periodical of the Poznań PWSSP, the 1991 issue.



**Fig. 4.** View of the *Spotkania – Obecność III* exhibition, 1992, Galeria BWA Arsenal, Poznań, in the foreground Anna Kutera's work *Dom dla wyobraźni* [A house for the imagination], Izabella Gustowska's archive

It is worth stressing again that Gustowska was as interested in the getting together of the women artists as in their individual shows, or perhaps even more. In an interview with Grzegorz Dziamski she admitted that when she was organising *Spotkania – Obecność I*, the situation was more important to her than the exhibition. She explained:

A situation are tensions between several individualities, between what those people can offer others and what they can receive from them. An individual exhibition produces some tensions, too, but they are fairly one-sided: an artist offers more or less, receiving little or nothing in return. But in a situation such as *Obecność*, the relationships are many-sided, many-directional and more vigorous.<sup>28</sup>

The successive gathering of women, *Spotkania – Obecność III* [Meetings – Presence III], took place in 1992 (Fig. 4). It was on the largest scale of all the exhibitions of women's art organised by Gustowska; it comprised three parallel shows held in three art institutions in Poznań: *19x1* at the Ethnographic Museum,<sup>29</sup>

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28 "Galeria ON – rozmowa Grzegorza Dziamskiego z Izabellą Gustowską" [ON Gallery: Grzegorz Dziamski interviews Izabella Gustowska], *Zeszyty Artystyczne* (Poznań), 1991, p. 51.

29 Participating artists: Magdalena Abakanowicz, Halina Chrostowska, Barbara Falender, Wanda Gołkowska, Izabella Gustowska, Aleksandra Jachtoma, Maria Jarema, Janina Kraupe-Świdarska, Ewa Kuryluk, Natalia LL, Danuta Leszczyńska-Kluza, Jadwiga

7x1 at Galeria BWA,<sup>30</sup> and 4x1 at Galeria ON,<sup>31</sup> as well as a conference. The numbers in the title of each show indicate the number of women artists whose works were exhibited there.

The first of them, *19x1*, offered an overview of women's art in the historical perspective. Although it did not reach very far back in time, it considered women artists of the older generation; some of them, e.g. Maria Jarema, had been active before the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. The exhibition *Artystki polskie* [Polish women artists], organised by Agnieszka Morawińska at the National Museum in Warsaw in 1991, is an important context to this part of the exhibition. It was the first history-oriented exhibition of the works of Polish female artists, "women of diverse positions, who practised art in different times and with varying results".<sup>32</sup> It was a *sui generis* counterpart to the exhibition *Women Artists 1550–1950* organised at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1977, where the curators proposed to focus on the social aspects and the way women artists functioned in the art world. Elżbieta Grygiel noted that "at first glance the [Warsaw – A. J.] exhibition resembled the outcome of stocktaking",<sup>33</sup> which had largely resulted from the desire to include as many women artists as possible, all of them worthy of being brought back to the viewers' awareness. Yet one of the key merits of the exhibition was that it presented the tradition of women's art. *Spotkania – Obecność III* did not have similarly ambitious scholarly or historical aims, but both of these elements, i.e. presenting the predecessors of contemporary women artists and leading the female creators out of the shadows of their more famous male colleagues, were important there as well. This exhibition, in turn, was based on the idea of exhibiting the works of three generations of women artists. In fact, works by some artists born in the 1940s and 1950s were shown not only at *19x1* but also at *7x1*, but in these cases the "historical" exhibition included their older works and the other their more recent ones. The youngest artists, born in the following decade, were invited to the *4x1* section.

The subtitles of the sections of the exhibition underlined the importance of individuality; they seemed to be shouting out that all of those parts were dealing with individuals, not with a group of women (or artists) that would have anything in common. The individualistic approach was also reflected in

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Maziarska, Zuzanna Pawlicka, Teresa Pągowska, Maria Pinińska-Bereś, Krystyna Piotrowska, Alina Szapocznikow, Danuta Waberska, Magdalena Więcek-Wnuk.

30 Participating artists: Izabella Gustowska, Zofia Kulik, Anna Kutera, Natalia LL, Małgorzata Niedzielko, Krystyna Piotrowska, Anna Płotnicka.

31 Participating artists: Zuzanna Baranowska, Agata Michowska, Małgorzata Sufleta, Anna Tyczyńska.

32 A. Morawińska, "Artystki polskie" [Polish women artists], in: *Artystki polskie*, exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw, 1991, p. 9.

33 E. Grygiel, "Kobiety i życie, i sztuka. (Na marginesie wystawy „Artystki polskie”)" [Women and life, and art. (On the margins of the "Polish women artists" exhibition)], *Format*, 1992, no. 3–4, p. 39.

the text by Alicja Kępińska entitled *Bliskość bytu* [The nearness of existence] which was published in the catalogue and referred to the 7x1 show:

The art of each of the artists to whom this exhibition is devoted is rooted in one such world [the many worlds which we deal with – A. J.]. The contours of each of them are different, just as are different their planes of existence and the colours of the energy they emanate. [...] The worlds in which the art of the seven women artists is rooted are not contiguous, but neither do they collide. Presented together, they do not form any tangible whole.<sup>34</sup>

Gustowska herself wrote in the catalogue: “I could say that for my basis I take the naïve notion of a diversity of sensibility, emotions, intuitions, biology, instinct and, finally, the feeling of power and independence”. But at *Spotkania – Obecność III* she mostly continued to present single narratives, whose distinctiveness she had already emphasised at the preceding *Spotkania*. Also, the subtitles – 19x1, 7x1, 4x1 – to a certain extent correspond to the title of the earliest exhibition discussed herein, *Three women* but, significantly, the focus on gender was lesser here even though the artists' gender was the criterion of selection. After all, neither the title of the whole event nor the titles of its subsections indicates that the exhibition concerned art produced only by women.

Interestingly, however, the exhibition's catalogue contained a sketch *Sztuka feministyczna – kronika wydarzeń* [Feminist art: a chronicle of events] by Grzegorz Dziamski. It opened with a definition as provided by Judy Chicago in 1979, in which she claimed that feminist art was an art deriving from female experience and it was neither a style nor trend in art; that it constituted an attempt at re-formulating the relationship between art and society, and that it was a transformation in one's perception of the world and oneself.<sup>35</sup> Gustowska never presented her exhibitions as belonging to feminist art; quite the opposite – in a short text included in the catalogue she wrote: “I believe that this art can exist without the burdensome feminist context”.<sup>36</sup> Yet the inclusion of this material indicates that this context was, in fact, important, especially considering that photographs documenting actions undertaken at *Sztuka kobiet* and *Spotkania – Obecność I* were reproduced between two pages containing the calendar of feminist actions. Gustowska's ambivalent approach to things that allegedly unite women, their manifestations in women's art and, above all, to feminism is noteworthy.

The question of the relationship between the exhibitions of women's art and feminism is currently a matter of wide-ranging debates.<sup>37</sup> These reflections

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34 A. Kępińska, “Bliskość bytu” [The nearness of existence], in: *Obecność III*, exhibition catalogue, Poznań, 1992, no pagination.

35 J. Chicago, after: G. Dziamski, “Sztuka feministyczna – kronika wydarzeń” [Feminist art – a chronicle of events], in: *Obecność III*, *ibid.*

36 I. Gustowska, “...dlaczego?...” [...why?...], *ibid.*

37 See e.g. *On Curating*, special issue *Curating in Feminist Thought*, May 2016, no. 29; *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Curating and Art Exhibitions 1970–2010*, eds. A. Dimitrakaki,

are dominated by the issue as to which exhibition can truly be described as a feminist one, which is strongly associated with the conviction that it does not have to be an exhibition showing only the works of women artists or only feminist art. At the same time it is underlined that not every exhibition of women's art is automatically a feminist exhibition. What I find crucial is not the question whether Izabella Gustowska's exhibitions can be perceived as feminist or not; more important is the insight that by being focused only on women they were examined in relation to feminism – an issue that is mentioned by the curator herself and by those who commented on her work.

All of Gustowska's earlier exhibitions that belong to the *Spotkania* cycle as defined herein and which have been mentioned above were well received by the critics. This time the situation was not much different, yet new elements emerged in its reception which had not been equally pronounced before. The issue of distinguishing women's art was underlined far more strongly. Some critics, for instance Marek K. Wasilewski, who was associated with the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań, repeated Gustowska's assumptions:

What is, today, the wisdom of creating distinctions within art into areas occupied by men and areas available to women? [...] This meeting was a search for tensions, shared fascinations and new energies. It was an attempt at showing women's art free of the burden of the feminist context. [...] Although the works of so many exhibiting artists must have diverse references, they evince elements of a shared sensibility.<sup>38</sup>

Voices from the other side of the divide, so to speak, could also be heard, asking for, among others, clearer ideological involvement and a more manifest battle against stereotypes involving women's art. In fact, various exhibitions of women's art that were organised in Poland at that time were accused of being devoid of such ideological involvement, including the already mentioned exhibition *Artystki polskie* or the show *Żywioły* [The elements], whose curator was Kinga Kawalerowicz (1993, Dom Artysty Plastyka in Warsaw).<sup>39</sup> The same issue of the periodical in which Wasilewski's review of *Spotkania – Obecność III* was published also included a critical statement by Natalia LL who had aptly pointed to the catalogue's cover by Jacek Mosiakowski (Fig. 5) and stated that "he reduced the philosophical and sociological problem of women's art to the level of a cellar floor, showing two ladies' shoes against the crescent moon" and thus made the publication "an unconvincing endorsement of the feminist idea".<sup>40</sup>

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L. Perry, Liverpool University Press, 2013, or H. Molesworth, "How to Install Art as a Feminist", in: *Modern Women*, eds. C. Butler, A. Schwartz, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010, pp. 498–513.

38 M. K. Wasilewski, "Obecność III", *Format*, op. cit., pp. 45–46.

39 See e.g. comments on the arrangement and catalogue in the already cited text by Elżbieta Grygiel or Ewa Toniak's article "Ogród Zosi" [Sophie's Garden], *Obieg*, 1993, no. 7–8, p. 65.

40 Natalia LL, "Na marginesie wystawy 'Obecność III'" [On the margins of the "Obecność III" exhibition], *Format*, op. cit., p. 47.



**Fig. 5.** Cover of the *Spotkania – Obecność III* exhibition catalogue, 1992, Poznań, designed by Jacek Mosiakowski

The emergence of such opinions may be explained by the fact that critical tendencies, including feminist criticism, were developing at that time in Polish art, criticism and history. Their promoters' viewpoint was that to present women's art on the basis of some intuitive feeling of a vague kinship (which Gustowska wrote about in the catalogue), i.e. without the ideological base related to feminism, was not enough. Gustowska, on the other hand, had always distanced herself from feminism, perceiving it to be a simplistic category that helped viewers interpret a certain type of art, but did not correspond to the complexity of its message. In this, among others, she differed from the curators of other exhibitions to whom she has sometimes been compared here, namely Natalia LL<sup>41</sup> and VALIE EXPORT.

At the opening of the first of the exhibitions discussed herein, i.e. *Trzy kobiety*, waitresses dressed as Playboy Bunnies appeared among the invited guests, serving them, among others, gâteau in the shape of a woman's breast. On the one hand, this was, as Krystyna Piotrowska put it, "an ironic gesture towards the gentlemen – here you are, you got what you always want and now leave us in peace".<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, it was an element that diminished

41 Natalia LL's attitudes towards feminism are very complex, but when organising her exhibition *Sztuka kobiet* in 1978 she clearly situated it in the sphere of feminist actions.

42 Krystyna Piotrowska in the commentary "Kobiece rewolucje", op. cit.



**Fig. 6.** Maria Pinińska-Bereś, *Pranie* [The laundry], a performance during the *Sztuka kobiet* exhibition, Galeria ON, Poznań, 1980, Izabella Gustowska's archive

the radicalism of their project by means of the two curators assuming the attitude of “cool gals”.<sup>43</sup> During the next exhibition, still prepared by the Gustowska/Piotrowska duo, the issue of feminism was approached directly, but in a markedly ambivalent statement. It was the performance *Pranie* [The laundry] by Maria Pinińska-Bereś, during which she laundered and then hung on a clothesline that surrounded her dishtowels bearing letters that formed the word FEMINISM (Fig. 6). The exhibitions *Spotkania – Obecność* as organised by Gustowska in the following years did not bring any extended reflection on the subject of feminism, but rather showed her growing reserve towards it. She was intensely involved in presenting works by women artists, also in the programme of Galeria ON under her direction, i.e. outside collective exhibitions, but she never assumed any politically involved or critical stance.

After *Spotkania – Obecność III*, Izabella Gustowska ceased organising exhibitions of women's art for several years. The only exception is an exhibition that was organised in the early 1990s, entitled *Presence IV – 6 Women* (1994, Galeria La Coupole, Rennes); it will not be discussed here, however, since

<sup>43</sup> That this strategy was effective is demonstrated by the fact that, in the already quoted review, Jacek Juszczyk wrote about “our ‘feminists’”.





**Fig. 7.** Artists participating in the *Osiem dni tygodnia* exhibition, Galeria Sztuki 13 Muz, Gdańsk, 2011, Izabella Gustowska's archive

it involves entirely separate issues, e.g. the presentation of works of Polish female artists abroad.

The view on issues of women's art which Izabella Gustowska proposed in 2011 was essentially similar to that known from her earlier exhibitions. "Eight women, eight different narratives",<sup>44</sup> she wrote in the description of the exhibition (Fig. 7). Yet new content emerged as well. The exhibition *Osiem dni tygodnia* [Eight days of the week], which was housed at the Miejska Galeria Sztuki 13 Muz in Szczecin, presented Gustowska's own works and works by seven women artists much younger than herself, all of them linked with the Art University in Poznań in which Gustowska has been working since graduating in 1972. Artists who participated in this exhibition besides Gustowska were Marta Jurkowska (who graduated in 2003), Ada Karczmarczyk (2009), Aneta Ptak (2009), Marta Mariańska (2009), Zuzanna Pyda (2009), Sylwia Czubała (then in her final year of study at the Art University) and Magdalena Marciniak (2001). Gustowska returned here to the milieu-oriented (or: academy-oriented) criterion of selection that lay at the basis of *Trzy kobiety*, which had been her first exhibition of women's art and which she shared with Piotrowska and Bednarczuk. In this case, however, the relationship between Gustowska and the other artists was entirely different. She was not their university friend or an artist at the same stage of artistic development – she

44 I. Gustowska, *Osiem dni tygodnia*, information about the exhibition, Galeria 13 Muz, Szczecin, 2011, <http://digitalia11.13muz.eu/index.php/galeria/> [accessed 30 November 2015].

was a teacher who was offering her own narrative from the perspective of far greater experience.

Gustowska's work shown at that exhibition, entitled *Summer Time*, pointed to another aspect of sharing an exhibition with younger artists or of inviting them to co-exhibit. The work was a video-installation in which somewhat oneiric films playing out on monitors showed young women enjoying a rich array of fruit being consumed on a lovely summer day. Gustowska as the author of these films and Gustowska as the exhibition's curator seemed to have been equally charmed by their sensuality and vitality. In the description of the exhibition she wrote: "It may be worthwhile to immerse ourselves in the images, sounds and universes of these seven wonderful, independent young women, always hungry for new experiences in life and in art, whose works I recommend and whose group, despite my age, I discreetly join".<sup>45</sup> This exhibition clearly reveals Gustowska's increasing fascination with young women and their potential, energy and vitality; this fascination matches her unceasing interest in their artistic projects and personal plans, her considerate attention and supportiveness.

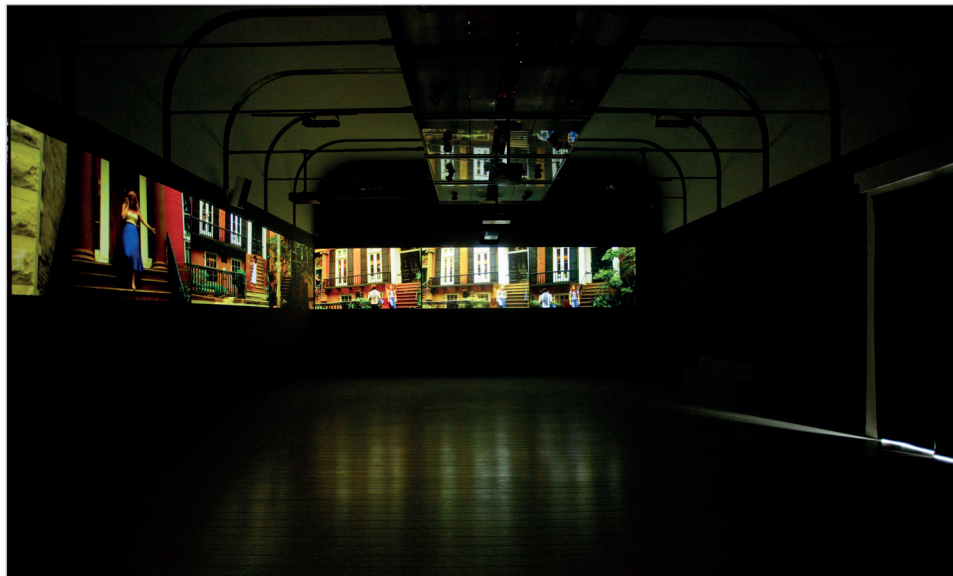
Many similar themes are evident in Gustowska's artistic project carried out in the years 2013–2015, entitled *Przypadek Josephine H...* [The case of Josephine H...]. The starting point for this project was provided by the persona of Josephine Hopper, the wife of the American painter Edward Hopper. She was a woman artist who today is known not for her own works but for being the female figure featured in her husband's paintings.<sup>46</sup> Bringing her back from obscurity, Gustowska did not focus on her art, but rather on her experience of being a wife to a painter. The heroines of her project are several women – primarily Josephine Hopper, then Gustowska herself, comparing her own situation and her decisions to those of Josephine, and several young women from New York, whom Gustowska observes, wondering whether they would share Josephine's fate or whether their lives would take a different turn. The film and video-installation<sup>47</sup> (Fig. 8) show several young women in their natural environments or in settings reminiscent of Hopper's paintings. Gustowska is also featured, sometimes as one of Josephine Hopper's contemporary incarnations, but mainly as a woman who looks at other women and then shows them in a gallery. This position is strikingly similar to that evident at the exhibition in Szczecin in 2011.

This connection between her activities as an artist and as a curator of exhibitions has practically been a permanent feature of Gustowska's work. Works

45 Ibid.

46 Gail Levin, a specialist on Edward Hopper, gave her the most attention. See e.g. "Writing about Forgotten Women Artists: The Rediscovery of Jo Nivison Hopper", in: *Singular Women: Writing the Lives of Women Artists*, eds. K. Fredrickson, S. E. Webb, Berkeley, 2003, pp. 130–145.

47 Presented at the Art Stations gallery in Poznań as part of the *Izabella Gustowska. Nowy Jork i dziewczyna* exhibition, 4 November 2015 – 7 February 2016.



**Fig. 8.** Izabella Gustowska, *Gdzie jest ta dziewczyna?* [Where is that girl?], video installation at the *Izabella Gustowska. Nowy Jork i dziewczyna* exhibition [Izabella Gustowska. New York and a girl], Art Stations, Poznań, 2015, photo by B. Busko

which focused exclusively on women and on topics which very often involved relations between women were created parallel to curatorial activities relying on organising collective exhibitions in which only women participated. Already at the first exhibition of women's art, *Trzy kobiety*, apart from her self-portraits she presented a work entitled *Kobiety* [Women], a *sui generis* group portrait of disempowered women, which is perversely focused on their bodies, not on their veiled faces. At the exhibition *Sztuka kobiet* in 1980, Gustowska presented a film from the new cycle *Względne cechy podobieństwa* [Relative traits of resemblance], showing nearly identical twins playing with their resemblance. These twins were the heroines of the earliest elements of this cycle, produced from 1979 to 1990, for which the starting point was Gustowska's interest in, as she wrote, "the perversity of Nature itself, proposing a 'doubled object', copies which on the visual level are apparently perfect".<sup>48</sup> Subsequent elements of the cycle, which were produced more or less concurrently with *Sztuka kobiet*, explored the motif of twinship from another angle. Gustowska focused on the likeness of things naturally unlike. First she presented *Bliźniaczki zastępcze* (Surrogate twins, 1980), then *Bliźniaczość z wyboru* (Twinship by choice, 1981) (Fig. 9). The works Gustowska showed at two exhibitions in the *Spotkania – Obecność* cycle, in which Gustowska-as-curator ascribed the greatest impor-

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48 Izabella Gustowska at her website [http://old.gustowska.com/index\\_pl.htm](http://old.gustowska.com/index_pl.htm) [accessed 30 November 2015].



**Fig. 9.** Izabella Gustowska, *Bliźniaczki z wyboru* [Twins by choice], from the *Względne cechy podobieństwa* cycle [Relative traits of resemblance], 1981, courtesy of Izabella Gustowska

tance to individual narratives, were similar in tone. In the place of relationships between women there appeared a focus on individual women and on diverse aspects of various existences. At *Spotkania – Obecność I* Gustowska exhibited an installation-cum-performance entitled *...99... (7 dni tygodnia)* [*...99... (7 days of the week)*], which referred to the fragmentary and transitory nature of the recording of a person's body, face and, consequently, everyday life. In *Spotkania – Obecność III* she exhibited works from the then-developing cycle *Sny* [Dreams], namely *Sny czarne* [Black dreams].

Exhibitions of women's art curated by Izabella Gustowska from 1978 onwards, initially in cooperation with Krystyna Piotrowska, had a consistent profile. They all emphasised the certainty of the essential closeness between women; a conviction which was deeply ingrained and unfailingly repeated regardless of the changing situation. Neither the passing of time nor changes in her personal or social life made Gustowska depart from her view, although she explored it with varying intensity. This closeness was always characterised very generally and vaguely. It did not concern a shared aesthetics, a shared position in society or a similarity of experiences – and yet it did concern a little of each. It was neither a symbiosis nor a strategic alliance, but rather a kinship that became evident only when sought. Gustowska's own role did not alter either. Her place in the art world – for instance in relation to other women artists – changed, but from the very beginning, i.e. from the exhibition *Trzy*

*kobiety* onwards, Gustowska placed herself in the position of both one of the women and of the person who had arranged a meeting of women – in the space of an artwork as much as in the space of an exhibition.

*Spotkania* is the longest-lasting and the most consistently carried out project enabling women artists to meet, but, paradoxically, not intended to consolidate them. The combination of a conviction that women share essential similarities with an emphasis on their individuality and on the separateness of their artistic proposals seems to have been of crucial importance to the project. Also central was Gustowska's distancing herself from feminist actions, and especially from their political dimension. *Spotkania* did not result in shared actions. An analysis of their influence on the oeuvres of women artists who participated in those meetings would require a separate essay, perhaps even more than one.

(Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz)

## Abstract

In February of 1978 the exhibition *Trzy kobiety. Ania Bednarczuk, Iza Gustowska, Krynia Piotrowska* opened at the Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Poznań. It became a starting point for two cycles of exhibitions that have been organised practically until today: *Odbicia* (Gustowska's and Piotrowska's joint exhibitions) and *Spotkania*. The essay focuses on *Spotkania*, i.e. exhibitions at which Gustowska (initially with Piotrowska) presented the works of invited women artists. These exhibitions were *Trzy kobiety* (1978, Poznań), *Sztuka kobiet* (1980, Poznań), *Spotkania – Obecność I* (1987, Poznań), *Spotkania – Obecność III* (1992, Poznań), *Presence IV – 6 Women* (1994, Galeria La Coupole, Rennes) and *Osiem dni tygodnia* (2011, Szczecin). To consider them a cycle and to analyse them under the joint title of *Spotkania* is the author's own interpretative approach based on the observation that, in their case, Izabella Gustowska's actions comprise a consistent project based mainly on the recurrent gesture of creating an opportunity for women artists to meet – hence the word *meetings* – and to engage in a dialogue.

*Spotkania* is the longest-lasting and most consistently carried out project enabling women artists to meet but, paradoxically, not intended to consolidate them. All of the exhibitions emphasised Gustowska's certainty of essential closeness between women. This closeness was always characterised, very generally and indistinctly, as a kinship that becomes evident only when sought. An analysis of the exhibitions leads one to the conclusion that the combination of the conviction that women share essential similarities with an emphasis on their individuality and on the separateness of their artistic proposals, coupled with Gustowska's distancing herself from feminism, are the reasons why *Spotkania* did not result in the emergence of any kind of community or in the undertaking of collective actions. The exhibitions remained as incidental meetings and their influence on the oeuvres of the women artists who participated in them is yet to be analysed.