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NAKED CARE: EXPLORATIONS OF NAKED PERFORMANCE AND QUEER POLITICAL GESTURES

In lieu of an introduction

I am a forty-two-year-old woman. I am white, Polish, European, educated, homosexual, the daughter of Elizabeth and granddaughter of Wanda. I stand naked. I stand next to Natalia Chylińska – my partner in life-art. It is the ending of our performance at the Festival of Naked Forms 8 in Gdańsk, October 5, 2022. Our bodies – gendered, female, non-heteronormative, queer – are covered with patchouli oil and soil. I am naked-with, naked in relation, attempting to activate the common space of shared relationality.¹ I am holding a container made of transparent glass. It is filled with dark soil and human hair – my pubic hair and Natalia's head hair which we cut for each other during the performance. A humid earthy and sweet smell embraces us. I contain and carry, I am carried and contained by the performative action of the nudity-in-flux that continues its hidden life with/in the ecosystem of interrelations and entanglements. The object that I am holding is

not a flag of protest, and the nakedness that I am exposing is not a fist in the air accompanied by a fierce protest song. It is the vulnerability of the private and intimate body that demands attention and invites new modes of co-existence based on care and recognition of differences that lie at the heart of the uncontainable multiplicity of human and non-human worlds.

From black flag to soft political gestures

In 2018 I wrote an article titled *#MyBlackVenusProtest*. The article summarised a series of naked performances and actions that were part of the Black Venus Protest project.² In the opening of the article, I chose a moment from one of the BVP performances as a frame for situating myself at the intersection of the private and the public, the political and the corporeal, the subjective, the collective, the symbolic. I wrote:

I am a woman. A Polish woman. My mother bore me in Gdańsk, in the hospital on Kliniczna street, on the 16th of August 1980, at 6:50 a.m. Two kilometres away, in the Vladimir Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk, a strike was going on. Thirty-seven years later I stand naked, facing what is left of the Shipyard, facing the greyness and the lazy movement of the sun that pierces the clouds. I am holding a black flag.³

Being naked and holding a black flag in the BVP performances was a clear political gesture of resistance against the oppression targeted at women in Poland and elsewhere. These performances “supported the Black Protests and women’s strikes by transferring them in the sphere of visual arts, and thus bringing the Polish movement of feminist counter-audience into the global women’s solidarity movement.”⁴

Four years later, in 2022, when developing the score for the FNAF8 performance, together with Natalia Chylińska, we questioned the very possibility of making a political gesture and began searching beyond the “conventional forms and gestures of political activism: a fist in the air, a demonstrator holding a placard, people assembling for a march or a sit-in.”⁵ Understanding that “the power of the political field that operates according to the principles of domination, power, and progress, results in the dominance of representations of resistance and protest based on the use of force.”⁶ Hence, we asked ourselves – How can we talk about violence and resist oppressive structures without reproducing violence and without multiplying violent imagery? How can we confront what we called ‘the inner politician’ in us, who tries to convince us that tenderness and care (of queer subjects) cannot be a political gesture? We also asked – How can we can “be political by means of performance in the context of representative democracy as the ruling political system in Europe”⁷ and in the current socio-political context, i.e., the ongoing Russian

invasion in Ukraine (violations of human rights, including cases of sexual and gender-based violence and the use of mass rape as a weapon of war⁸); the anti-government protests in Iran where Iranian women were shaving off their hair in a gesture of protest, grief and anger;⁹ the continuous attempts in Poland of the leading party PiS (Law and Justice) to further limit women’s rights and tighten abortion laws, which are among the strictest in the EU.

Assuming that performance itself is “a repository of critical and resistant knowledge,”¹⁰ we decided to explore the caring “minor gesture”¹¹ – a gesture that can shape Rancière’s “common sensorium”¹² and whose political potential may lie in the fact that it activates a field of relations and marks “a space of cohabitation where differences are cultivated and produced.”¹³ Focusing on this minor gesture and using the shape-shifting potential of relational movement, we attempted to create “a space of democracy that is empty, inviting the public to engage in inventing the people who populate it and create the social imaginary.”¹⁴

Performance score and relational movements and gestures

Meanwhile, I would like to briefly outline the score of the performance and point out several traces that can accompany us in the explorations into politicality of performance.

Performance outline (K is for Katarzyna, N is for Natalia) [Fig. 7–15]:

- K and N enter the space. K – carrying a transparent glass container with soil, N – carrying a transparent glass container with patchouli oil and scissors.
- Place glass containers on the floor, stand face to face (soft eye-contact), undress.
- Stand naked face to face (soft eye-contact).
- K puts the soil from the glass container on the floor.
- N kneels in front of the heap of soil and gives scissors to K who kneels next to her.
- K cuts N's head hair and places hair wisps on the soil heap.
- When N's hair is very short, K puts the scissors on the floor and takes the oil container and covers N's head with patchouli oil.
- K ends the oiling, stands up with her pelvis facing N.
- N takes the scissors and cuts K's pubic hair, placing hair wisps on the soil heap.
- When K's pubic hair is very short, N puts the scissors on the floor and covers with patchouli oil K's pubis, groins, thighs, underbelly, hips.
- K and N move towards the heap of soil and hair; K and N place their bodies on the heap in a position, in which the bodies are closely intertwined like a knot, forming an image of an entanglement.
- K and N smear the oil and the soil with their hair onto their bodies, moving slowly and gently, keeping the eye contact. Finally, they stop the movements. A moment of silence.
- K and N stand up and leave the PATIO.

The performance score was based on relational movements, gestures of care and offering one's vulnerability to other(s) – the other performer, the witnesses, who were with us in the PATIO space of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk. We handled the objects (scissors, glass containers, soil) and each other with care, delicacy, and attention. We carried out physical practices of the everyday such as cutting the hair, oiling the body, holding each other in a firm embrace with an intention of creating a common safe space. We realised that placing oneself naked in the hands of another person who has a sharp tool is a gesture of trust but also a step into uncertainty. As highlighted by Natalia Chylińska, “exposing and experiencing a body that is naked, vulnerable, caring, and longing for care and protection, is about placing oneself in a state of uncertainty – uncertainty about the power of the gesture, uncertainty about its agency and political potential.”¹⁵ It is a state, in which the internalised structures of patriarchy shake, and it is by entering the state of uncertainty that we create space for new caring gestures of protest that do not reproduce political gestures based on the demonstration of force, violence, self-violence, destruction, self-destruction.”¹⁶

Let us not forget also that hair holds a special place in Polish and Slavic traditional culture and folk rituals, where it was associated with the magical and ritual sphere and “(...) commonly regarded as a carrier of life forces, vitality and energy.”¹⁷ Hair also functioned as a denominator of the social status and played a key role in the rites of passage, reflecting the relationships between the individual and a larger group/community.¹⁸ “Destroying, combing, or cutting hair, including shaving it, were among the gestures with a strong ritual and religious character. They signified a ritual death”¹⁹ of an individual and his/her passage into the realm of the new social status. It is in the light of these connotations that we intended the performance score to be a form of ‘fake ritual,’ whereby the nudity and the act of cutting each other's pubic and head hair, followed by placing/planting them

in the soil, serve as elements of our personal rite of passage towards visibility – whereby we become caring queer subjects, exposing naked care and creating “queer time and space”²⁰ for non-binary and non-normative relationality to sprout outside the paradigm of birth, marriage, reproduction and death. In a gesture of trust, we entrust the cut hair to one another, we entrust a part of ourselves. Additionally, to transform this potentially aggressive act into a caring gesture we encased the act of cutting in a series of tender gestures and small movements that enabled us to project the intention of care and empathy, and to activate performative feedback between us and the witnesses, a circulation of attention and attentiveness, a sense of cohabiting a safe space, in which we are breathing together. In this space, the physical and emotional closeness and vulnerability of intimate naked bodies emerged as a gesture of protest against the public sphere and its system of order and oppression. Following the act of cutting the pubic and head hair we covered these areas with patchouli oil that has protective and nourishing properties and is used for healing wounds. The oil was used “to create an actual, yet transparent and sticky, protective layer in the areas that were exposed, with the intention of healing the wounds that are not physical.”²¹ As if the act of oiling one another was able to heal our invisible and silenced queer subjectivity, by bringing it to a full pronouncement in the public/institutional space of the Art Academy. A sensual and sensuous encounter, in which proximity and the physical and emotional aspects of touch, shape intimacy and open a space for a collective socio-political body of doers and witnesses to emerge and move and indulge in the intimate sensory experience. The gaze of the witnesses is following the slow movement of the hands as they spread the oil on one another, making the naked bodies glitter, as if the affects and sensations were coming to the surface – a sticky, sweaty, oily, substance of attraction and desire. The gaze traces the hands, joins them in their tender passages along the lines of muscles, the folds, curves, surfaces, points where

the fingertips sense the fascia sliding under the skin. The doers and witnesses join in a “dance of attention,”²² through which the normative and non-normative identities can come together in a gesture of care, resistance and pleasure.

As I return to the simple structure and the organic flow of our performance, I see two bodies in motion and am immediately reminded of Erin Manning’s passage on relational movements and their often-ungraspable politicality. The movements of these two bodies create the space, they are agents of body-worlding.²³ These two bodies “stand close, facing one another, reaching-toward an embrace that will signal an acceleration of the movement that has always already begun. The movement within becomes a movement without, not internal-external, but folding and bridging in an intensity of preacceleration. (...) Our embrace quickens the molecules that compose us. An adaptation occurs—we begin to recompose. Volumes, always more than one, emerge from surfaces, recombining with lines, folding, bridging, knotting. This coming-together proposes a combination of form-forces where preacceleration potentially finds passage. (...) To move together, the connection must be alive. As they move, they reconnect. Call it a relational shape-shifting.”²⁴ The relational movements of “the two of us moving together—provides a glimpse into the ways in which movement creates the potential for unthinking dichotomies that populate our worlds: abstract-concrete, organic-prosthetic, alive-dead, mind-body, actual-virtual, man-woman. It’s not that movement directly undermines these dialectical concepts. It’s that movement allows us to approach them from another perspective: a shifting one. When we are no longer still, the world lives differently.”²⁵

Our naked vulnerable bodies in motion shape-shift the binary oppositions and invite new combinations of experience-in-motion and experience-in-relation, and “the micropolitical potential of its in-betweenness.”²⁶ In this coming-together and moving-together of two bodies, “(...) a politics is made palpable whereby what is produced is the potential for divergent series of movements. This is a virtual politics, a politics

of the not-yet. In-forming analogously to the interval, these politics of touch are substantial but ungraspable. These are not politics we can choreograph but politics in the making. These are politics not of the body, but of the many becoming one, increased by one. The body-in-deformation is a multiplying sensing body in movement: many potential bodies exist in a singular body. These are politics of that many-bodied state of transition that is the collective.”²⁷

Seeds of minor political gestures

Between May and September 2021, I undertook several performative actions that later fed into the FNAF8 performance. On the one hand, these actions were part of the artistic research project *Anatomies of the Process* that I carried out with Natalia Chylińska.²⁸ On the other hand, they were part of my personal process of healing the wounds of sexual abuse and reworking elements of this experience via performative practice, as well as exploring the theme of gender identity. These actions were a mode of “re-membering”²⁹ and healing by the means of revisiting personal hurt and exploring my “material geo-neuro-biography.”³⁰

The first of these actions took place on May 31, 2021 and was witnessed and documented by Natalia Chylińska [Fig. 1–4]. The action comprised cutting my pubic hair and securing the hair in a hand-folded paper envelope. I carried out the action in my apartment in Gdańsk using scissors and a thick grey A4 paper. I began sitting naked on a chair. I placed the paper between my legs, so the pubic hair that I was cutting would fall on the paper. I was cutting the hair in a slow and caring manner. “Careful and caring in the act of taking care of”³¹ myself. Touching the genitals and making the vulva more visible by cutting the hair that covered it. I was trying to push my fingers deep into my own flesh, touching the pubic bone, softly pulling at the skin that covers my pubis and my groins, digging into the layers of skin, muscle tissue, fascia, nervous tissue, folding and

unfolding the labia. My fingertips wanted to see thorough the cartilaginous pubic symphysis, investigate the uterus, tubes, ovaries, and vagina. My primary concern was to reconnect with and care for a site in my body that has been violated and the borders of which were trespassed at numerous occasions. While continuing the act of cutting the hair, I kept reconnecting also with the concrete geographic location where the sexual assault took place, namely the Jaškowa Dolina Park in Gdańsk-Wrzeszcz. The act of cutting my pubic hair with an intention of reconnecting with the location and the experience of being raped, became - using an anatomical metaphor - a connective tissue bridging the present and the past, and opening them into the future via a minor gesture³² of caring for my intimate story and securing a material element of myself - pubic hair - in a hand-folded envelope, for future empathic engagements. It was “an embodied practice of re-membering - which is not about going back to what was, but rather about the material reconfiguring of spacetime mattering in ways that attempt to do justice to account for the devastation wrought as well as to produce openings, new possible histories by which time-beings might find ways to endure.”³³ In this sense, the minor gesture of caring for my intimate story and securing a material element of myself is “the activator, the carrier, (...) the *agencement* that draws the event into itself. It moves the nonconscious toward the conscious, makes felt the unsayable in the said, brings into resonance field effects otherwise backgrounded in experience. It is the forward-force capable of carrying the affective tonality of nonconscious resonance and moving it toward the articulation, edging into consciousness, of new modes of existence.”³⁴

Hence, the action carried out on the May 31, 2021 that encompassed a gesture of self-caring, as well as unfolding and folding of the self and matter, was also an act of detaching myself from my own hurt and opening my “isolated, autonomic, anthropocentric and agential »I«”³⁵ to a complex process of mourning understood as a “political embodied labour,”³⁶ that creates new

entanglements with the world. In this sense, “the conjunction between the minor gesture and life-living is a political ecology that operates on the level of the in-act, asking at every juncture what else life could be.”³⁷

The second action that grew out of the above-described process was a continuation of the embodied and political mourning process, in which I attempted to untangle my relationship with the actual location of the sexual assault (Jaškowa Dolina Park in Gdańsk-Wrzeszcz) and find new openings and new entanglements with life that could be born of minor gestures.

On June 30, 2021 I revisited the Jaškowa Dolina Park in Gdańsk-Wrzeszcz to reconnect with the landscape that I associate with violence and loss, and symbolically heal it. [Fig. 5–6]

My visit at the site was part of the long-duration performative walk carried out as part of the *Anatomies of the Process* project created by me and Natalia Chylińska. The performative walk encompassed a journey through Gdańsk during which me and Natalia revisited places that are of special importance to us and interacted with them. We also collected stones from each of the places/sites we interacted with, a material fragment of the place, and we labelled each with a word or phrase that for us resonated with this place or with our experience of this place.

Together with Natalia Chylińska, we pushed a table into the woods of Jaškowa Dolina Park and arrived at the small clearing – the exact site of the sexual assault. This is where I decided to plant the pubic hair I cut on May 31. I found a stone on the edge of the clearing. I lifted it in a caring manner, dug a hole with my bare hands and placed the pubic hair from the paper envelope in the ground, buried it, and then covered it with the stone. A minor gesture of planting a material part of myself in a place where another part of me has been lost, muted, fragmented, and violated by means of a brutal gesture of assault. This gesture was accompanied by the wish for the hair to grow, to be like seeds that can germinate or become a fertilizer for the growth of other lives. New entanglements.

The continuum

The gestures that emerged in the performative actions described above were transformed by me and Natalia Chylińska and became part of the score of our FNAF8 performance, calling forth the ecology of which they were part and creating new relational fields. The performance was a condensation of a long-term process into several gestures and movements that bring forth an actual change. The act of entrusting the other(s) with one’s nudity, vulnerability, and uncertainty is a practice of relationality that broadens the field of political gestures and opens new potentialities for collective acts of nurturing minor narratives and fostering non-dominant modalities of protest. The practice of naked care is about personalising the political questions, bringing them into the microscale of an individual person and their ecology, asking oneself – What do I need in my personal process of protesting? What alliances can help me foster care and “response-ability”?³⁸ What new entanglements can my caring and careful gestures activate and what new human and non-human configurations do they create?



1



2



3



4

1, 2, 3, 4. Katarzyna Pastuszek
intimate ritual, 31.05.2021, Gdańsk
 Phot. Natalia Chylińska



5, 6. Katarzyna Pastuszek and Natalia Chylińska – long-duration performance *Anatomies of the Process*, 30.06.2021, Jaśkowa Dolina Gdańsk, Phot. Vero Szafran



Katarzyna Pastuszak and Natalia Chylińska – unfitted performance, Festival of Naked Art Forms 8, Academy of Fine Arts Gdańsk – PATIO, 5.10.2022

Notes

¹ Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2012): 134-151.

² Black Venus Protest – a project initiated in 2016 by the Polish artists Magdalena Mellin and Monika Wińczyk in co-operation with the Colombian artistic collective Caldode Cultivo (Unai Reglero, Gabriela Córdoba Vivas, Guillermo Camacho). The project was produced by Łąźnia Centre for Contemporary Art of Gdańsk (Poland), within the framework of the European project *Artecitya.eu Envisioning the City of Tomorrow*. In 2017 and 2018 BVP was realised in Gdańsk and Gdynia and encompassed a series of performative interventions/protests in the public space carried out by BVP group I (2017) – Magdalena Mellin, Monika Wińczyk, Katarzyna Pastuszek, Magda Doborzyńska, Agnieszka Sprawka and BVP group II (2018) Katarzyna Lewandowska, Monika Wińczyk, Joanna Krysiak, Vanessa Szymikowska, Katarzyna Lewandowska, Magdalena Mellin. See katarzyna lewandowska, "Why Do We Need Women's Freedom? Feminist Artistic Activism Against Power. Anarcho-Porn-Resistance (Anarchopornopór)," *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* (Art and Documentation) no. 25 (2021): 279-292.

³ Katarzyna Pastuszek, "My #BlackVenusProtest," *Artecitya. Artist Residencies as a Process of Mutual Learning* (Gdańsk: ŁAZNIA Center for Contemporary Art, 2018), 46.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 55.

⁵ Claire Bishop, "Rise to The Occasion. Claire Bishop on the art of political timing," *Artforum*, vol. 57, 9(2019), accessed January 12, 2023, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201905/claire-bishop-on-the-art-of-political-timing-79512>.

⁶ Natalia Chylińska, Conversation with the author, 12 January 2023.

⁷ Ana Vujanović, Livia Andrea Piazza, "Introduction: People Are Missing..." *A Live Gathering: Performance and Politics in Contemporary Europe* (Berlin: b-books, 2019), 13.

⁸ The allegations of a "systemic, coordinated campaign of sexual violence by Russian forces" were voiced in late March/early April 2022, after the initial period of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. See. Bethan McKernan, "Rape as a weapon: huge scale of sexual violence inflicted in Ukraine emerges," *The Guardian*, accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/03/all-wars-are-like-this-used-as-a-weapon-of-war-in-ukraine>.

⁹ The outburst of protests in Iran were caused by the death of Mahsa Amini. Amini was arrested by Iran's morality police for allegedly violating the country's strict Islamic dress code and died in the custody. Amini's death was internationally condemned and triggered numerous acts of solidarity across the globe, including female politicians and celebrities who symbolically cut off their hair in a gesture of solidarity with Iranian women. See. Celine Alkhalidi, Nadeen Ebrahim, *Grief, protest and power: Why Iranian women are cutting their hair*, accessed: January 4, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/28/middleeast/iran-hair-cutting-mime-intl/index.html>.

¹⁰ Ana Vujanović, Livia Andrea Piazza, "Introduction: People Are Missing..." *A Live Gathering: Performance and Politics in Contemporary Europe* (Berlin: b-books, 2019), 15.

¹¹ "Minor gesture" – a term devised by Erin Manning and analysed by her in the book *The Minor Gesture*. Manning develops the concept of the minor gesture by analysing it from a variety of theoretical perspectives including art criticism, critical theory, and literary analysis and insights into the practice and experience of the minor gesture that open new possibilities of understanding politics, art, agency, and resistance. Manning situates the minor gesture in opposition to major/grand gestures, rooted in discourses and narratives of the majority and by linking it to Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis, explores its potential to shift power relations and introduce social change by altering perception and allowing the emergence of new ways of living and expression. See. Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹² Ana Vujanović, "Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance," *Dance, Politics & Co-Immunity. Current Perspectives on Politics and Communities in the Arts*, Vol. 1, eds. Stefan Hölscher and Gerald Siegmund, Berlin: Diaphnes (2013): 181-191.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Natalia Chylińska, Conversation with the author, 12 January 2023.

¹⁶ Natalia Chylińska, Conversation with the author, 12 January 2023.

¹⁷ Anna Figiel, "Symbolika włosów w polskiej kulturze ludowej," *Zeszyty Wiejskie*, no. 23 (2017): 126. See also: Anna Targońska, "Symbolika włosów i manipulowanie włosami w kulturze ludowej," *Lud* no. 82 (1998): 157-176.

¹⁸ Anna Figiel, "Symbolika włosów w polskiej kulturze ludowej," *Zeszyty Wiejskie*, no. 23 (2017).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 128-129.

²⁰ Judith Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Space. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: NY University Press, 2005).

²¹ Natalia Chylińska, Conversation with the author, 12 January 2023.

²² Tsing,

²³ Erin Manning, *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2019).

- ²⁴ Erin Manning, *Relationships: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2019), 13.
- ²⁵ *Ibidem*, 14-15.
- ²⁶ *Ibidem*, 28.
- ²⁷ *Ibidem*, 27.
- ²⁸ *Anatomies of the Process* – an artistic project created by Katarzyna Pastuszek and Natalia Chylińska in 2021, financed from the funds of the City of Gdańsk within the “Artistic Scholarship” programme.
- ²⁹ Karen Barad, “Troubling time/s and ecologies of nothingness: re-turning, re-membering, and facing the incalculable,” *New Formations* 92(2017): 56-86, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:92.05.2017>.
- ³⁰ *Ibidem*, 83.
- ³¹ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 73.
- ³² *Ibidem*.
- ³³ Karen Barad, “Troubling time/s and ecologies of nothingness: re-turning, re-membering, and facing the incalculable,” *New Formations* 92(2017): 63, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:92.05.2017>.
- ³⁴ *Ibidem*, 7.
- ³⁵ Monika Rogowska-Stangret, *Być ze świata* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2021), 77.
- ³⁶ Karen Barad, “Troubling time/s and ecologies of nothingness: re-turning, re-membering, and facing the incalculable,” *New Formations* 92(2017): 70, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:92.05.2017>.
- ³⁷ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 8.
- ³⁸ “Response-ability” – a concept that lies at the core of a post-anthropocentric feminist ethics, broadly discussed by such theorists as Donna Haraway, Vinciane Despret, Katharina Hoppe, Karen Barad, Hanna Meissner, Natasha Myers, Monika Rogowska-Stangret, among others. See Bibliography to this article.

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