



## Reflections on exhibition by Małgorzata Drohomirecka: Strategies of the unreliable narrator in dealing with nationality, patriotism, ethnicity in artistic feminist discourses

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### ABSTRACT

This is a report on the visual art collection WA(Y)ST(O)ED FREEDOM exhibited in the Centrala — Art Gallery and Creative Space in Birmingham, United Kingdom, 5<sup>th</sup>–25<sup>th</sup> November 2021. The authors discuss Małgorzata Drohomirecka's series of works, *Polonia 2020*, which consist of collages that reinterpret national and patriotic symbolism. Polonia is a very important role model for Polish women as well as for the political devise. The authors discuss the artistic strategies involved in deconstructing the national myths and social stereotypes used by the artist. These strategies are called “the unreliable narrator”, namely the means to look at history as a repository of themes and material which is now in need of reinterpretation, sometimes ridiculing, and dismissal. The paper includes the artist's commentary on her works.

### KEYWORDS

Polonia; Małgorzata Drohomirecka; unreliable narrator; patriotism; feminist narratives

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## PROPOSAL FOR THE SCHOOLS: POLONIA AS A CULTURAL REBELLION

Polonia, the name for Poland in Latin and many Romance and other languages. In modern Poland it is used when referring to the Polish diaspora. Yet, it is foremost the symbol, the image of a national personification. Is it a symbol of traditionalist politics with its heteronormative structures? Shall we abandon it? Rebel against? Or reclaim it? And make it speak differently?<sup>1</sup>

The series of works by Małgorzata Drohomirecka called *Polonia 2020* consists of bold collages: rather large and intense artworks, which — in a strange (and funny) and mysterious way — use Polish national and patriotic symbolism and turn it on its head. Polonia, a woman who symbolises Poland is seen in a series of works: *Polonia at the altar (Polonia u ołtarza)*, *Polonia practicing sado-masochism (Polonia praktykująca sado-maso)*, *Polonia in the hospital (Polonia w szpitalu)*, and many others. The works were first shown online, as was the case for many exhibitions during the pandemic, and then they found their off-line space at an exhibit in Birmingham Gallery Centrala Space under the leading title WA(Y)ST(O)ED FREEDOM. The wordplay suggested both “ways to freedom”, which relates to the romantic fights for independence under the Polish political partition (1793–1918) and “wasted freedom”, most likely suggesting the situation of Polish women in contemporary Poland. The WA(Y)ST(O)ED FREEDOM was curated by Marta Grabowska and shown for a month in November 2021.

Upon first seeing the works from the *Polonia 2020* series in autumn 2020, we immediately thought about schools and education, and how we dreamt of bringing this brave critical art into Polish schools, which seem to be increasingly controlled by the state. Drohomirecka’s works are excellent material for teaching both history and critical thinking, as well as a tool for assessing tradition. Drohomirecka deconstructs Polonia — the allegory of Poland through playful reinterpretation. The artist uses the national symbols, the flags, the national colours, the coats of arms, and a series of well-known paintings, that are canonical in the national discourse, to create today’s new Polish woman, who is sceptical towards the past, but happy to be part of national discourse. And indeed, the Polish woman, in the country that prides itself in having over 100 years of women’s emancipation, needs to fight for her position in the

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the works: Ary Scheffer, *Polonia*, 1831; Jan Matejko, *Polonia*, Illustration to Zygmunt Krasiński’s *Psalmy przyszłości (Psalms of the future)*, 1861; Artur Grottger, *Polonia*, 1863; Jan Matejko, *Rok 1863. Zakuwana Polska (Year 1863. Polonia enchained)*, 1864; Jan Styka, *Polonia*, 1890–1891; Stanisław Wyspiański, *Polonia*, 1892–1893; Jacek Malczewski, *Polonia*, 1914; Władysław Skoczylas, *Polonia*, 1915; Jacek Mierzejewski, *Polonia*, 1915; Jacek Malczewski, *Polonia II*, 1918.

public space. Today, women in Poland need to fight not only for their basic reproductive rights, but also for their well-being and safety, because in the current Polish nationalistic and religious discourse women are confined to the position of bearers of children: the children of the nation. In this way *Polonia 2020* is a strong and eager voice that exposes the pitfalls and dangers of nationalism. It is vital to notice that *Polonia 2020* uses national symbols indirectly: Drohomirecka uses previous artistic works (canonical works and the canonical message connected to these works) and deconstructs them. In this way, *Polonia 2020* processes both the national emblems, but also the previous artistic works that are using these emblems and, by doing so, the exhibition powerfully denounces not only the political spheres, but also parts of the canonical art and its place in their dangerous nationalist discourses. *Polonia 2020* tells us that both politics and art need to be reconsidered. Consequently, *Polonia 2020* becomes excellent material for deconstructing the monolithic discourse on nationalism, enrooted in Romanticism and Neo-Romanticism, and exposing its anachronism in the position of a woman in the contemporary world.

Feminist critique often challenges the anachronistic national discourses, especially in moments of the drastic events, resulting from this abusive nationalistic politics. A good example is set by the writings of Dubravka Ugresic, an author who describes herself as “post-Yugoslav, transnational, or even more precisely, postnational” (Ugresic, 2016). She analyses an outburst of nationalism during Yugoslav Wars (1991–1992). She shows how nationalistic discourses use women’s bodies as mailboxes. She writes that women are perceived as inferior beings in the imagination of a Yugo-man. During the wars, the women’s bodies are reduced to two basic functions: reproduction and communication. Therefore, raping and abusing women could be seen as writing letters on their bodies. The message is being sent to another man — an enemy. Let us imagine this metaphor being extended into political life: imposing an almost total ban on abortion is, in fact, using women’s bodies to send both triumphant and threatening messages, which signal that they take the control over women’s freedom. Some of these bodies, are already, or soon be dead. As Clive James emphasizes Dubravka Ugresic’s main message that: “Whatever faction a man represents, the uninvited penetration of a woman seems to be his main reassurance of personal power. Beside and scarcely below the threat of murder, rape becomes a part of a woman’s life expectancy” (James, 2007).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Rebecca Solnit formulates a similar thesis of constant present of a potential man’s violence against women in a traditional patriarchal culture also in a daily, supposed quite circumstance. Solnit describes her life as a young, 20<sup>th</sup> year old woman and for example her fear of walking alone at night. See: Solnit, “It felt ubiquitous then. It still does. You could be harmed a little—by insults and threats that reminded you were not safe and free and endowed with certain inalienable rights—or more by a rape, or more by a rape-kidnapping-torture-imprisonment-mutilation, more yet by murder, and the possibility of death always hung over the other



Illustration 1: *Polonia przed ołtarzem (Polonia at the altar)*, 2020

The artist, Małgorzata Drohomirecka, in an interview, given for this article, describes this work: *The red room evokes associations with the mystery serial drama Twin Peaks (1990). David Lynch often refers to the subconscious, psychoanalysis, and dreams. The red room is supposed to create the atmosphere of a mysterious ritual, a meeting of a secret brotherhood or a sect. The “dogs” made of chrome are a reference to some mythical creatures, like Cerberus, acting as the gate keepers, they make sure that the patriarchy stays untouched, they are the guardians of the status quo. The female silhouette is inspired by the Polish pop star, Doda — photo taken from the internet (Drohomirecka in conversation with UCH and AF, November 2021).*

Women in Yugoslavia, as in Poland, were deprived of their reproductive rights, and in this way were deprived of their freedom, unless we define freedom as fitting the patterns of nationalism and/or fascism — this

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aggressions. You could be erased a little so that there was less of you, less confidence, less freedom, or your rights could be eroded, your body invaded so that it was less and less yours, you could be rubbed out altogether, and none of those possibilities seemed particularly remote. All the worst things that happened to other women because they were women could happen to you because you were a woman. Even if you weren't killed, something in you was, your sense of freedom, equality, confidence” (Solnit, 2020: 63).

reminds us of the famous distinction between negative and positive liberty (Berlin, 1969). This distinction is always important, also in the framework of present-day political narratives, as it exposes who decides about the horizon of our actions, since positive liberty — as Berlin puts it — is involved in the answer to the question “what, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?” (Berlin, 1969: 121–122).



Illustration 2: *Ellenai*, 2020

*Drohomirecka: The figure of Ellenai is taken from Jacek Malczewski's painting and it is inspired by Polish Romantic prose poem, which contributes to the Polish national myths. She is flying somewhere in space — maybe digital space (the blue colour also indicates the computer screen). The folklore pattern is Estonian — a quite random, spontaneous choice. The horse is from stock images. This is the first painting from the series. I painted it a year earlier than the rest of Polonias. Here is what I wrote about this painting back then: Unfortunately, we are still enmeshed in the web of symbols and references from the times of political dependence, and it is difficult to detach from the past. That is why I wanted to juxtapose the passive nostalgia emanating from romantic paintings with strong, bold colours and dynamic composition. By analysing well known figures and putting them in a different context I wanted to deconstruct the traditional iconography of martyrdom.*

Indeed, the modern world, which often succumbs to the suspicious charm of populist and national propaganda, needs works by daring artists: the works of women who confront the normative artistic representations of national and state affiliations. They should enter schools, although this is probably a very ambitious dream. Perhaps teachers who start to deconstruct national myths and clichés, would face criticism from parents, school directors, and other teachers. It is not easy to fight against the founding myths. Just as in the first mainstream Polish lesbian film, *Nina* by Olga Chajdas (2018),<sup>3</sup> in which the teacher takes her class to the installation of the fascinating Polish artist, Natalia Bażowska and her work *Rodzisko* (*Birthplace*). There, students could enter an artistic “woman’s womb” and stay there, on the red comfortable cushions and contemplate a little. These students could also see the work of another critical Polish woman artist, Katarzyna Kozyra and her *Boys*, in which men have vaginas stuck to their bodies in place of penises (rather amusing “vagina panties”). This trip to the gallery initiates a real upheaval as the parents in the film are terrified that words such as vagina and uterus are being discussed in ensuing debates. The outrage caused by the discussion on wombs and vaginas can be an indication of the shock that can be awoken by an artistic reinterpretation of the national symbols, that some can treat as an attack. Frankly, we are longing for such a revolution.

Such a revolution is much needed in the country where the rainbow is treated as a political colour and is thought to be offensive in the religious context. Such a revolution is needed in the country where LGBTQ representation is denied. Aniko Imre in her text *Affective nationalism & transnational postcommunist lesbian visual activism* (Marciniak, Anikó, & O’Healy, 2007: 147–162) wrote that performances and art have often been a weapon against national conservatism. In cultures where otherness has limited visibility because of religious and national animosities, political activism and identity politics are not necessarily more influential than forms of performative activism: humorous, subversive forms of undermining the mainstream discourses that exclude some groups from their rights. Fearless art that confronts and exposes the hidden heteronormative ideologies of our times is needed! The events of the last few years in Poland: radicalisation of the abortion law, the anti-gender and anti — LGBTQ politics show that performative art in Poland is needed, and that it has become increasingly politicized in Poland, to the point that any critical artist would have to be from the emigrant community (fortunately, Drohomirecka already lives in London). Critical art is again in the dangerous position of being easily marginalised and denied by mainstream galleries that are slowly being brought under government control. But maybe it is only in these times,

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<sup>3</sup> See overview of the film *Nina* in Polish here: Chajdas, 2019; in English about the director Olga Chajdas: Chajdas, no date.

in which the state interferes in cultural discourses and tries to stop criticism, that critical art really blossoms we need deconstruction, humour, hyperbolic perspectives, and excessive art to see the absurdity of the political reality.



Illustration 3: *Polonia uprawiająca sado-maso* (*Polonia practicing sado-maso*), 2020  
 Drohomirecka about the *Polonia Practicing Sado-Maso*: *All the elements of this painting are inspired by stock images from the internet. I had certain abstract notion in my head when creating it, such as “subconscious” or “collective memory” and then I looked for images that would best match the idea. They may seem banal and obvious sometimes but then when all the elements are put together, we create a puzzle.*

#### WHY DO FEMINISM AND THE LEFT NOT LIKE PATRIOTIC NARRATIVES?

*Polonia 2020* by Drohomirecka is an amalgamation of works that are clearly feminist with a patriotic discourse, which is a rather puzzling combination. In 1997 Henry R. Huttenback wrote about the connection between feminism and

patriotism in his text *Dual loyalty: Between feminism and patriotism*.<sup>4</sup> Feminism and patriotism are the contradictory ways of thinking about the future and the past. Ethnicity (or ethno-geographical identity) and - connected to it — the concept of patriotism is focused on the past, rootedness, tradition, and conservatism (oriented on keeping the status quo and being opposed to changes, which implies the change of tradition). Meanwhile, feminism is oriented towards the future, and it is rather critical of the past, maintaining that much of “the traditional” needs to be improved and even transformed. Feminism is situated within the discourse around citizenship rather than that of patriotic debates. It is about gaining new rights rather than keeping any (national or ethnic) identities. Resignation from the patriotic discourse within feminism was historically a very interesting gesture. Thus, when we look for feminist patriotic women, we find women who criticized the existing order of things. The feminist Polish woman, feminist Polka, is a citizen, who sees inequality and injustice, who is sensitive to the dominance discourse, the discourse of power, and who stands in support of the interests of minorities (Zofia Nałkowska, Gabriela Zapolska, Maria Dulębianka, Irena Krzywicka).

Yet, the abandoning of the patriotic discourse resulted in the reappropriation of the discourse by the ultra-conservative and religious positions, who utilized the romantic paradigms of national identity almost as if the emancipatory changes of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century had not happened. Therefore, there is no positive, inclusive, feminist pattern of patriotic thinking. I don't know what it could look like. However, I know that what we have, especially in schools, is a national-sacrificial pattern of women's participation in the nation. All the paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century masters: Jan Matejko, Jacek Malczewski and Artur Grottger play their role very well in creating this pattern: creating the allegoric Polish woman, Polonia. Furthermore, this is a dangerous pattern, but what can we, the feminists, do with that? Shall we ignore and abandon altogether the patriotic discourse? Or shall we reclaim our way of taking part in the discourse, reclaim our agency, on our own terms? Let us now discuss the unreliable narrator. Here we will show how Polonia by Drohomirecka takes over the patriotic discourse.

Nevertheless, one can still wonder why the resignation from the patriotic discourse should be perceived as a failure? It is hard to deny that feminism is about citizenship, human rights and antidiscrimination, but above all feminism is about depriving patriarchy of its powers. Now, let's ask if it is possible to move at least slightly towards this direction with reference to “patriotism”? Putting aside the origins of the very term “patriotism”, which is deeply enrooted in the

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<sup>4</sup> In *Nationalities Paper*, online: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/nationalities-papers/article/introduction-dual-loyalty-between-feminism-and-patriotism/E049200CD5C-293BA7C6199AA2A222EA8> (10.11.2021).



patrilineal history of Europe, and refers, inevitably, to the country of the fathers, there is also another question which demands an answer: if patriotism is about social bounds (as it is most commonly defined), is Polonia by Drohomirecka an attempt to reclaim our agency or is it also an attempt to sever the ties? Supposing both positive answers are correct: could it be seen as the end of patriotism as we know it? There are other forms of both political and social loyalty which are stubbornly knocking on the doors of patriotism. Non-heteronormative groups are just one, extremely significant example of these. As can be seen by the example of the Republic of Ireland and its social change: the 2015 referendum on same-sex marriage followed by the 2018 referendum on legalizing abortion (both won by more than 60% votes), even in Catholic countries, traditionally identifying faith with nation, new, inclusive patriotism is possible. Both referenda were preceded by long ongoing debates on citizenship, patriotism, and the moral duties of the citizen - not exclusively towards "patria" but towards other members of the community. This historic change has been portrayed in the popular Irish documentary *Queen of Ireland* (2015), which follows the life and political activity of an Irish drag queen, Panty Bliss, who transforms the political debate into a drag show that allows her fellow-citizens to look at their country with both performative wit and compassion. A part of Polish society, which sees that this kind of shift is possible, is looking for a similar option.

#### UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

One can assume that history has already happened and has already been written and sanctified. Yet, some stories still have a chance to be told, many her-stories are still to be discovered, some stories still have the chance to be discarded or — at least — reinterpreted. Yet, most of history is a repertoire of already-told stories. So, what the feminist artist can do is draw from this repertoire, from these already told stories and narratives and arrange them into your stories — like puzzles that can be scattered and re-arranged. The feminist artist must act as the unreliable narrator, to pretend that she tells stories that people already know, to rely on what the audience wants to hear, and all this in order to change previous discourses, transform them and thus expose the absurdity of our well-known stories, which are accepted by the majority. I think that by putting a sadomasochistic outfit on Polonia, the symbol of the Polish woman, by cutting out fragments from well-known masters' clichés and arranging them in new colourful combinations, Drohomirecka creates an unbelievable narrator, one who surprises us, maybe outrages us, but who, above all, wants to say something new and ask us what national identity is for a modern woman. Is there a chance that the sentences "I love my country, I am a patriot, I am Polish" could sound cool, colourful, perhaps even rainbow-coloured?



Illustration 4: *Zabieranie głosu (Taking the floor)*, 2020

This is “Polonia-Frankenstein”, says Drohomirecka. She has been cut into pieces and glued back together. Her head is taken from Polonia by Stanisław Wyspiański, while her hands and torso belong to Henryk Siemiradzki’s *Christian Dirce*. The bottom part of the image is an excerpt from the music video titled *Mask off* by an American rapper and singer Future. My interest in hip-hop and pop culture began with my stay in New York City, where between 2005–2007 I worked as a painting assistant in the Kehinde Wiley’s studio.

The concept of the unreliable narrator came to me when analysing the art of Kara Walker and her *Fons Americanus* (2019) in the Tate Modern. The artist exposes and denounces the colonial British-American past, based on the systematic brutality of exploitation, but makes a fountain-puzzle out of it, funny and absurd, and at the same time full of hidden pain. Such a puzzle is offered also by Drohomirecka in her series *Polonia*. When Kara Walker says that her work “has always been a time-machine” that takes us back to the past, in order to understand our location in today’s concrete moment in space and in history, I think this ambition is also present in the works of Drohomirecka, who knows that in order to expose the past she cannot repeat the historical normative stories – they all must be told from the today’s position. The unreliable narrator

is taking us to the past, but she stays in the present and in this way exposes how much the past does not match our today's standards. It is a very clever and brave narrative strategy. They are unreliable narrators that are trustworthy in their support for the better future.

On the other hand, it is also interesting to challenge the unreliable narrator with the personal/objective quasi-opposition within narrative turn. The nationalistic and/or fascist version of patriotism is effortlessly presented by state propaganda as "universal", "objective", "one for all citizens", and endlessly refers to the national myths which are perceived in one, seemingly neutral way. As Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis imply this kind of neutrality "masks domination, conserves the interests of the status quo and reinforces oppressive social practices" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016: 49). In this way the unreliable narrator tells not only a story against the historical objectivity, but also her/his own, personal story, which means that Dorohomirecka's paintings can also be seen as a personal narrative. It can also be seen as a story of a woman within/against/in the context of national mythology. Furthermore, it is not a representative story for all Polish women but a specific narrative for this specific woman with all her spontaneous artistic choices exploring and manifesting both her consciousness and subconsciousness: a testimony, and yet an invitation to a multi-voiced discussion about the community and the way we feel about its myths and legends. A woman, who is also Polish, but not only Polish, must write herself into the past to secure her position in the modern world. To do that, however, she must become an unbelievable narrator: she cannot care about canons, dates, order, what fits, what doesn't, what's likely, or what's consistent. She must write herself back into all time periods to ensure her place in the future. Unreliable narrators in art are for women like a magical time-machine, which combines the past, and which deals with the historical erasure of women while simultaneously giving women the chance to rebuild an equal and full presence in the future. In this way the title of the exhibition at Birmingham's Centrala was very appropriate for our times, especially in the context of women history, perhaps especially in Eastern Europe. Maybe every history that shows the Ways to Freedom is also a story of pitfalls, and in many respects, it can just as easily be called *The History of Wasted Freedom*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This report had already been finished when the war in Ukraine started. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of February Oksana Zabuzhko's collection of essays *Platena Piotun* was also published in Polish translation. In her book the Ukrainian author analyses the nationalistic discourses involved in the postcolonial political power-relations, in which some voices are completely silenced and undermined. Patriotism, nationalism, politics are still to be revised and deconstructed by the feminist movement. Until then women, and women's bodies will be cruelly used in the power-games. See: Zabuzko, 2022.

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