

STATES OF FOCUS / 15.03–20.05.2019

15.03
–20.05.2019

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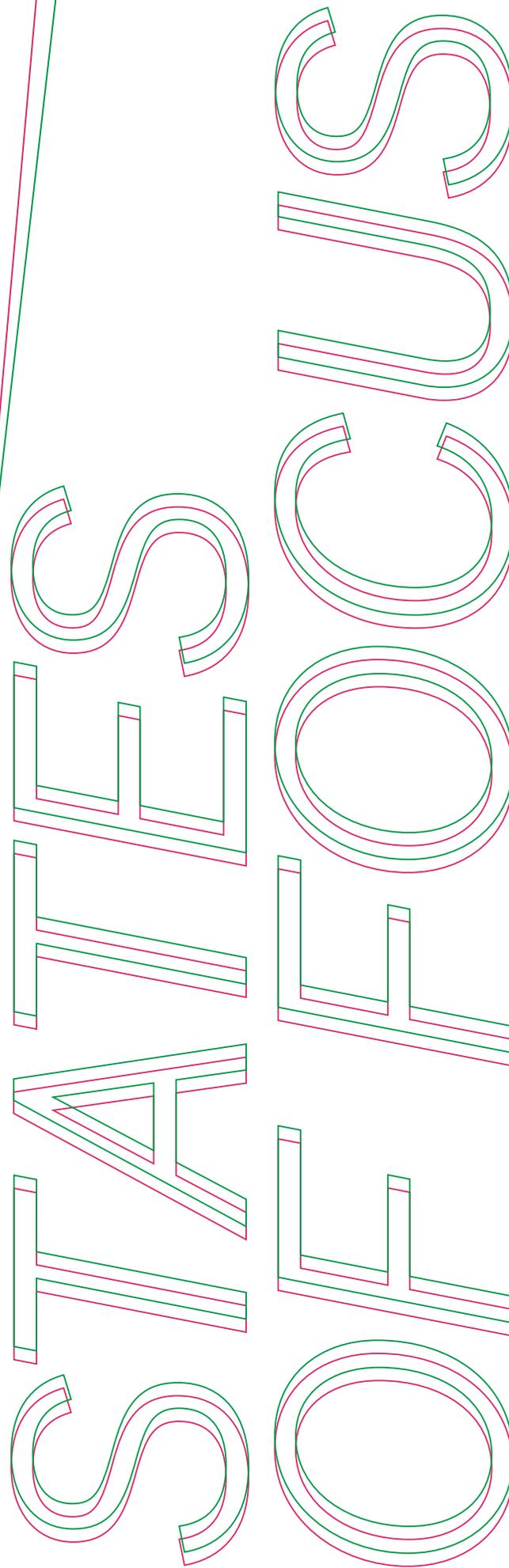
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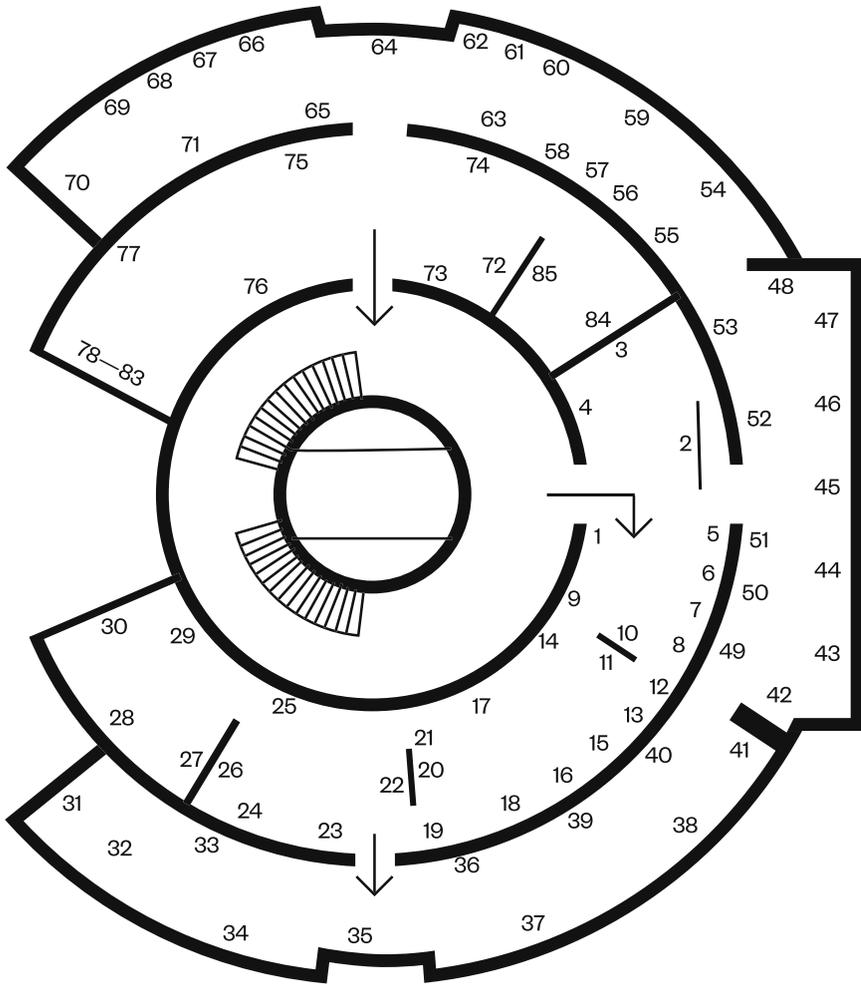
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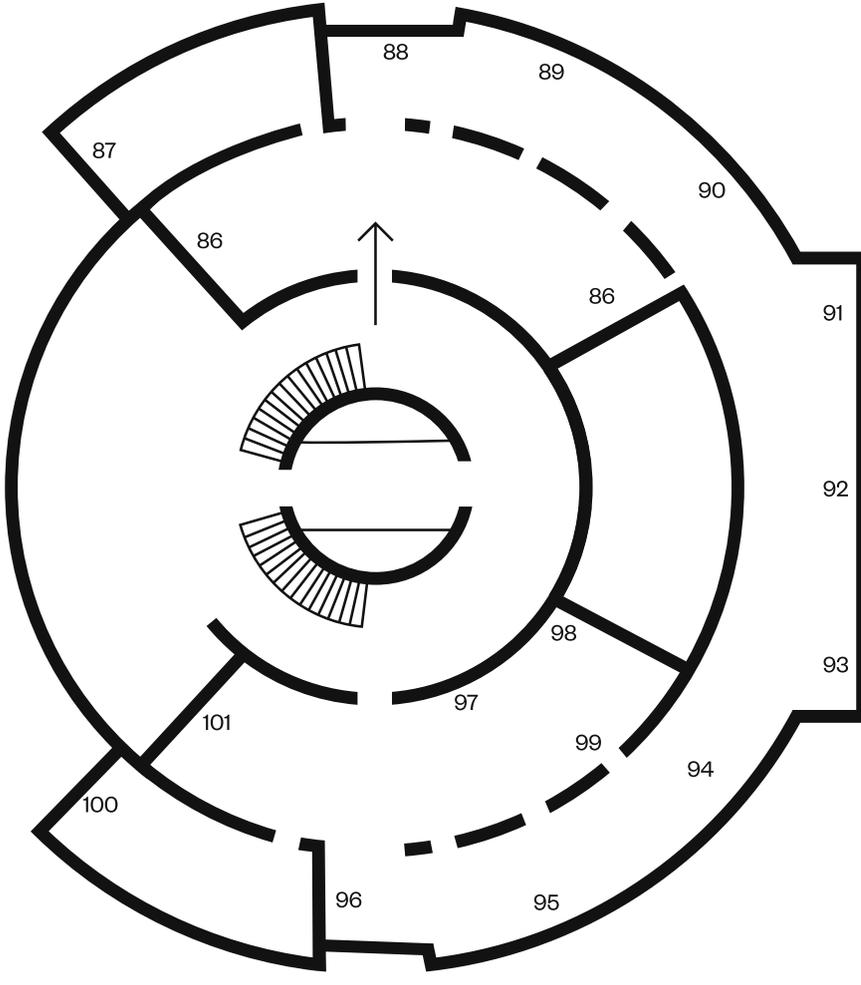
artists:

NATALIA LL
and
Marina Abramović
Anna Baumgart
Agata Bogacka
Geta Brătescu
Anetta Mona Chişa &
Lucia Tkáčová
Cipedrapskuad
Alexandra Croitoru
Anča Daučiková
Alla Georgieva
Teresa Gierzyńska
Katarzyna Górna
Aneta Grzeszykowska
Izabella Gustowska
Sanja Iveković
Elżbieta Jabłońska
Zuzanna Janin
Anna Jermolaewa
Jagoda Kaloper
Šejla Kamerić
Adu Karczmarczyk
Barbara Konopka
Katarzyna Kozyra
Zofia Kulik
Ewa Kuryluk
Anna Kutera
Cecylia Malik
Jolanta Marcolla
Dóra Maurer
Teresa Murak
Anna Niesterowicz
Dorota Nieznalska
Tanja Ostojić
Ewa Partum
Liliana Piskorska
Anna Płotnicka
Jadwiga Sawicka
Sędzia Główny
Jana Shostak
Teresa Tyszkiewicz
Julita Wójcik
Ewa Zarzycka
Agata Zbylut
Alicja Żebrowska

3RD FLOOR



4TH FLOOR



Taking its title from one of the works by Natalia LL, the exhibition *States of Focus* concentrates on the artist's own image, which she has been exploring almost since the beginning of her practice. Although the strategies of using her own appearance have changed over the years, the Wrocław-based artist consistently situated her face and body at the centre of her art. The exhibition confronts her oeuvre, produced over the span of more than five decades, with works by over 40 artists from Poland and countries of the former Eastern Bloc. This juxtaposition makes it possible to not only attentively analyse the transformations which women's self-portraiture has undergone in art history, but also to polemically approach the practice of the main heroine.

Based primarily on photography, video and actions for the camera, the exhibition concentrates on the moment when female artists point the camera lens at themselves. Consequently, it raises questions about performance of the self, strategies of representation, and constructing and de-constructing the image of a woman. Highlighting the historical continuity of these experiments offers a new perspective on the currently ubiquitous phenomenon of selfies, which permeates not only social media, but also the artistic discourse. By presenting the historical and international context of self-portraiture, the exhibition problematises the ambiguous gesture of self-analysis and poses questions about female artists' self-definition and the perception of women in society.

The invited artists investigate issues such as objectification of the female body, scopophilia, emancipating and oppressive aspects of sexuality, narcissism, acceptable and reprehensible social roles, the right to self-determination and individual freedom. An important facet of the exhibition is the influence of iconography and mythology on the forms of representation, the role of tradition and the potential change of status of the contemporary woman artist. The variety of perspectives on the female experience forms a multi-thread story that weaves together the social and political role of women and private narratives.

By concentrating on the phenomenon of self-presentation in art, the exhibition *States of Focus* invites the viewer to not only reinterpret the practice of the outstanding artist from Wrocław, but also to revisit her oeuvre in dialogue with canonical works that have defined the perception of women's art in Central and Eastern Europe.

Art realises itself in every moment of reality. Every event, every second, is singular for the individual and can never be repeated. This is why I record common and trivial events such as eating, sleeping, copulation, resting, speaking, and so on.

This is what Natalia LL wrote in 1972. The tension between the idea of permanent registration, which tends towards maximal objectivity and transparency – as expressed in *Intimate Registration* and *Topology of the Body* – and the staged theatricality of *The Velvet Terror*, is the best manifestation of the ambivalent character of self-representation. It results from the simultaneous desire to perform while seeking to express the truth about oneself. The impossibility of making an unequivocal statement comes to the foreground in Natalia LL's work *Word*, which records the articulation of a phrase that is known solely to the artist while remaining unintelligible to the viewer, leading to speculations and numerous possible interpretations. The relativity of perception in the context of the photographic medium is also emphasised by Zofia Kulik in her 1970 work that has not been presented before. Here, the artist reveals the very moment of taking a photograph, using light and screens that confuse the voyeuristic gaze and highlight the barriers of visibility. The significance of the adopted pose and selected framing in constructing a seemingly objective depiction is stressed in Jolanta Marcolla's *Dependence*. In the series of self-portraits, the artist's eyes are fixed on an area beyond the frame, inaccessible to the viewer and outside the photograph. Seriality and performing for the camera are important aspects also in the case of Dóra Maurer's work. The artist combines in it threads related to modernism, class politics and feminism. By caressing cobblestones that were used as projectiles during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Maurer connects intimate, private gestures with political history and social norms determining the currently acceptable roles of women and their involvement in processes affecting the course of history. Jolanta Marcolla's cycle *Trial* (1971–1975) – a creative collective co-founded by her – such as the activation and liberation of the viewer's imagination while rejecting the so-called fine-art photography, which was strongly promoted in Poland under communism. By introducing slight modifications of props or changes of perspectives, Marcolla emphasises the manipulative potential of photography in order to sensitise the viewer to it. At the same time, she approaches the eponymous trial with irony. A peculiar reversal of the concept is visible in *Fur*, another work by the same artist in which she becomes the central, immobile element orbited by the camera, which highlights the changeability of the surroundings *vis-à-vis* the artist's stableness. The limits of faithful representation by the photographic medium are also explored in Marcolla's *Self-Description*, in which the artist added handwritten captions to provide information about what the photographs had failed to convey. Although most of her self-portraits were taken with a self-timer or shutter release controller, in *Visual Acuity* she is holding mirrors to reveal the presence of an assistant – a person who is typically unseen in the process of creating artists' depictions of themselves. It yet again emphasises the relativity of the photographic medium and the consequences of minor shifts.

Whereas Marcolla stresses the impossibility of looking

7 directly at the photographic subject, not least because of the peculiar filter in the form of the camera, Anna Kutera perversely insists on looking into her eyes. When Marcolla resorts to verbal expressions to unveil the limits of photography, Kutera seems to disregard them simply by providing a clear instruction and allowing the photograph to become her objectified substitute, capable of giving instructions to the viewer. In *Feminist Painting*, Kutera's work created at Alfons Mazurkiewicz's studio when she was attending the State Higher School of Fine Arts, the artist directly addresses the subject of feminism by perversely combining painting – in particular, abstractionism in the spirit of Jackson Pollock, which is conventionally deemed to be an essentially "masculine" form of expression – with household chores, typically attributed to women. This very early work raises the issue of women's invisible work while ironically approaching the nascent phenomenon of what would come to be known as feminist art. The subject of women's expressiveness in relation to the body is also raised by Natalia LL in her work *Body Alphabet*. By arranging her body to form letters, and thus by transforming corporeality into semantics, she highlights the impossibility of expression due to body objectification.

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11 In the 1975 work titled *Natalia!* and performed in Beograd, a choir comprised of students and artists conducted by Hungarian artist Katalin Ladik recites all the possible permutations of the name Natalia. Of key importance here is the involvement of invited participants, who thus ceased to be observers and became co-creators of the event. Works from the mid-1970s featured in this exhibition clearly indicate a shift in the artists' attitude towards the role of the audience as well as towards the medium of film. Jolanta Marcolla's video installation titled *Dimension 2* (which has survived only in the form of photographic documentation) stresses the technological aspect of producing video, emphasises the medium's relativism and the ensuing threat of destabilisation of the image. Marina Abramović's 1974 video *Rhythm 2* is also based on transforming the audience into participants in the creative process in their own right. During her performance, the artist explored the limits of her body until reaching the point of unconsciousness. In the first part of the performance, she ingested a pill for patients with catatonia, which deprived her of muscle control, but not of consciousness. After a short interlude, the artist swallowed a pill used in the treatment of schizophrenics, which left her bodily functions intact, but resulted in her loss of consciousness. In the two-channel video documenting the performance, Abramović endows the reactions of the audience with a status equal to her own actions, thus indicating the impossibility of separating the performer from the onlookers. Anna Kutera in her 1975 work *The Shortest Film in the World* is looking at a single film still showing the back of her head, which gives an impression that what she actually sees is her face, invisible to the viewer. In the same year, Jolanta Marcolla – one of the first Polish artists who used video in her practice – made the work *Kiss*, in which she assumes the role of a flirtatious starlet sending kisses to the viewers, who are thus assigned the role of adoring fans. Sanja Iveković's video *Instructions* refers to the pressure of the beauty regime, making a comment about one of the key feminist observations that "the personal is political." *Instructions* belongs to a series of Iveković's works from the 1970s, described by her as "sweet violence", in which she concentrated on the seductive and sexually attractive image of women as promoted by the media. Iveković was one of the first artists from the former Yugoslavia to

16 call herself a feminist, perceiving it as a gesture of dissent against the communist regime, which viewed feminism as a bourgeois import from the West. References to the official socialist political doctrine also played a significant role in the practice of Geta Brătescu, a Romanian artist whose series of self-portraits shows her face become increasingly obscured by layers of transparent foil. Following Ceaușescu's 1971 July Theses, the dictator introduced a rigorous cultural policy and ordered a return to the idea of socialist realism. Brătescu's work symbolically depicts the transition from subjectivity to objectivity, or, in the Romanian context – from realism to abstraction.

17 In Poland, the period of liberalisation and increasingly greater opening to the West under the leadership of Edward Gierek is reflected in artworks criticising consumerism and popular culture. The pressure to be young and sexually attractive became the subject of Ewa Partum's work *Change*, which she presented for the first time in 1974. The artist had one half of her face covered with aging makeup, so that the resulting chimaeric appearance triggered associations with a theatre mask. By accelerating the inevitable aging process, which, in Partum's opinion, discredited her as a woman and artist due to the imposed requirement of attractiveness, the artist exceeded chronology and, in a peculiar way, biology – she rejected the social norms that would render her unimportant in the future and made her dependent on a look of approval at present. Nature and its cyclical processes are often identified with the woman's body in the practice of Teresa Murak, who would use cress to weave robes or as an object of rituals. In this way, her ephemeral actions combined environmental issues, which were slowly surfacing in the public debate in Poland, with female corporeality. Natural laws were therefore associated with fertility and mystery, and contrasted with the overly rational structures and hierarchies that privileged men. A peculiar antithesis of this narrative is provided by Natalia LL's works from the *Artificial Photography* series, in which the artist adopts stereotypically seductive poses, mocking the clichés of sexual availability, but first and foremost stresses the functioning of photography as an artificial language, detached from reality rather than transparent vis-à-vis it. She used similar measures in the film *Artificial Reality*, finished one year later. By playing the role of a seductress, she ironically refers to her iconic piece *Consumer Art* from a few years before in order to mock the convention of erotic films. Although she appears to succumb to the logic of the lubricious male gaze by turning her objectified, observed body into a performance, she simultaneously seems to highlight the artificial forms of expressing and performing desire in popular culture.

22 Naked, wrapped in a fur coat – a symbol of luxury – and wearing dark glasses that have become iconic today, she is sitting on a characteristic sofa in a simple room: in *Animal Art*, Natalia LL perversely highlights the connections between consumerism and eroticism, only to shatter the whole construction against the crude reality of economic shortages in Poland in the late 1970s. Ewa Kuryluk in the cycle *Me a Hundred Times* makes a mocking reference to the tradition of black-and-white artistic portraiture by twisting her face in a grimace and adopting other poses far removed from sex appeal. The canons of classically defined feminine beauty were also mocked by Anna Kutera, whose work *Hairstyles* ironically stresses the artist's right to self-determination and rejection of fashion dictatorship by arranging her hair in unconventional ways. With her characteristic amusement, Kutera exposed the

25 Polish society's aspirations to Western fashion and the shallowness of defiance based on the rejection of external emblems of elegance. Izabela Gustowska in the works making up the cycle *Relative Similarities* addresses the phenomenon of duality, whose starting point is her own experience of twinship. Gustowska analyses it from the angle of searching for her own identity versus the potential of multiplication, which acquires special significance in the context of the photographic medium deprecating the concept artwork's uniqueness. By pondering existence reflected in a double, she arrives at questions concerning "her own form of realness" and the essence of being that transcends the visible. In Natalia LL's series of works titled *Points of Support*, the artist arranges her body to form the constellations of the northern sky, which she explained with the following words:

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// I want to constitute in myself both macrocosm and microcosm, reduce them to a psychophysical orientation limited by my physical finitude. I will thus be a medium for reproducing the macrocosm in earthly conditions.

27 Works from the *Point of Support* series mark a shift in her practice towards metaphysics, mysticism and exploring the subconscious, as exemplified by the project *Pyramid* connected with the *Dreaming* series.

28 By experiencing the pyramid as a special place, the artist admits the possibility that this structure reveals our internal order, that *this personal revelation effected through art will make us aware of how lonely we are among the maddening crowd*. Similarly, Teresa Tyszkiewicz's film *Breath* indicates a departure from the analytical approach to the medium in favour of a shift towards expressiveness, the subconscious and spontaneity intended to examine the roles attributed to women in the contemporary iconosphere and the collective subconscious. Although the artist presents herself as a vamp or a woman aware of her sexuality, she transgresses the unambiguously erotic image and reveals the subversive potential of the ritual. Whereas in Tyszkiewicz's film the heroine appears to be fully self-sufficient and in control of the surrounding world, Ewa Partum in her film *Change* turns her body into an object of manipulation. Returning to her 1974 idea, Partum made one half of her body look old and, after finishing the performance that she declared a work of art, wrote the following inscription in the gallery: "A male artist has no biography. However, a female artist has one. It is important if she is young or old." Partum directs attention to the connections between a woman artist's age and her career, emphasising the mechanism of discrediting experience and maturity in favour of physical attractiveness and peculiar naïveté. Described in this way, a woman's body turns out to be a source of strength and erotic power, but on the other hand its loss of vitality heralds marginalisation and uselessness. In this context, Natalia LL's explorations of her subconscious in the *Dreaming* series could be perceived as attempts to exceed corporeality and discover sources of cognition beyond the physical matter of her own body. *Dreaming* was based on the everyday activity of sleeping, which the artist transferred into a gallery and the realm of art in order to penetrate the essence of intuitive cognition. Dressed in a white robe triggering associations with pagan priestesses or prophetesses, her vulnerable

and unconscious body was visible to the audience, photo and video cameras. However, the essence of the action – the exploration of unconscious and irrational cognitive processes – was accessible solely to the artist. Natalia LL rejected “technicalism” and “rationalised art” rooted in conceptualism because, as she stressed in 1978,

being more closely related to the whole psychological system of man, art is, so to say, intrinsically inconsistent, just as man is inconsistent.

- 31 For the next few years – until the mid-1980s, when *Scorpio's Dance* was made – Natalia LL arranged séances intended to achieve the unity of spirit and matter through focus in order to find energy for infinite development of the self. In 1984 she wrote that *performance is the anti-nomy of decay and deterioration*. She combined questions about materialism with social practice and *barometric attachment to collective moods*, because she viewed the society as the source of both knowledge and falseness. In
- 32 1980, when the work *Natalia LL Reads the History of the Church* was presented, she wrote: *the materialist conviction of man's greatness is just a false belief in the mission of the naked ape*. While Natalia LL in the early 1980s approached corporeality from the transcendental perspective, as an element of cognition beyond materialism, other
- 33 female artists used their image as part of different strategies of self-expression. Izabela Gustowska subjected photographs to painterly processes in order to investigate the phenomenon of existing beyond herself, the possibility of unique expression and the private character of existential confession. In Teresa Gierzyńska's photographs from that
- 34 period, an important role is played by intimacy and privacy, in which the complex and ambiguous aspects of femininity can be freely expressed. Despite their contrivance and formal sophistication, Gierzyńska's self-portraits seem to be intended to reveal a truth about the artist, to show her in a way that she sees herself, as if they were made by a woman only for herself.
- 35 Another attitude towards introspection can be observed in Natalia LL's works from the *States of Focus* series, which she described in 1980 in what could be seen as her manifesto of life based on self-awareness and self-contemplation: *Concentration. Calming down. Inner concord. Harmony. Becoming focused. Removing oneself from chaos. Polarisation of consciousness. Monitoring and self-monitoring. Reflecting. Thinking. Thoughtful non-thinking. Wise non-thinking. Spontaneous and unhurried wisdom. Slowing down. Concentration*. Jolanta Marcolla in the work
- 36 *I'm not a Feminist, Although I Should* presents a completely different kind of reflection about herself as a woman and artist. Dressed in hunting gear, she gracefully poses with a rifle, only to finally aim it directly at the camera – or the viewer. Marcolla's eponymous declaration could be equally true for many woman artists at that time. Although they took up subjects connected with the role of women in society – creating works that would later be deemed iconic for Polish feminist art – they did not consider themselves to be feminists, perceiving it mostly in terms of futile struggle against men. At the same time, women artists in those days intentionally raised the issue of the objectification of the female body, whose role was to serve the pleasure of men rather than function autonomously and belong to an individual capable of self-determination. In
- 37 *Objectified Outlines*, Dóra Maurer stresses that the very

- moment of posing for a photograph objectifies the model by transforming her according to a contour outlined on her body. Another form of game with the reifying gaze is suggested by Anna Kutera in *The Strip Session*. The undressing artist remains outside the frame and all that the viewer is allowed to see is a growing pile of clothes flung on the chair. Yet another strategy of revealing her image is adopted by Sanja Iveković in the work *Personal Cuts*, in which the artist cuts one hole after another into a stocking covering her face. As she performs the action, images of her face are juxtaposed with fragments of Yugoslavian TV programmes, indicating the influence of ideology not only on individual identity, but also on the image of an individual. The use of propaganda programmes based on nostalgia, identity-shaping strategies and politics of memory partially reveals the artist's story, who situated herself in the background of the official narrative in the perverse game of looking and being observed.

- 40 In Poland, the political turmoil at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s – the carnival of Solidarity followed by the introduction of martial law – was reflected in art, too. During the legendary international exhibition *Construction in Process*, organised by artists in cooperation with the Łódź branch of Solidarity just before the imposition of the Martial Law, Natalia LL presented the séance *Twitches*, in which she went into a trance and moved little bells by means of strings attached to her hands. By assuming the role of a shaman shaking in convulsions, the artist expressed feelings and tensions that were otherwise inaccessible to those who were observing the ritual – her body became a transmitter of undiscovered and unrationalised contents. A tellingly different relationship between the female body and the socio-political situation was outlined
- 41 by Ewa Partum in the action *Hommage à Solidarność*. The naked artist – wearing only high heels – imprinted her lips on the eponymous inscription. Referring to visual poetry – the imprint of lips pronouncing a sound replaced letters – Partum thus combines the act of speaking with a kiss. This tribute to the trade union is a gesture in which the artist's naked body could be perceived as a sacrifice or object of love.

- 42 In her 1986 work *Apage Satanas, or Begone, Satan*, Natalia LL sheds the white robe of a prophetess and transforms herself into a trickster-witch. In 1987, when analysing the Judaeo-Christian dualism of good and evil, symbolised by the Absolute Being who *created all things good and spiritual* and Satan who created the *corporeal and visible ones*, she concludes that *art is qualified for an artificial investigation of what is part of our reality whose area is defined by the Absolute and Satan*. *Apage Satanas* inaugurates elaborate cycles of self-portraits in which the artist focuses on her head and subjects it to a number of processes aimed at shattering the image of her face. The existential perspective plays an important role in these works – the artist links it with religion, faith and magic. In 1991 she wrote: *The ability to absorb external matter is an incredible secret of the head: the tenet that bread becomes flesh and wine blood is demonstrated here with great force. (...) The view that art is to be a mirror doesn't have a snowballs chance in hell, because both life and reality are mixtures of commonplaceness and the present day. But real joy can be evoked by the fatalistic use of the head in black and white magic. Art can fend for itself not on the strength of trivial connections, for our God is either willing or not to reveal our different nature*. While departing from the aesthetics and forms of conceptual art, Natalia

48 LL nevertheless highlights the conceptual significance of her works, in which the head is both the subject and object of cognition. In the first half of the 1990s, the artist made a number of works drawing directly on Norse mythology, especially in a form evoked by Wagner. As Brunhild, the bravest and most powerful of the Valkyries, she rejects Wagnerian pathos and solemnity in favour of grotesque. Thus Brunhild-Natalia LL calls into question both male and female power. In doing so, she resorts to the motif of the banana, which she already used in the early 1970s. In 1991 Natalia LL commented on *Consumer Art* and noticed:

In a certain way I also embraced feminism, though I realise the xenophobia of feminism is not exactly a woman's liberation but her imprisonment in the claws of the vagina and uterus.

Such a simplified definition of gender essentialism determining the woman through biologically-based features and fighting for reproductive rights – which were important for second-wave feminism – was presented by the artist at a time when the so-called third-wave feminism was emerging in the West. It embraced the experiences of women that had previously been marginalised due to their skin colour, sexual orientation, low financial status or other factors that would surface in the so-called feminist art in Poland much later.

49 In the late 1980s Ewa Partum in her highly personal work *Marriage Disaster* explored the subject of domestic violence, which was considered shameful by many. Whereas in 1974 her double face in the work *Change* emphasised the social pressure to be beautiful, in 1987 the artist focused on physical violence as an experience connected with being a woman. The first work performed by Marina Abramović after her separation from Ulay was *Dragon Heads*, in which pythons slither around the head of the motionless artist sitting in an ice circle. The snakes follow the energy and warmth of Abramović's body, who refrains from any reaction or movement that could provoke the reptiles. However, the photographs documenting the performance do not reflect the mortal danger; instead, they trigger associations with the ancient Medusa with snakes in place of hair, who would turn those who gazed upon her into stone. A distinct strategy of using her own image and biography was adopted by Ewa Zarzycka, who often employs oral performance in her practice. Based on personal stories, this method rejects the formal photo-medialism of video art. In the work *Maintaining the Artistic Position* she talks about the difficulties of the creative process before concluding that nothing will aid her more in achieving the eponymous task than high-heeled shoes. On the other hand, in the work *Kates-Threads*, made by Katarzyna Górna in collaboration with Katarzyna Kozyra when they were still students at Grzegorz Kowalski's studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, the artists focus on their friendship and fun instead of rivalry. Tying themselves together with a thin strings while dying their hair, they seem oblivious to the camera, their naked bodies are not posing, not manifesting anything and not resisting the voyeuristic gaze – they are the artists' property, to be used solely by them. Presenting the woman's body as it is and for its own sake, which undermines the logic of the male gaze, was taken to the extreme by Alicja Żebrowska, whose triptych *Discharging* shows the defecating artist. Overcoming the taboo connected with everyday physiology could be viewed as an attempt at demystifying femininity perceived as

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subtleness, mystery, politeness, passiveness and charm.

54 Katarzyna Kozyra in the work titled *Olympia* makes a reference to Édouard Manet's famous 1863 painting, who in turn alluded to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* from 1534. By repeating the composition and pose from the classical depiction, Kozyra shows her naked body during chemotherapy. However, while contrasting classical beauty and female vitality as presented in the canonical paintings with her own ailing body during the treatment, the artist does not deprive it of dignity. Displaying illness – a reminder of mortality – breaks the social taboo against exhibiting physical suffering, decrepitude and body degradation; at the same time, the artist rejects the primacy of the male gaze.

55 Zofia Kulik also makes a reference to classical representations known from art history. In the work *The Splendour of myself III*, she prepares a photographic collage resembling the sixteenth-century portraits of Queen Elisabeth I, which she constructs from elements borrowed from her own practice and the practice of cooperating artists. In Kulik's version, the splendid attire representing royal power and wealth is made from pieces of her own works and images – the artist's richness lies in her depictions, collected over her lifetime. A peculiar video collage was also made by Anna Płotnicka, whose *Unfinished Film* shows the process of placing various objects belonging to the artist on her face. She thus emphasises the impact of seemingly unimportant, everyday items on constructing the biography of an individual – their accumulation does not determine the financial status, but the richness of intimate memories, the individual past and everyday toing and froing. Barbara Konopka in her *Multiple Portrait* makes a reference to the canon of art history, which is overwhelmingly dominated by men. Wearing a male, the artist repeats Witkacy's iconic portrait from ca. 1915–1917, which he made in Petersburg while serving as an army officer. By assuming the classical representation of the "genius" artist and embedding herself in such narrative, Konopka brings to attention the fact that until recently women were absent not only from art, but also from political life. In a video based on found propaganda footage documenting Edward Gierek's visit to her kindergarten, when the First Secretary greeted the artist as a child, Anna Niesterowicz combines Gierek's official, ideologised image with her private history in order to finally present herself as a grown woman, equal to the politician.

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59 In 2000 – the same year when she made the work *Birth According to the Body*, a composite photo showing the artist's head covered by a mask-cast taken from her face – Natalia LL continued her reflection on the relationships between the body and spirit, and wrote:

The spirit and energy somehow result from the fact that the body is physical. Spiritual experience is the sublimation of reflections and experiences embedded in corporeality. An interesting example is provided by the practices of mystics, whose physical suffering led to spiritual development.

By entering into a discussion with the Catholic interpretation of the connections between the body and spirit, Natalia LL's explorations significantly differ from the subjects raised in other contemporary works. In 2001, three video works featured in this exhibition were made by artists representing various generations and nationalities, but brought together by a similar reflection on the

60 socially-sanctioned depictions of women – as courtesan, warrior or housewife. Tanja Ostojić in the performance *I'll Be Your Angel* assumed the role of an escort and accompanied Harald Szeeman – one of the most famous curators in the world – during the opening of his exhibition at the Venice Biennale. Wearing a glamorous dress and a radiant smile, Ostojić repeated her work from several years before – shaving Malevich's *Black Square* on her pubic hair – with the provision that only Szeeman was allowed to see the original and admit it as an artwork participating in the biennale. Zuzanna Janin decided to enter the ring and face Przemysław Saleta in a never-ending boxing match. Although the undecided *Fight* had been preceded by months of preparatory training, the physical disproportions between the two boxers and their incomparable experience in throwing punches revealed the grotesque character of a confrontation based on physical strength. Julita Wójcik focused on an activity that is traditionally attributed to women – she spent hours peeling potatoes in the exhibition room of the Zachęta National Gallery of Art. She thus emphasised the fact that women – especially in post-socialist countries, in which a vast majority of them worked professionally – perform a huge amount of work without remuneration. The so-called invisible labour of women, such as cooking, cleaning up, looking after children or infirm family members, is commonly considered to be their duty, not a work that is worthy of payment. Elżbieta Jabłońska, who posed dressed as superhero with her son in their flat, combined the convention of sacred depictions with pop-culture. On the one hand, she stressed the exclusively male realm of heroism, and on the other hand she elevated maternity by accentuating values such as caring, nurturance, tenderness and love. Katarzyna Górna used the convention of a triptych depicting herself, her younger sister and mother to illustrate how the process of female aging and the passage of time determines women's expectations and aspirations.

65 In her texts and works making up the cycle *Birds of Freedom*, Natalia LL points to the intuitive and unpredictable connections between her art and tragic events. As an example, she indicates the chronological coincidence of her self-portraits in a gas mask and the attack on the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow, where dozens of people died because of gas poisoning during the liberation of the hostages. In 2002 Natalia LL wrote:

I think that art, just like the Bird of Freedom, penetrates the future, the present and the past in order to reveal the unknown and invisible. My role comes down to the function of a scribe, who meticulously records the mysterious intuitions flying on the wings of our imagination.

66 Natalia LL's symbolic and transcendental works from this period stand in stark contrast to works by artists who perceive symbolic violence and the sense of marginalisation due to being a woman as an inalienable element of their everyday experience. Alexandra Croitoru's *Self-Portrait with the Prime Minister* belongs to a series of emblematically patriarchal photographs, showing the artist alongside well-known Romanian men. She adopts poses known from bourgeois portraits – of a woman standing in the shadow of a powerful man displaying his authority and might. Alla Georgieva combined her image with commercial aesthetics to accentuate the connections

68 between the commodification of the female body, consumerism and mass media sensationalism. Another work by the same artist, *AG Gold Jewellery, Collection Balkan*, is a reminder of the recently ended Balkan wars. Georgieva juxtaposes military camouflage with the slogan *The art of being unique* and makes a reference to sites of war crimes where rape was considered a means of fighting the enemy. Šelja Kamerić in the work *Bosnian Girl* overlays her photographic portrait with text written on the barracks wall by an unknown Dutch soldier of UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Forces), who was stationed in Srebrenica, where one of the largest massacres of civilians during the Balkan wars occurred: *No teeth...? A mustache...? Smell like shit...? Bosnian girl!* In the poster presented in public spaces, Kamerić, who grew up during the wars in Yugoslavia, merges her own experience of oppression and marginalisation with that of thousands of women who had fallen victim to violence and discrimination. Choosing the form of a poster, i.e. a medium intended for mass distribution and strongly permeated with commercial aesthetics, is an important element of woman artists' self-representation strategies. Dorota Nieznalska prepared a poster for a 2002 competition organised by the Federation for Women and Family Planning, which was meant to promote women's right to self-determination, including the right to legal abortion, contraception and sexual education. Nieznalska's submission refers to the symbol of the crown of thorns, thus accentuating the social and religious determinants influencing women's reproductive rights. The video by the duo Anetta Mona Chişa and Lucia Tkáčová shows the artists lying on the bed, laughing and talking about the sexual attractiveness of heads of states. A situation in which young and attractive women judge men in power by their sexiness is more than just a reversal of what is commonly deemed to be the natural state of affairs. The artists' honesty and laughter demonstrate that, contrary to appearances, it is easy and common – although rarely done in public – for women to judge men according to the latter's attractiveness. *Dialectics of Subjection* is a proposition based on the reversal of the male gaze, in which the woman is the gazing subject who uses such power in combination with carefree laughter and privileging of girlhood and female friendship. Anna Jermolaewa in the video *Research for Sleeping Position* focuses on refugees' solitude and lack of support. The artist draws on her own experience of forced migration and homelessness after fleeing the Soviet Union, highlighting structural obstacles – such as benches with armrests positioned to stop people lying on them – as examples of systemic marginalisation intended to drive the vulnerable out of public spaces.

72 Violence against women becomes a symbolic point of reference in Natalia LL's work *Eroticism of Terror*, which depicts the artist's naked body, covered only by fragments of a gas mask, emerging from the dark to create an oneiric, grotesque portrait. Anna Baumgart's video titled *Ecstasies, Hysterics and Other Sainly Ladies* shows the artist alongside other women acting out staged – but not fictional – scenes of self-aggression. By concentrating on female madness and hysteria, Baumgart weaves a story about women's fears, self-inflicted pain, intimate rituals performed on the body, solitude and ecstasy. The artist draws on 19th-century theories of hysteria and hagiographies of holy ecstatic to problematise women's hysteria as a subversive and potentially revolutionary phenomenon. Dorota Nieznalska made the video *Praying Position* at a time when criminal proceedings had been instituted against her for blasphemy. Although resembling prayer,

- 75 the position adopted by the artist is actually a physical exercise and a test of arm muscle strength. In the photographic cycle under the title *Untitled Film Stills*, Aneta Grzeszykowska repeats Cindy Sherman's iconic black-and-white series of photographs from the late 1970s in a maximally faithful way, but in colour and set in Warsaw. Sherman spent three years staging film stills and photographing herself disguised as the main heroine in order to momentarily embody the stereotypical representations of femininity. Grzeszykowska repeats Sherman's entire cycle by assuming the role of the canonical American photographer and problematising the project in terms of originality and peripherality. The elaborate cycle *In Art Dreams Come True* by Katarzyna Kozyra shows the artist learning to perform femininity in a staged, artificial manner. To do so, she attends opera singing lessons with Maestro and practices with drag queen Gloria Viagra. The video clip *Cheerleader* is Kozyra's rendition of Gwen Stefani's song, in which she plays on clichés connected with femininity and masculinity by impersonating the pop star as a cheerleader in a men's locker room.
- 76
- 77 Natalia LL in her monumental project *Eroticism of Terror* refers to elements of her previous works, such as *Artificial Photography*, and, contrary to social conventions, uncompromisingly reveals the body of a mature, self-aware woman. The eponymous eroticism of terror turns out to be a manifestation of not only existential fears and evanescence, but first and foremost of sturdiness and faithfulness to her art. Numerous examples of works featuring different strategies of women's self-portraiture in the first decade of the twenty-first century demonstrate the topicality of the phenomenon and a vast array of strategies employed by the artists. Jadwiga Sawicka transposes onto her body the typography that she typically uses in her painting. Agata Bogacka's ironic self-portrait seems to question not only the purposefulness of this strategy of self-presentation, but the very logic of looking and creating. Teresa Tyszkiewicz uses pins to refer to her earlier works, but covers her face with a surgical mask of a kind. Izabela Gustowska in the cycle *The Art of Easy Choice* browses through her oeuvre; in the work featured in this exhibition, she recalls her performance *Pilgrim, Murder, Divka z konikiem*. Natalia LL turns towards family and presents an amusing depiction of an intergenerational covenant. The artists from the Sędzia Główny duo face each other to pay a peculiar tribute to Natalia LL by ironically travestying her iconic *Consumer Art*.
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- 84 This part of the exhibition finishes with the most recent self-portraits by Natalia LL. In *Transfiguration of Odin II*, the artist revisits the Wagnerian myth to present Odin's transformation. This is how she described it in 2008:

Odin echoes humanity's primeval longing for immortality, reincarnation and transfiguration, i.e. phenomena belonging to the spiritual rather than material sphere. Determined by the principle of cause and effect, the matter constituting man is heavy with the lead of literalness, and man's material body after death rots in foul reek. (...) Odin's ability to adopt different forms pales in comparison with his transfiguration from an old man into a youth, which reverses and contradicts time.

- 85 The role of old Odin is again assumed by Andrzej Lachowicz, who also appeared at the very beginning of the exhibition *Topology of the Body*. This arc spanning over half a century of practice reveals the deep changes that have occurred in Natalia LL's art. But it is the work *Odin's Giggles* in which the ultimate transformation takes place and the artist herself morphs into the male god. While transcending time and gender, Natalia LL sheds one mask only to mockingly reveal another countenance, hidden behind the mysterious dark glasses.

4TH FLOOR

- 86 The second floor of the exhibition, opening with a two-channel video by Anetta Mona Chişa and Lucia Tkáčová, focuses on works created after 2009, i.e. after Natalia LL's last self-portrait was done, which continue or elaborate on subjects raised by the artist. Thus the piece *Death Defeats, Creates, Repeats* contains perverse analogies to *Consumer Art*. It depicts the artists in the cannibalistic ritual of eating cakes shaped as their heads. Although the activity may sometimes trigger erotic connotations, it quickly turns into strenuous effort. In this case, devouring one's own countenance appears as a metaphor of the very strategy of self-representation and of a self-conscious attitude compelling the artists to consume it.

- 87 The ambiguous use of one's image and the ensuing doubts, especially when viewed from the angle of the passing time, is the subject of Jagoda Kaloper's video. This legendary Croatian film star played many groundbreaking roles, often involving nudity, which quickly catapulted her to fame in Yugoslavia. In the video *Woman in the Mirror* – the only one that she directed in her lifetime – Kaloper, making a reference to Virginia Woolf's short story *The Lady in the Looking Glass*, visits the places where her films were set. She records her image of a mature woman on reflective surfaces and juxtaposes it with scenes from films in which she acted as a young girl. Importantly, Kaloper's video is not an attempt to reverse time or hide whatever could be perceived as shameful. Instead, the artist firmly holds the camera and weaves an intimate story – the first one in which she is in full control of her own image.

- 88 Aneta Grzeszykowska, who has already been presented here, is a photographer who regularly uses her own image. In a work made in 2017, she photographs a realistically-looking dummy made in her semblance. The artist laboriously puts makeup on it, trying to achieve maximum likeness. The dummy, which has also been used in other photographic series, seems to serve the role of the artist's avatar. It is a precise, almost breathing copy, and the artist is free to do anything with it. The series could be seen as another example of defying the convention of self-portraiture, or as Grzeszykowska's attempt to break free from her body, to symbolically sever the connection between identity and its physical carrier.

- 90 The photographic cycle titled *Mommy* by Agata Zbylut, who has consistently photographed her body since university, documents the marks left on the artist's body by aesthetic medicine treatments that she regularly undergoes. Zbylut deliberately situates her practice within the context of selfie culture and discussions revolving around selfie-feminism, although her age seems to have acquired an emancipating character in her self-representation

- strategies. As the artist explains, *I am examining my body increasingly thoroughly, I am interested in clinics and miraculous injections. This is also the time when I have started to doubt. On the one hand, I am still anxious, uncertain – also about my own decisions, on the other hand, I have already been in so many situations to know how things will go. The only thing that changes is me. This is why I am looking at myself again.*
- 89 A different strategy, based not on self-observation but on its opposite – exposing oneself to gazes constantly evaluating one's physical attractiveness, has been used by Jana Shostak, who has been entering beauty pageants with the intention of becoming Miss Poland 2020. Shostak, who was born in Belarus, is also campaigning for the introduction of the words *nowak/nowaczka* (newcomer) into the Polish vocabulary to replace the pejoratively-sounding term "refugee". The artist would like to use the popularity of beauty contests to promote her idea. In order to become a contestant, Shostak goes to training camps and makes long preparations, documenting the entire process on film.
- 91 In a series of short videos from 2011, Ewa Zarzycka ironically deals with the formalism of photomedialism and analyses of the properties of the photosensitive material. She simultaneously mocks not only her own strategy, but also the originality and uniqueness of other practitioners' attitude to art. She says: *To make something new, to reject the past. I don't think it is only my dream. It is the dream of every artist. To throw away what was before, to forget who we were. But, on the other hand, it would be useful to have some roots, a lineage, a support, a position and mainly an oeuvre. Once, my dream – maybe I was inspired by certain young artists – was to become such a nobody.*
- 92 Cipedrapskuad, a hip-hop group formed in 2012 by artists Dominika Olszowy, Maria Tobała and Fryderyk Lisek (dj Efekt Dziada) and split up three years later, produced five pieces and the *Music Video* accompanying them, which is presented in this exhibition. The convention of the video clip is transgressed here in a simple way. A walk through the Praga district of Warsaw lasts 18 minutes – exactly as much as all the band's pieces played one after another. The sleepy and unappealing setting of the infamous quarter has been filmed in a single take and used as the background for an aggressive, emancipated narrative which intercepts the hip-hop formula only to exceed it. Overwhelmed by their success, the artists announced their split-up with the following words: *We used to live in small towns / and now people swarm around us / can't even get a bun / 'cause someone's screaming to be with me.*
- 93 Another artist who connects her practice with music is Adu Karczmarczyk. She writes pop songs about conservative values, such as faith or patriotism. As she claims, she is a born-again Christian who uses her music to convey Catholic teachings, e.g. *Idź do światła i nie pierdol* [*Go to the light and stop bullshit*], *Niszcz szatana Łaską Pana* [*Destroy the Satan with the Lord's grace*], *Czysta pipa* [*Pure Pussy*], *Embriony na trony* [*Embryos on the thrones*], *Bit z Serca Jezusa* [*Beat from the heart of Jesus*] czy *Jaraj się Marią* [*Enjoy Mary*]. The music video *Church is a Girl*, Adu's first professional clip, was produced for the exhibition accompanying the *Spojrzenia/Views* competition for young artists. Since then, the artist's videos have been acquiring an increasingly elaborate form. The internet plays an important role in Karczmarczyk's practice, because it enables her to reach people who share

- her views while remaining sceptical about the ceremonialness of the Catholic Church.
- 94 In 2009-2010 Cecylia Malik completed her project *365 Trees*. During the year, she had climbed one tree every day and photographed herself. As the artist points out, it was less about environmental contexts and more about certain feistiness or rowdiness. However, when a large-scale action of felling trees began in Poland in 2017, Malik decided to protest by creating the work *Polish Mother on a Logging*, showing herself breastfeeding her son while sitting on what remained of the tree she once climbed. Uploading the photo to the internet caused a wave of support and prompted other women to get involved in the protest. This is how the action *Polish Mothers on Logging* began.
- 95 From 2002 to 2010, the district court in Gdańsk was hearing the case of Dorota Nieznalska, who was charged with blasphemy pursuant to article 196 of the Criminal Code for exhibiting her installation entitled *Passion* at the Wyspa Gallery in Gdańsk at the turn of 2001 and 2002. During eight years, a total of 41 hearings took place, from 16 September 2002, 18 November 2002, 3 January 2003, 3 March 2003, etc., until 11 March 2010, when Nieznalska was finally acquitted. Article 196 of the Criminal Code provides as follows: *Whoever offends the religious feelings of other persons by publicly insulting an object of religious worship, or a place designated for public religious ceremonies, is liable to pay a fine, have his or her liberty limited, or be deprived of his or her liberty for a period of up to two years.* The presented film symbolically refers to these eight years of criminal proceedings, documented with precise dates of the 41 hearings and whispered by the artist in a monotonous voice. Three years later, on 11 November 2013, Nieznalska carried out an intervention on the family grave of her ancestor Roman Dmowski and her great-grandmother Rozalia née Dmowska, buried in Bródno Cemetery in Warsaw, which highlighted the ambiguous relationships between the freedom of creative expression and conservative values.
- 97 The same line by Dmowski is quoted in Liliana Piskorska's work titled *Self-Portrait with a Borrowed Man a.k.a. I'm a Pole so I Have Polish Responsibilities*, from the series *Methods of Camouflage in Contemporary Poland*. It shows the artist – a lesbian living in Poland – considering ways of disguising her presence in the contemporary Polish society. Another performance by Piskorska, *She-Wolf*, was inspired by the cult Polish horror film from 1982 under the same title, in which a rejected woman offers her soul to the devil to take revenge on her husband. The performance took place in the same palace in Śmiełów where the film was shot. Piskorska returned to the subject of camouflage and hiding homosexuality in contemporary Poland in 2018, when the series of photographs called *You're Going to Love the Lavender Menace* was created. The title refers to a banner displayed during the Second Congress of United Women, held in New York in 1970. Protesting against the exclusion of lesbians from the American feminist movement, a group called Radicalesbians read out a manifesto titled *The Woman-Identified Woman* – the first publically announced lesbian manifesto. It was a time when radical lesbian feminism was emerging and the illusion of unanimity of the feminist movement was gradually disappearing. The phrase "lavender menace" was first used by Betty Friedan in 1969 to describe the threats that she believed lesbianism posed to the feminist movement. Piskorska and

her partner put on two handmade ghillie suits, designed to ensure the comfort of invisibility for lesbians in public places. The camouflage clothing was made according to tutorials published by Polish hunters and militaria aficionados, in keeping with the late summer / early autumn, dry meadow / watered grass style. *Lavender menace, lavender herring, the fifth column of feminism – you never know if it's not hiding behind your bus stop.*

- 100 In a video from the series *Portrait of a Woman with Institution*, Anča Daučíková recollects her confrontation with the Catholic Church, when she was summoned as a witness for a friend suing her husband for a religious divorce. The friend's husband had been unable to satisfy her sexually, which resulted in her growing frustration. However, as a practicing Catholic she did not want to cheat on him and commit a sin against the sacrament. The video is a re-enactment of the conversation between Daučíková – a lesbian forced to conceal her orientation for many years when she lived in the USSR – and a Catholic priest concerning the sexual life of the artist's friend.
- 101 In May 1989 Anna Jarmolaewa was forced to leave Russia for political reasons. She had co-founded the Democratic Union – the first opposition party, and she was a co-publisher of the Union's periodical. Jarmolaewa fled to the West via Poland, where she was unexpectedly offered help by a stranger, Anna Wysokińska. The film made 20 years later shows the two women meeting again at the railways station in Cracow to remember and celebrate the first time they met. Jarmolaewa's work does not just combine political issues with the artist's biography and national identity, but it is a celebration of the power and importance of one person's gesture. While remembering the details of their first encounter, the two women weave their portraits from the past, pointing to each other as the repository of identity and memory.