



1. Writing a story about the meeting of two gloves, the workshop *Gloves-Stories* led by Małgorzata Markiewicz

Interplay of art and faith in women's communities

Developing a heightened awareness of research perspectives and evolving methodologies

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Introduction

On 6 and 7 December, Universidade Nova de Lisboa played host to the first of three planned conferences *The Lost-and-Found. Revisiting Art Stories in Search of Potential Changes*¹. The thematic core of these meetings in Lisbon, Warsaw and Riga is inspired by Wisława Szymborska's poem *Przemówienie w biurze rzeczy znalezionych* masterfully translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh as *A Speech at the Lost-and-Found*. In this poignant piece, Szymborska whimsically reflects on a lifetime, recounting the extinction of stars, the loss of gods and the shedding of personal attributes such as claws and fur. The poem's exploration of perpetual mutability aligns seamlessly with the conference's overarching mission to revisit art stories and consider potential changes in the broader context of art history. In the poet's own words, expressed in the first person, "I've long since closed my third eye to all that, / washed my fins of it and shrugged my branches"². This articulation reveals the poet's journey in time, marked by forgetfulness, the abandonment of once magical abilities, and a hazy identity built on vanishing elements that defy fixed categorization. The loss of numerous goddesses and gods is promptly acknowledged by the poet in the opening lines.

Szymborska diagnoses the effects of modernization processes, and her poetic language expresses in a laconic form what in academic language would require more words and likely be less inspiring. In their search for new methodological approaches to the study of



¹ This article is a result of research carried out as part of a project funded by the National Science Centre, Research Project 021/41/B/HS2/03148.

² W. Szymborska, *A Speech at the Lost-and-Found*, [in:] *eadem, Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*, Transl. S. Barańczak, C. Cavanagh, Kraków 1997, p. 147.



³ K. Aune, *Feminist Spirituality as Lived Religion: How UK Feminists Forge Religio-Spiritual Lives*, "Gender and Society" 2015, No. 1, p. 123.

⁴ M. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, Oxford 2008.

the relationship between art and faith (and the displacement of the sacred) in women's communities, the organizers of the meeting, though art historians, focused on the explicit presence of artists (not only art works).

The conferences' distinctive logo features a photograph of an ephemeral work by the Wrocław-based artist Karolina Freino entitled *Confluence. The Monument to Emma Goldman*. As a memorial to the renowned political activist and feminist, this sculpture in the form of a winking buoy found its place at the confluence of two rivers – the Nemunas and the Neris – during the 11th Kaunas Biennial in 2017. Despite Emma Goldman's forgotten legacy in Kaunas, Freino's work seeks to revive her memory and contribute to a re-examination of the historical heritage shared by Poland, Lithuania and Germany. Significantly, this recognition departs from state narratives and dispels the shadows of nationalism, anti-Semitism and universal homogenization as societal unifiers. The buoy's flashing light told Goldman's story in Morse code. Indeed, the purpose of this unconventional counter-monument is in line with the broader aim of the Lisbon–Warsaw–Riga conference series: to provoke recollection, to reclaim displaced narratives and to give voice to elements overshadowed by the imperatives of functionality, technocracy and homogeneity – the alleged guarantors of social cohesion. Both the poet's voice and the visual artist's object are brought together to reinforce this collective intention.

The inception of these conferences stems from ongoing research supported by a grant from the National Science Centre (Research Project No. 2021/41/B/HS2/03148), led by the undersigned and complemented by the expertise of Agnieszka Patała, an art historian specializing in medieval times, and Dominika Łabędź, an artist. The project, entitled *Residua of Pre-Modern Relations with Art in Selected Contemporary Convents in Lesser Poland and Lower Silesia*, by its very nature calls for comprehensive research. First and foremost, it mandates an examination of the spaces inhabited by nuns, delving into their lives and exploring how they coexist with their often historic and priceless art. However, the underlying premise of the project compels us to extend our focus beyond the confines of the convents. It urges us to contextualize the nuns' piety and artistic activities within the broader framework of contemporary spirituality and contemporary collectives. This approach ensures that the religious is not isolated from the spiritual, and that contemporary collectives may be seen in continuity with those with a long institutional tradition.

It is worth noting that the futile distinction between religiosity and spirituality, with its roots in contemporary feminist research, carries a longstanding tradition. Kristin Aune, following Meredith McGuire, adopts an interchangeable usage of the terms "spirituality", "religion", and "religio-spiritual". This choice, as argued by Aune³ and McGuire⁴, stems from the belief that differentiation is not only

analytically unhelpful, but also deviates from feminist narratives. Given that the primary aim of the project is to uncover a distinctly feminine perspective on art and spirituality, focusing on what has been termed “lived religion”, the notion of interchangeable spirituality and religion takes on particular significance. This interchangeability becomes a compelling facet in our exploration of living art, i.e. art possessing its own agency. Historically, the current moment in Central and Eastern European countries, where a significant number of the scholars invited to the Lisbon conference come from, is broadly aligned with European post-secular tendencies. These tendencies are a response to the failed predictions of modernity analysts regarding the diminishing influence of magical-sacred references with the advance of science. Within this exploration lies the quest for non-theistic holiness and novel religious practices, intricately woven with a robust historical religiosity, resulting in a surprising and vibrant amalgam. In this expansive framework, painting and other art forms emerge alongside communal needs, affirming ritual celebration and the (re-)enchantment of the world. Phantasms prove therapeutic, while narratives evoking fairy tale characters are empowering. Although there are occasional echoes of contemporary consumer culture, reducing mythic thinking to the consumer market is an oversimplification. The situation is further complicated by the emergence of the climate crisis, pandemics and war, revealing that modern spirituality encompasses not only the relaxed *hygge* but also the archaic and threatening *numinosum*. With such diverse attitudes, needs and perceptions, the place of the sacred in relation to individual and social life is changing, posing new challenges for mediation in a pluralised society⁵. There is also a growing call to remove the authority of religious representatives to determine what is secular⁶.



⁵ See M. Martinelli, *Religion in Secularized and Post-Secularized Europe*, [in:] *Migrants and Religion: Paths, Issues, and Lenses: A Multidisciplinary and Multi-Sited Study on the Role of Religious Belongings in Migratory and Integration Processes*, Ed. L. Zanfrini, Leiden 2020, pp. 97–98.


⁶ See S. Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism*, New York 2013, p. 62.

Two hypotheses of the research project

The research project is based on two hypotheses:

1. The spirituality and sanctity embodied in art objects unveil their reparative and supportive power and instil a sense of meaning and belonging, particularly evident during participation in artistic activities and venues.

Given the shift in contemporary art from a focus on inventive form, futuristic projects, and a critical attitude (as crucial for a period of modernity) to a central emphasis on the quality of life, an affirmative attitude and social relations fostered through art, it is postulated that it is worthwhile to explore contemporary women's convents. The aim is to recover and redefine values that have been marginalized or lost in the course of modernity. It is suggested that within these convents, art may have preserved practices – residues – that

 ⁷ See *ibidem*, p. XII.

are largely pre-modern or even medieval in origin, and that prove to be of interest to contemporaneity. It is crucial to note, however, that the study of residues does not entail a regression into the past, but rather a re-evaluation of the understanding of art in spaces that are not governed solely by academic, aesthetic logic or driven by capitalist reasoning. This exploration seeks to uncover aspects of art that have the potential to construct and support communities, foster relationships, and influence emotions and dimensions of well-being that have been overlooked in previous scholarly analyses. The project challenges the prevailing notion that religious institutionalism, often intertwined with patriarchy, negates the possibility of differentiating forms of activity and causality within women's religious orders. Women's convents refrain from aligning themselves with centres of political power and avoid exerting pressure for legislative change in the country, unlike the church hierarchy. It is this subtle aspect of transcending the boundaries of power and the abstract sovereignty of knowledge (*hors pouvoir*⁷) that proves to be most intriguing, leading us to the second hypothesis:

2. Knowledge production, rooted in respectful relations, can be cultivated through non-hierarchical, mutual interactions between “experts” and “observed subjects”.

The acquisition of knowledge stemming from a genuine regard for the local community and its connection to the specifics of a given place cannot be achieved through predetermined methods that rely on scholarly and aesthetic classification, preliminary evaluation and object selection. Instead, it requires the establishment of horizontal relationships with the users of art. This hypothesis asserts that it is not only the academically categorized artworks that hold significance; the individuals engaging with art become vital sources of knowledge within the project as well. Given our primary interest in understanding the use of artworks in the routines of everyday life, rather than focusing solely on their autonomous qualities, this hypothesis underscores the importance of researchers in the project establishing appropriate, respectful relationships with those who create or use art.

The goal of the project is twofold: to generate new knowledge, conceptualized as a non-exploitative resource that fosters empathy, and to develop methodologies for its acquisition within the realm of art history. These twin goals are not treated in isolation, but as a synergistic nexus embedded in the emerging field of affirmative humanities. The overarching aim is to illuminate the dynamic, “non-museum” connections between individuals, collectives and art, emphasising the central role of identity formation – which allows for the expression of vulnerability – as well as community building based on principles of respect, sharing and trust, where the acceptance of failure is acknowledged. Ultimately, the focus is on prioritising well-be-

ing over the imposition of human domination over objectified reality. The effort is to generate knowledge that comes primarily from experiential immersion in the world, from being inside. This shift is prompted by a departure from the dominance of modern attitudes characterised by a scientific inclination toward objective, rational detachment and an endorsement of individual autonomy that promotes the establishment of hierarchies and control. The form of art-related knowledge that captures our interest in this project is inherently reserved in judgment. It focuses on art's ability to forge social bonds and facilitate subjective evolution in the broadest sense, addressing the ontological aspect. In a nutshell, it plays a central role in shaping one's connection to a world full of horizontal dependencies and affiliations that require empathy. Consequently, the distinctiveness of this knowledge emerges from the dynamic interplay between humans, non-humans, space and objects. Each of these elements actively participates in actions and activities involving art, and collectively contributes to the intricate tapestry of relationships within this framework.

Places and people

The theoretical ferment found an intriguing response in Lisbon. Basia Sliwinska and Margarida Brito Alves played a key role in organizing the conference on behalf of Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Notably, the conference saw the inclusive participation of both artists and university researchers, marking a hierarchical equalisation of art-based research and the traditional knowledge produced within university art history departments.

The sessions in Lisbon took place in different venues: the monumental post-Jesuit building of the Colégio Almada Negreiros, part of Universidade Nova de Lisboa, the lush gardens of the Gulbenkian Museum, and Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea. The diversity of the space stimulated different ways of thinking, further enhanced by the opportunity to walk outside. Participants represented three main countries – the UK, Portugal and Poland (including Middlesex University in London, Leeds Arts University, Loughborough University, University of Gloucestershire, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Escola de Arquitetura, Arte e Design da Universidade do Minho (EAAD), Academy of Fine Arts in Szczecin, University of The National Commission of Education in Kraków, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and Magdalena Abakanowicz University of Fine Arts in Poznań). There were also guests from Sweden (Göteborgs universitet), Croatia (Sveučilište u Zadru) and Latvia (Latvijas Mākslas akadēmija), as well as independent researchers and artists from these countries.



2. *To Be a Poet in the Margins of the Museum*, workshops led by Marta Branco Guerreiro in the garden of the Gulbenkian Museum

Building trust, sharing joys and pains

Of particular note were the collaborative activities that seamlessly integrated conference participants while providing a unique opportunity to reflect on how history is made. One especially fascinating initiative was led by Małgorzata Markiewicz. In her *Gloves-Stories*, the artist drew attention to her two-decade-long practice of collecting lost individual gloves from the streets of numerous European cities [Fig. 1]. Bringing some of these gloves to the Lisbon conference, she challenged participants to choose one that most resonated with them, then find a matching pair and create a narrative about the glove's owner – a story that often involved someone lost and still missing.

The resulting stories proved to be surprising and imaginative, fostering a unique connection among conference participants. Sharing these stories allowed individuals to see each other from an un-



3. Composing an “in-between” space; *To Be a Poet in the Margins of the Museum* workshops

conventional perspective. Markiewicz posits that by engaging in touching and smelling discarded objects, new methodologies for shaping the present and future can be cultivated. By introducing this collaborative activity at the beginning of the conference, she not only sparked a bond, but also cultivated trust and a shared enthusiasm among participants for the activities ahead.

Marta Branco Guerreiro based her proposal for activities in the gardens of the Gulbenkian Museum, *To Be a Poet in the Margins of the Museum (walkshop)*, on the conviction that participation can take many forms and use many languages, not necessarily verbal, since its actors are not only people [Figs. 2–3]. One of the ideas we had to develop in the charming space of the Lisbon garden concerned the Japanese concept of *engawa*, a space that is “neither completely in-



4. Reading together the NKVD archives, proposed by Dominika Kemilä; the *Dangerous Grounds: Witnessing, Archive and Public Space* workshop

side nor outside”. It is worth noting that the Centro de Arte Moderna of the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian is currently under renovation, and the architect in charge of the project, Kengo Kuma, is working on the idea of incorporating the idea of *engawa* into the museum and its gardens. The task for the participants was to try to answer the question of whether we can use the “in-between” space to think about new ways of working together. In addition to consuming the idea of *engawa*, imagining new ways of entering the walls of the museum had to be also done by recalling/imagining the flood of 1967, when water – so gentle and beautiful in the gardens – broke into the museum and threatened its collection. The “walkshop” based inventing a relation-

ship with the museum, its garden and its collection on activities such as writing, drawing and devising choreographed movements. The atmosphere was conducive to overcoming one's inhibitions and trying on the role of a poet in the museum.

Dangerous Grounds: Witnessing, Archive and Public Space by Dominika Kemilä offered an engaging workshop in which participants took part in a collaborative reading of archival documents related to Karelians executed by the NKVD during the 1937–1938 ethnic minority purges in the USSR [Fig. 4]. Using NKVD archives which had been inaccessible for over half a century and which are now part of the Russian association Memorial's database, Kemilä's activity aimed to explore the contemporary relevance of studying these crime-related documents. Each participant was provided with a text containing the names of the victims and brief details of their lives. The collective reading, which was conducted in a uniform rhythm, was intentionally interrupted by Kemilä's distinct reading pace. This deliberate glitch enhanced the clarity of the words being read, requiring participants to stay in rhythm and pronounce each word with precision. The collective effort became both an individual act of mourning and a shared experience of grief. In a poignant way, the dry data came to life, permeating the readers with the horror embedded in the historical record.

Located at the intersection of entertainment and altruistic engagement, these workshops had a transformative effect. In the case of *Dangerous Grounds*, the shared retelling of painful stories from the participants' backgrounds opened doors to collective grief and unhealed wounds. Through these workshops, the process of acquiring knowledge became a captivating journey, open to unexpected pathways of learning and knowledge construction based on the evolving relationships among researchers.

Feminist themes: the work of memory, the construction of history

As expected, the conference took up many feminist themes, with Beatriz Laschi's presentation *Lisbon Her-Stories: Counter-Monuments for Women's Visibility*, addressing the appropriation of public space in the Portuguese capital by male monuments and the conspicuous absence of monuments commemorating influential women in the city's history, a phenomenon prevalent in many European cities. The pivotal question arises: is the solution to this gender imbalance simply the addition of female figures to achieve parity in the urban landscape? This question delves into the complexities of commemoration, memory restoration, and the creation of history, where figurative monuments often risk degenerating into caricature.

Given the widespread interest in this topic, a brief mapping of Lisbon's female counter-monuments was followed by a roundtable discussion. Participants shared insights and critiques, with a partic-



⁸ See M. Praczyk, *Materia pomnika. Studium porównawcze na przykładzie monumentów w Poznaniu i Strasburgu w XIX i XX wieku*, Poznań 2015, p. 25.

ular focus on failed sculptural efforts. The discussion began with the controversial statue depicting a nude Mary Wollstonecraft unveiled in London in 2020 and which, due to its criticism, has even been considered for decommissioning. It became clear that while monuments shape the movement of city dwellers and contribute to the formation of local identity, the imagined space they create can sometimes be entirely independent of the monument's intended message⁸. This led us to reflect on the suggestion that while control over the past may be exercised for a period of time, its exploration does not necessarily adhere to ideas imposed from the top down. Instead, it can unfold as a personal experience, infused with pleasure and not strictly limited to scientific procedures.

Katarzyna Cytlak elaborated on the concept of a sensual approach to herstory. In her presentation *Forgotten Her-Stories: Decolonial Practices in Latin American Clay Art* she discussed the work of contemporary artists who create small clay figurines inspired by Native American culture. Not only did Cytlak showcase photographs of artworks and offer commentary, but she also distributed small portions of clay to each audience member. This interactive element allowed everyone to shape the clay while listening to stories about figures made from the material. Participants were able to feel the wet substance in their hands and explore its various properties such as smell, temperature, elasticity, and malleability with their fingers. This approach, referencing unrecorded narratives transmitted orally – local myths and forgotten stories – told by subaltern subjects, made the act of “reconstructing” these stories with the help of the imagination an engaging activity, almost like a game, giving rise to stories born between words.

Madara Kvēpa also explored oral and forgotten histories in her talk *Natural Sites of Significance: the Grand, the Small, the Sacred, and the Mundane*. She discussed her artistic practice, which is driven by a desire to explore the ancient history of her country through the lens of ancient trees and stones considered sacred. The artist revisited sites with sacred trees and erratic rocks, seeking to make her own connections primarily through voice and touch. Kvēpa emphasized that in her attempt to communicate with her ancestors and to retroactively constitute them by transcending temporal boundaries, her focus was not on the outward appearance of the trees and boulders, but on their incomprehensible, time-embracing interiors. Kvēpa's efforts to “reconstruct” ancient art were in line with Alison Poe's perspective, as presented in her paper *Loss, Feelings, and Care in the Reception of Ancient Greece and Rome*. Drawing on Michelangelo's reconstruction of the ancient sculpture of Laocoon, Poe concluded that such activities often served to highlight the uniqueness of Western civilization and relied on the specialized knowledge of an elite group. She suggested that remnants of the past should be used to recover the knowledge of underprivileged individuals overlooked by

patriarchal culture. In her opinion, scholars and artists should approach this with more compassion and empathy, aiming to uncover the similarities and differences between modern and ancient life. She advocated the creation of a transnational dialogue that would foster understanding with the inhabitants of the “foreign land” of ancient Greece and Rome.

The call to incorporate affectivity into research was embodied in the presentation *An Affective Biography of the Sculpture of Salomea from Głogów*, given by Dorota Łuczak and Aleksandra Paradowska. Rather than treating Salomea of Głogów merely as an object (a sculpture from around 1290), the researchers approached her as a figure with her own individual biography. The focus extended beyond the sculpture itself to the cult of Salomea and the deeply affective, as opposed to purely social, reception of the statue. The presentation explored the displacement of the sculpture and the various interpretations of its social role. The emphasis on the affective nature of the reception was crucial, as Salomea played a significant role in shaping the identity of Poles in the so-called Recovered Territories, which the country acquired after World War II. The surviving photographs in which Salomea appeared alongside the entire functioning ecosystem, to use Elizabeth Edwards term “archival ecosystem”⁹, bore traces of both physical and symbolic migration.

Hilary Robinson, for her part, began her presentation entitled *Feminist Art Making Histories: A Practice Towards Not-Losing*, with the observation that art history, museum studies, and related pedagogies persistently relegate women artists, Irish artists, and feminist analysis to the margins, resulting in the “loss” of Irish feminist art due to prejudice or ignorance. Robinson detailed her three-year project to address this issue: Feminist Art Making Histories (FAMH). She outlined the objectives and progress of the project, which revolves around recording and archiving the stories and ephemera of 60 British and Irish feminist artists.

Other presentations and workshops

In addition to the sessions mentioned above, the conference offered other workshops. Ana Vivoda led the *Folded Memories – Object Based Workshop*, which explored the process of mourning her father. The artist organized an impromptu exhibition featuring handkerchiefs left by her father, each one embroidered with a different phrase. Subsequently, participants were provided with newly purchased handkerchiefs and encouraged to creatively intervene with needle and thread [Fig. 5].

In *Exercises in Moving Over*, Dominika Łabędź presented a series of collaborative movement tasks aimed at addressing personal privilege, promoting shared histories, and attempting to communicate without relying on English, using only a native language or an-



⁹ E. Edwards, *Thoughts on the “Non-Collections” of the Archival Ecosystem*, [in:] *Photo-Objects: On the Materiality of Photographs and Photo Archives in the Humanities and Sciences*, Ed. J. Bärnighausen [et al.], Berlin 2019, p. 67 n.

5. Margarida Brito Alves (co-organizer of the conference; left, seated) and Małgorzata Markiewicz (right, seated) during the *Folded Memories - Object Based Workshop* by Ana Vivoda



other language unfamiliar to the conversation partner [Fig. 6]. The exercises emerged as lessons in openness, employing the methods of transformative pedagogy.

The workshop, titled *The Gendered Practices and Politics of Art Collectives – Writing and Thinking Together about Affective Labour and Collectivity*, was led by artists and researchers associated with the And Others network, including Carla Cruz, Helena Reckitt, and Karolina Majewska-Güde. Rooted in reflections from their colleague Lina Džuverović's research project at Chelsea College of Art, *And Others: The Gendered Politics and Practices of Art Collectives*, the session focused on recognizing and transforming visual patterns. It aimed to develop new possibilities and performative pathways for collective visibility, offering insights into the wide range of ex-

clusions and omissions associated with the historicization of collaborative and collective work. After brief lectures, participants began drawing and creating collages to represent themselves, their neighbours as well as various places and situations. This was a challenging task, marked by ingrained patterns of self-representation and a reluctance to introduce dissonance that might disrupt the harmonious atmosphere. The artists leading the workshop explicitly emphasised, and this was evident throughout the session, that the current enthusiasm for group activity in the art world carries with it a certain romanticising of collectives. This romanticising mistakenly suggests that collective work – whether artistic, curatorial or organizational – is inherently emancipatory and egalitarian, with a built-in promise of equality and inclusivity. However, the reality of collective work is fraught with challenges and inequalities, and those engaged in such endeavours are no less vulnerable to exploitation than individual cultural workers¹⁰.

Similar to Ana Vivoda, Lawrence Buttigieg's presentation *Lost-and-Found within the Box-Assemblage* explored the ambivalent status of certain objects that resemble secular relics. He focused on the box-assemblages he creates with Cesca, his friend and model. Buttigieg highlighted a crucial process in their work that he described as "presencing", a term also used by archaeologists, including Chris Gosden, to whom the artist referred. In Buttigieg's practice, intimate items, once removed from their usual context, are intricately connected to other objects, creating a new context or home for them, akin to a reliquary box. The concept of "presencing" poses a significant challenge not only to the historical knowledge and the arts, including museums, but also to religion. It encompasses both absent or silenced social actors and experiences of epiphanies, visions and revelations involving supernatural figures and phenomena. Yet, in the absence of these premodern residues, and despite our aspiration for a wholly rational approach to the past, fully grasping our ancestors and the traditions they handed down would be problematic. In any case, Buttigieg asserts the existence of a "material transmutation" in the works he creates, a phenomenon that oscillates between the subject and the object.

Moving to an entirely different domain, Susie Olczak's presentation on *Reciprocity* explored analogous themes of interdependence and connection within the realm of inanimate objects. It was enriched with insights about being grounded in the environment and nature. Olczak highlighted, among other points, her collaboration with Emma Elliott in the project titled *Jungle Meets the Sea... The World is Split in Two*. This project illuminated the importance of women's narratives in a matriarchal indigenous community in Darién Gap, Panama ("in a tropical paradise, but also in an unstable region") for fostering sustainable relationships between humans and the nonhuman world, especially plants. Furthermore, Olczak shared findings



¹⁰ See *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*, Ed. W. Bradley, Ch. Esche, London 2007; *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, Ed. B. Stimson, G. Sholette, Minneapolis 2007; V. Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything*, Transl. L. Mason-Deese, London 2020.



¹¹ K. McKittrick, *Yours in the Intellectual Struggle: Sylvia Wynter and the Realization of the Living*, [in:] *Sylvia Wynter – On Being Human as Praxis*, Ed. K. McKittrick, Durham (North Carolina) 2015, p. 2.

from a research residency in Chile’s Atacama Desert, exploring how communities there thrived for over 10,000 years in one of the most challenging environments on the planet. As she pointed out, this is a place where storytelling serves as a bridge between earth and sky.

In a section dedicated to protests and the communities that emerge from them, Alexandra Kokoli’s presentation *God is Change: Intersectional Feminism Against the End of the World*, shared her research on art and visual activism at the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp (1981–2000), located around a U.S. Air Force base in southwestern England. The Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp quickly became more than a site of dissent from contemporary politics; it became a refuge for women fleeing violent homes and oppressive living conditions. It also functioned as a laboratory for the re-imagining of gender. In Kokoli’s own words, the camp became “a machine for feminism-in-practice that continues to resist the spectres of apocalypse, both historic and emergent.”

Emilia Jeziorowska’s presentation, *In (Re)Search of Potential Changes: Indignados Protest Art from Archivo 15-M and Princeton University Library Collections*, delved into the traces and archival collections of Occupy and Indignados protest memorabilia. She explored both institutional and unofficial practices of creating and documenting movements of civil dissent. Emphasizing the importance of this context, the researcher underscored that even the loss of faith in the possibility of political revolution overthrowing the hegemony of global capitalism does not discourage the documentation of acts of dissent. This perseverance is crucial because, in the end, these highly unconventional archives can prove to be extremely valuable in the practices of rebuilding knowledge.

Catherine Dormor approached the concepts of justice and equality from a distinctive perspective in her presentation entitled *Unmaking – The Peripheral Spaces of Curiosity*. Inspired by the writings of Sylvia Wynter and her notions of reconceptualising and rehistoricising humanity as a practical project, Dormor explored the transformative potential of these ideas. Reflecting on this, Katherine McKittrick noted (as Dormor recalled) that it is incumbent upon us today to engage in a “creative-intellectual project of reimagining what it means to be human and thus rearticulating who/what we are”¹¹. The proposed workshop aimed to foster an awareness of inclusionary thinking and to collectively explore whether curiosity, as a peripheral practice, can give rise to new ontologies, pedagogies and ways of being in community.

In her lecture-intervention entitled *Material Nomads: A Feral Artist Intervention*, Paula Chambers began by discussing her art project presented at Momentum’s 12th Nordic Biennial in Moss. Her initiative involved the placement of 51 copper and chiffon works in various locations around the city. Given the ambivalent status of these copper and chiffon artworks, hovering between “work and



6. *Exercises in Moving Over*, workshops led by Dominika Łabędź at the Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea. In the blue coat, second from the right – Basia Śliwiska, co-organizer of the conference. In the background, the exhibition by Ana Vivoda

non-work”, she termed it a “feral artistic intervention”. Subsequently, during a panel discussion in Lisbon, she strategically positioned her captivating chiffon and copper objects within the venue, allowing these peculiar creations to function as peripheral catalysts of curiosity during the panel discussion. The artist’s intention was to offer participants the opportunity for a deeper exploration of how embracing a feral approach can be a feminist strategy applicable today’s context.

Summing up

The conclusions drawn from the somewhat intuitive and, one might even say, rather disjointed, unexpected exploration that unfolded during the Lisbon discussions can be summarized in a coherent and concrete way because all the efforts were aimed at undermining the dominance of the epistemic stance and abstract thinking, the over-rationalized relationship with art, with its utopian ideals. So, while the undermentioned conclusions may seem fairly obvious, having been

embraced by feminist artists and activists already in the 1960s, it is noteworthy that academic conferences decades ago rarely featured scholars engaged in activities such as embroidering, drawing, touching, or walking through gardens to compose poetry. While ideas are valid in themselves, they often revolve around planning and the future, shaping reality to align with ideals. Transforming them into tangible realities in the present shifted them from a mere brainstorming, disembodied exercise to a transformative surge that profoundly affected individuals in their entirety, transcending the limited roles of mere experts – be they “scholars” or “artists.” It is worth emphasising, in line with Emilia Jeziorowska’s observation, that throughout the workshop, there were not only endeavours to bridge the gap between artistic practice and theory (given that these two spheres never operate in isolation), but also successful efforts to dismantle the hierarchical relations inherent in the academic environment and foster a unique connection among the participants. Participants directed their focus to various aspects of relationships, which can be summarized in the following points:

1. Affectiveness, empathy, care. Filling historical gaps with patriarchal or any other naturalised ideological content risks reproducing past hierarchies, prejudices and injustices and creates abstract narratives. In contrast, a contemporary approach to filling these gaps seeks to breathe vitality into the shared space. Sensual, affective, empathetic and careful attitude should be linked to an appreciation of the material aspects of things and ought to include non-human actors. It seems that the affective component of art, involving the body and senses, may have reparative potential (cf. Gilles Deleuze, Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Susan Best, Luiza Nader). In the context of museum art, this means recalling earlier biographies of art objects, when they were often tenderly touched and kissed (Donna L. Sadler, Jacqueline E. Jung, Antoni Ziemia). In this way, not only does it acknowledge the significance of the backdrop, the subdued and often overlooked elements, but it also presents an opportunity to recognise the diversity of perspectives. Despite being observable only on a micro scale and within small narratives, and being subject to constant change, relationships with people and objects hold immense importance. They contribute significantly to creating a sense of security and inner harmony, largely due to the inherent reciprocity they offer.
2. Heterochrony. Taking a distinctive approach to the temporality of artworks, we shift away from solely inscribing them in linear time towards heterochronic narratives that consider inner biography of an art object and both geographical and cultural specific conditions. Heterotemporality not only enables the appreciation

of art beyond the Western mainstream (cf. Okwui Enwezor, Keith Moxey), breaking away from the art-ethnography dichotomy, but also renders the study of ancient art (“before the era of art” as Hans Belting would phrase it¹²) more immediate and resonant from today’s perspective.

3. Constellation of faith and sanctity. Art is deeply rooted in the artist’s faith and the community to which it is intended. Beyond confining art solely within the context of institutional historical religions, it is crucial to acknowledge that numerous contemporary works emerge from the quest for the sacred and spiritual. In contrast to the traditional top-down approach, contemporary spirituality frequently operates independently and strives to enhance the overall quality of life. In this regard, one can connect this form of spirituality with Paul Heelas’ concepts of “celebration of the self” and “self-spirituality”¹³, but equally important is the concept of respectful living in a multi-species community. This idea is proposed by the relational ontology and epistemology of the new animism, as articulated i.a. by Graham Harvey¹⁴. It is also about healing, because although overlapping health and religion may seem anachronistic, it delivers means of belonging and meaning-providing elements¹⁵. Integrating faith into the methodologies of art research also enables the recognition of the profound causality inherent in works of art, extending beyond the mere documentation of individual gestures, behaviours, or fleeting emotional reactions. The emphasis is on understanding the present-day significance of the past. This quest for legitimacy in long duration, addressing rapid cultural transformations and efforts to establish order, appears to be post-secular in nature.
4. Workshops may be seen as integral to the decolonial, transformative pedagogy envisioned erstwhile by bell hooks, where students are not mere passive consumers. She recognized that to foster a climate of openness, intellectual rigour and shared commitment, it is crucial to build a sense of community¹⁶. At the Lisbon symposium, a sense of community was forged among the participants, involving both people and objects.

Considering the above four points, the following options could be explored to establish a distinctive approach to art history:

A. The exploration of rituals, given their communal and affective nature, provides a pathway to access a more personal, non-mainstream and marginalized past, giving voice to silenced and unheard perspectives. This inclination aligns with ongoing contemporary efforts to liberate art from the shackles of commodity-driven, elitist, class-based, patriarchal and colonial modes of thinking.



¹² H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Transl. E. Jephcott, Chicago-London 1994.

¹³ P. Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Oxford 1996.

¹⁴ G. Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, London 2005.

¹⁵ See M. B. McGuire, *Religion and Healing*, [in:] *The Sacred in the Secular Age: Toward Revision in the Scientific Study of Religion*, Ed. P. E. Hammond, Berkeley 1985, p. 269.

¹⁶ See b. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, New York - London 1994, p. 40.

B. Considering art as a form of labour opens the door to including not only craftsmanship, but also non-original, peripheral artistic activities that involve participation rather than focusing solely on generating unique ideas and producing brilliant masterpieces. This suggestion is in line with ongoing efforts to undermine the canons that have historically upheld the hierarchies within art, favouring the privileged white European middle and upper classes. As Agnieszka Patała points out, a similar perspective on art-making as a collaborative endeavour involving diverse individuals, including those engaged in peri- or non-artistic activities, can be found in the WOMENART project (*Reassessing the Roles of Women as “Makers” of Medieval Art and Architecture*) led by Therese Martin. While the project laid the groundwork for recognizing women’s contributions to medieval art, its final collection of essays fell short of dismantling the entrenched patriarchal vision of the medieval world. This serves as a reminder to be steadfast in our assumptions and, in moments of doubt, to avoid straying into scholarly paradigms that may still perpetuate existing biases.

C. Activating the senses in the pursuit of understanding the past, fostering openness to surprises and unlearning. This approach prioritizes the ontological dimension of art over the epistemological, emphasizing the relevance of prolonged duration, performativity, and participation. Such an attitude can cultivate a sense of belonging and rootedness, qualities that are particularly important in today’s nomadic and multicultural society.

The content naturalised in the educational process undergoes testing in the realm of action, marking the first beneficial outcome of the performative approach to art research. The second is related to the realisation that the democratisation of science should not be equated with populism. Consequently, the fostering of empathetic connections – both among researchers and between participants in the realm of art – appears as a catalyst that integrates abstract thinking into the bodies and hearts of tangible individuals. This shift from speculation and symbolisation to matter and body, from planned research to spontaneous research encounters that need not culminate in immediate success, is particularly important in navigating away from the shadowy paths that modernity, despite its many merits, has led us down. The collective ritual of delving into the past as well as into one’s own inner realm during art-based research is transformed into an important contemporary event. As a result, the historical event takes on a vivid, real-life significance that transcends the realm of mere aesthetics or artistry for the participants. Through this process, art shifts from the pedestal traditionally reserved for experts and evolves into a shared asset for individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures. It provides a distinctive platform where extraordinary phenomena, impossible in other contexts, can unfold.

Finally, I will return to the project *Residua of Pre-Modern Relations with Art in Selected Contemporary Convents in Lesser Poland and Lower Silesia*. As mentioned above, this project provided the intellectual basis for the conference and ultimately led to the establishment of the series of meetings *The Lost-and-Found: Revising Art Stories in Search of Potential Changes* in three European capitals. It is noteworthy that none of the conference participants delved into discussions of women's religious orders and their treatment of art. Nevertheless, attention was directed towards feminist methods and essential themes, crucial for a contemporary art historian or historian working within contemporary convents, such as community, spirituality, belonging, empathy, mutual solidarity and long duration. These aspects provide avenues for recontextualising art within a framework that was abandoned by modernity and that is re-emerging today with considerable vigour. Exploring the relationship between memory and spirituality¹⁷ and embracing a more inclusive feminism emerge as essential components for learning from contemporary female orders, notwithstanding their patriarchal context.

But beyond these aspects, the overarching attitude presented in Lisbon is of paramount importance, one that we should earnestly assimilate, as it transcends the knowledge acquired through formal education. I argue that the Lisbon conference served as an educational course, facilitating a departure from entrenched and often stagnant research paths that, under the guise of objectivity, perpetuate worn-out frameworks and contents. This departure unfolded in two key dimensions: a heightened awareness of research perspectives and issues, and an evolving methodologies. It is within such a transformative framework that the study of the nunneries finds its meaningful context.

If the educational impact of Lisbon is to be of any use, it should be considered a success, especially considering that the initiative was led by traditionally trained researchers accustomed to teaching students primarily through photographic materials, occasional museum visits and rare encounters with churches, usually not during worship services. When I left Lisbon, it was not that I knew more, but rather that I knew less, underscored by the recognition of the redundancy of different information and delivery methods that are ingrained in us today. In this aspect, I attended a symposium on unlearning.

In my view, the kind of thinking encouraged in Lisbon, characterised by mutual learning, is very much in line with the stance of Rosi Braidotti, a long-time advocate of post-secularism. As she aptly puts it:

I want to argue for a vision of consciousness that links thinking to affectivity, critique to affirmation instead of negativity, and that does not hesitate to show traces of residual – albeit it non-theistic – spirituality. The conceptual punch of something we may call the postsecular turn consists in the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, is not mutually exclusive with spiritual values and that civic engagement as well as militant activism may involve



¹⁷ See *Memory and Religion from a Post-secular Perspective*, Ed. Z. Bogumił, Y. Yurczuk, London 2022.



¹⁸ **R. Braidotti**, *Conclusion: The Residual Spirituality in Critical Theory: A Case for Affirmative Postsecular Politics*, [in:] *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere*, Ed. eadem [et al.], New York 2014, p. 251.

significant amounts of spirituality. For as long as I believe in civic values such as justice, freedom, equality, and democratic criticism, I can be said to be a believer, albeit of the non-theistic kind¹⁸.

So, it is now incumbent upon the art historian to cultivate a new competency: to engage in empathetic conversations with believers. Works of art, intricately intertwined with the constellation of faith, span different belief systems and different expressions of holiness.

Słowa kluczowe

religia, sztuka duchowa, żeńskie klasztory, społeczności, budowanie wiedzy, feminizm, konferencje naukowe

Keywords

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Summary

ANNA MARKOWSKA (University of Wrocław) / Interplay of art and faith in women's communities. Developing a heightened awareness of research perspectives and evolving methodologies

The Lost and Found: Revising Art Stories in Search of Potential Changes marked the inaugural conference of a collaborative initiative between the University of Wrocław, Universidade Nova de Lisboa and the Polish Institute for World Art Studies in Warsaw. This unique meeting brought together university researchers and artists, creating a stimulating atmosphere. The collaborative artistic endeavours undertaken aimed to build community and explore alternative knowledge production rooted in affectivity and openness to surprise, rather than an immediate quest for success. The focus was on a shared experience of being together and learning about each other's roles beyond the conventional boundaries of scholars and artists. At the heart of the conference was the project *Residua of Pre-Modern Relations with Art in Selected Contemporary Convents in Lesser Poland and Lower Silesia*, supported by the National Science Centre in Warsaw. Although the residues and anachronisms discussed during the meeting did not explicitly refer to religious orders, they provided insights into the significance of faith and the evolving nature of the sacred in contemporary art. The project's premise challenged the distinction between the religious and the spiritual, emphasizing the roles of community, respect, and care. It was hypothesized that female religious orders maintain these values in relation to the place of art in everyday life. Consequently, if an art historian wishes to study the relationship between women's art and the sacred in everyday life, they should learn from nuns and female artists, not merely study them.