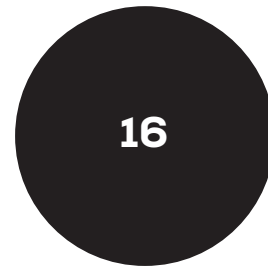




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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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*Feminist Art of Failure, Ewa Partum and the Avant-garde of the Weak*

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## **Feminist Art of Failure, Ewa Partum and the Avant-garde of the Weak**<sup>1</sup>

Even objectified the work remains a developing process by virtue of the  
propensities active in it.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*<sup>2</sup>

[...] we can never be sure we will be strong enough, for we have no system, only  
lines and moments.

Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*<sup>3</sup>

### **Strategic Weakness**

In this essay, I will discuss the work of Polish feminist artist, Ewa Partum, as an example of what I call "the weak avant-garde."<sup>4</sup> In the decades following Joseph Beuys' statement that "everyone is an artist" avant-garde artists have worked hard to democratize artistic production.<sup>5</sup> Some of them have rejected the very label of the avant-garde. I would like to revisit several discussions concerning the avant-garde, including those of Hal Foster, Theodor Adorno, Boris Groys, and argue for a new category of the *weak* avant-garde, which combines the feminist rejections of patriarchal visions of genius and creativity and emancipatory claims originating in the peripheries, with their demand for an expanded epistemology – one including marginalized and colonized territories in art history and practice. The rejection of the notion of the avant-garde, recurring in the contemporary European context, where artists demand common participation in art, fulfills the biggest hope and aim of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde, that of doing away with the art/life distinction. According to Boris Groys, it is precisely the democratizing power of avant-garde art that makes it weak, as in: weak universalism.<sup>6</sup> Following artists

from the East and the West, Groys suggests that the weak messianic force has manifested itself in 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde art, determining its democratic force on the one hand, and leading to rejection by the public, on the other. What for him stands as the genderless, classless paradox of a subject formation deprived of any historical and cultural specificity, for me has only been made possible by particular, embodied and socially specific articulations of art, its makers, critics, audience and/or participants. Therefore, in what comes next, I will discuss Ewa Partum's feminist artwork as an example of a (feminist) weak avant-garde.

The interest in the "power of the weak," or simply in weakness, has already been expressed in the fields of art history, philosophy and cultural theory. Gianni Vattimo argues for a "weak thought," where dialectics is not seen as ultimately hegemonic, but as a strategy of preserving weakness in the historical process and reflexive standpoints, for which the strategy of deconstruction seems the most suited.<sup>7</sup> James Scott depicted the rebellious farmers from Asia and their political agency as "weapons of the weak."<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, whose *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, as well as his research on the French proletarians and their activities in the field of politics and education aimed at the empowerment of the weakest social classes, offers a theoretical language for possible new understandings of resistance by the weak, avant-gardes of the common and a politics of multitude beyond categories shaped in the masculine self-affirming heroic tradition of privilege.<sup>9</sup> I think that confrontation with contemporary art – especially feminist works – and particularly with the sometimes unexpected displacements it offers, allows for a reshaping of the grammar of the political in ways that open up space for excluded and marginalized groups and subject positions. Without grandiose claims of finding a remedy to the supposed silence of the subaltern, so convincingly and dramatically explicated as epistemic violence by Gayatri Spivak, I hope to offer another perspective on political agency as informed by the arts – the avant-garde of the weak.

The concept of the weak avant-garde invites us to search for universality starting with a partial, situated experience.<sup>10</sup> It is indebted to several rather distinct theoretical contexts. One of them is Jack Halberstam's book *The Queer Art of*

*Failure* as well as other queer theories of aesthetics, including Renate Lorenz's *Queer Art: A Freak Theory*.<sup>11</sup> The other inspiration comes from an utterly different context, the writings of East European dissidents from the 1970s and 1980s, such as Vaclav Havel and Jan Patočka.<sup>12</sup> Their concepts of the "power of the powerless"

(Havel) and the "solidarity of the shaken" (Patočka) allow us to understand Ewa Partum's formal experiments with

the figures of stupidity, vulnerability and weakness as elements of a more general, perhaps regional, semi-peripheral sense of identity built on failure and collapse.

The third inspiration originates in recent discussions in the field of aesthetics – a rereading of the concept of the avant-garde by Hal Foster, Boris Groys and their discussion with earlier theorists, and materialist aesthetics inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of territory. My concept of the weak avant-garde is also indebted to the writings of Gerald Raunig, and particularly his *Factories of Knowledge*, which begins with a reference to Josephine, the singing mouse from a Franz Kafka short story.<sup>13</sup> This singing, similar to many successful artistic interventions, is not planned, it is not intended as resistance or an alternative, it comes as a failure to repeat the sounds of mice; actually, it is received as a mistake or misfortune. In Raunig's *What is Critique* he discusses Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, and analyzes the lives of medieval nuns, who rejected the conditions of contemporary society and developed new spaces, new forms of life, and new communities organized by affect rather than obligation, by intellectual inquiry rather than dogmatic rules.<sup>14</sup> The weak avant-garde tries to follow that path and create an exceptional space rooted in specific practice, in the here and now. I think all these theories can be employed to create a background for the emergence of the weak avant-garde, which challenges the militant and heroic/victorious avant-gardes of the past as well as allowing one to reject the false distinction of melancholic feminist art and resistant art, which, as Ewa Płonowska-Ziarek acutely summarized, are two sides of the necessary feminist resistance to patriarchy, both in the socio-political realm, and, more specifically, in the process of artistic production.<sup>15</sup> I have also been influenced by an essay by Sascha Scott, on "subtle



**Legality of Space.** Courtesy of ARTUM Foundation Ewa Partum Museum

resistance” in the art of Awa Tsireh. She discusses the “deviations in representational conventions,” the “subtle inaccuracies,” “misdirections,” “silences” and “subtle alteration of details” as specific elements of an artistic strategy aimed at protecting the knowledge and traditions of Native American tribes and at introducing them into art.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Estonian theorist and artist, Kristin Orav, has discussed the role and meaning of the representation of failure in art from her country, however, without any specific theoretical claim.<sup>17</sup>

### Weak as in: Ridiculous

Ewa Partum was one of the first Polish feminist artists and is currently based in Berlin. Although I will discuss particular pieces of her work in detail, I believe that a short introduction is in order. Her career started in the mid-1960s, when, still a student of the Warsaw Art Academy, she worked on questions of presence, representation and the public space. Her conceptual art was not only planned as such, but she is also considered

a feminist artist whose conceptual work has enriched the art historical canon, both by collectors and galleries as well as critics.<sup>18</sup> The first work that earned her wider recognition was *The Legality of Space* – a piece of public art from 1969, staged in Łódź, Poland. In this work street signs marking permitted activities on the roads and in public spaces were mixed with signs created by the artist, slogans that looked reminiscent of the walls of 1968 Paris, such as “it is forbidden to forbid” or “imagination.” Since the early 1970s she has been developing several strands of work – one originating from “concrete poetry,” using letters, signs and texts, involving references to literature and deconstruction; and others that are more performative and body oriented, such as a performance entitled *Change* (1974), which she made in several takes, dealing with the process of aging and how the body changes with time.

In 1980 Partum announced that she would always perform naked, since there was no place for women in art and art history except for as a model or an artist’s wife;



*Legality of Space.* Courtesy of ARTUM Foundation Ewa Partum Museum

her nakedness would demonstrate her disagreement with this state of exclusion.<sup>19</sup> Even in works such as *Hommage a Solidarność* (1982), created after the introduction of Martial law in Poland, she performs naked. Her subtle gesture of tribute to the suddenly delegatized trade union also suggests a necessity to make women visible in the context of political events, but also the sudden vulnerability of the recently invented proletarian counterpublic mercilessly crushed by the powers of the communist state. In the mid-1970s she started to use lipstick marks as her signature, first in poetic works, and then also as a commemorative activity (*Tribute to Solidarity*, 1983) and a performative, participatory practice (*Pearls* from 2006). Partum moved to Berlin in 1983 and, until 2005, her work remained marginalized and known only to a small group of professionals and enthusiasts. She has recently featured in debates about Polish art owing to her big exhibitions, starting with a 2005 exhibition in Wrocław, while her participation in major feminist exhibitions in Western Europe and the US, together with the growing number of her works in art collections, both private and public, have made her one of the most important contemporary feminist artists globally.<sup>20</sup> The works discussed in this article are treated as the expression of her efforts, undertaken in the first 20 years of her career, to dismantle masculine domination in the arts and in society. Due to the directly challenging and serious character of her artistic endeavors, Partum has taken a lot of risks, but she has also challenged social gender norms and demonstrated her ability to stand above them in a critical and ironic way.

With pieces from the early 1980s such as *Pirouette*, *Stupid Woman* and *Women, marriage is against you!* Partum has gained herself a place in the ironic, self-ridiculing and anti-heroic "neo-avant-garde" described by Hal Foster as being in opposition to the traditional avant-garde, which was based on a serious sense of experiment and emphasized a sense of anteriority versus evolution in society.<sup>21</sup> *Women, marriage is against you!* was a performance in which the artist walked a catwalk, like a model, wearing a white wedding dress, and a transparent, plastic wrapping, which she proceeded to cut and tear to finally present herself naked, with a slogan: "Women, marriage is against you!", as if she was cutting herself from a trap or gift wrap. This piece, in which naïveté and stereotypes are approached *via*

the phenomenon of failure and dismantlement of social norms, was first performed in 1979. It can be read in relation to Yoko Ono's famous *Cut Piece* (1964), in which the Japan-born artist gave scissors to an audience to cut pieces off her clothes. Ono's piece is also discussed in *The Queer Art of Failure*, where Halberstam rightly points out that it cannot be reduced to a mere repetition of supposedly masochistic femininity and aggressive/sadistic masculinity.<sup>22</sup> Halberstam argues that this reductive reading ignores the potentially reparative aspects of this artistic practice. It is not noticed, however, that in some versions of *Cut Piece* Yoko Ono would add that the audience should cut a piece off her clothes to commemorate the time offered to them by caring women in their households, families etc. *Cut Piece* therefore becomes a tribute to women's affective and care labour. In this work Ono offers a re-evaluation of care labour, something which only appears in Ewa Partum's work later. In 2006, in a piece called *Pearls*, she performed in an art museum in Spain with immigrant house workers from South America – cleaners, baby sitters and other carers. In that piece the gesture of leaving a trace of lipstick as a precarious sign of femininity, woman or Ewa – a gesture which has become Partum's signature and has always been performed individually – was conducted as an example of a practice shared with other women. By doing so, Partum invited house workers to the production of an artwork. The women produced multiple lipstick marks, so that a big Spanish flag (red-yellow-red) was created by red lipstick left on a large linen cloth.

Partum's vulnerability, signaled by her artistic costume of nudity, by the brutal dissolving of layers of clothes and plastic, in which she enters the stage only to leave it naked, but also the rejection of dense theoretical or literary context in favor of a simple, popular slogan, marks a desire to challenge the existing patriarchal norm while at the same time emphasizing the artist's weakness. The naked body of the artist, finally appearing from under the layers of the wedding dress and plastic, seems structurally similar to the truth of everyday resistance suggested by Havel as the weapon of the weak. It also resonates with other feminist projects, in which, like in Barbara Kruger's famous image, a woman's body "is a battleground."

*Stupid Woman* is a performance staged several times between 1980-1984, in

which the artist, naked, wearing only red lipstick and high heels performs a “stupid woman” – frivolous and flirtatious, dancing and laughing, impersonating the slightly degrading stereotype of a party-girl devoid of seriousness and *conduite*. After 45 minutes, the artist officially thanks her audience, terminates the performance and leaves. Adorno once depicted the women's situation in patriarchal culture as “the reverse



*Stupid Woman*. Courtesy of ARTUM Foundation Ewa Partum Museum

side of the masculine domination”. Partum's *Stupid Woman* definitely works as a reversal of this power, especially in its video version, when we watch it now, almost 40 years after the original performance – the dominant presence of hegemonic male faces and bodies in the gallery, where the naked artist stages the carnivalesque role-play of a silly party girl, seem perplexed at the very least. Their uncertainty as to how to act in the face of a woman who is pretty and tempting, but also an autonomous artist and in front of a camera – makes us laugh when watching it today, because of the perfect ambiguity of the situation. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno argued, “it is only as finished, molded objects that they [artworks] become force fields of their antagonisms; otherwise the encapsulated forces would simply run parallel to each other or dissipate.”<sup>23</sup> Partum's pieces are always finished ones, perhaps especially those which involve failure or laughter, like *Stupid Woman*. They are polemical, on several levels – they discuss the social distribution of power – not solely between men and women, but also between artists and the public, and the rational and the irrational. For Adorno, the artwork should be successful, but at the same time “there are no perfect artworks,”<sup>24</sup> he claims in the *Aesthetic Theory*,

Only in the recent past—in Kafka's damaged parables—has the fracturedness of art become thematic. Retrospectively, all artworks are similar to those pitiful allegories in graveyards, the broken-off stelae. Whatever perfection they may lay claim to, artworks are lopped off; that what they mean is not their essence is evident in the fact that their meaning appears as if it were blocked.<sup>25</sup>

Partum definitely does not try to merely reconcile the existing social antagonisms,



she also strongly opposes the dominant notion of success. Most interestingly perhaps, the artist's work, very often perceived as hermetic, actually fulfils the last of Adorno's characteristics of artwork, which I would like to mention here. As he suggests, "Inherent in many artworks is the force to break through the social barrier that they establish."<sup>26</sup> This is also a vital element of the discussion offered by Halberstam, in which popular culture seems to be perfectly mixed with avant-garde queer art. Moreover, in the case of Partum's works discussed here, they seem accessible regardless of their formal complexity.

In *Pirouette* Partum conjures the future, by performing ice-skating pirouettes on a large surface of mirror, placed on the floor, which breaks into pieces while the naked artist, wearing only ice-skates, turns on its surface (1984). In the video documentation of the piece, Partum says that she wants to intervene, change her future, by using the mirror, however – in most European countries, the breaking of a mirror predicts many years of unhappiness, usually seven. The artist is conjuring up the bad future and bringing it upon herself, and therefore she reminds us of all the contemporary discussions concerning marriage, love, and happy, shiny scenarios of the future, compulsively prescribed to the neoliberal subject, who wants her life to be successful. The issue of success and failure was discussed by Halberstam in *Gaga Feminism*; in addition, other queer theory authors, such as Tim Dean, Lee Edelman and even Simon Critchley, tend to object to this logic of success. In ridiculing a very demanding sports discipline – skating – and ridiculing herself, both as an artist and as a person, Partum entered the domain of idiocy, something highly unwanted in the state communism of the People's Republic of Poland in the 1980s as well as in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. It might be worth recalling the Greek etymology of the word "idiot" here, since it originally referred to someone who confused the private and the public, who was unable to securely leave their intimate life at home or in an otherwise private domain. Partum plays with the pessimistic belief of seven unhappy years, and she uses a somewhat childish form of expression – ice skating pirouette, which becomes a light, somewhat childish effort to comfort herself in a moment of low self-esteem and low spirits.

## Weak Beginnings: Territory and Resistance

The non-heroic aspects of artistic production were discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in a chapter called *On the Refrain of A Thousand Plateaus*, which they appropriately describe as “perhaps very Hegelian,” and in which an uncertain, scared, weak person (a boy, a prefiguration of ‘the artist’) is depicted as comforting himself with a song, a lullaby whistled quietly, to overcome a moment of fear.<sup>27</sup> The territorial is, as they emphasize, not yet music, music comes from the deterritorialization of sound, which is – and here comes the “Hegelian” aspect – at the same time a sort of overcoming of the territorial, apparently always present in the territorial as a potentiality. Sound, a noise, the comforting chirping of a person or of a bird, is the beginning of a process, an attempt at a change, not driven by the grandiose, heroic, culturally masculine agency of a self-understanding subject. It is a weak cultural or political agency. The final phase of this process might consist in creating a “deterritorialized refrain as the final end of music” and releasing it into the Cosmos, which for Deleuze and Guattari clearly is “more important than building a new system,”<sup>28</sup> but it might as well just end up in Fascist fixation or a moment of madness.<sup>29</sup> It is very interesting, how Elisabeth Grosz reads Deleuze and Guattari’s territory as solely generative – which I think is a correct reading – but also only preoccupied with the powers of nature, which I think counters the intentions expressed in *A Thousand Plateaus*. They both say, and Grosz repeats after them, that “art is the opening up of the universe to becoming-other.”<sup>30</sup> How does that differ from the theory of culture proposed by Hegel and based on a contradictory, alienated, self-undermining practice of culture, particularly on Diderot’s *Paradox of the Actor*? Hegel’s insistence on understanding culture as a space for encountering oneself as the other, from the *Phenomenology of the Mind*, resonates with the chapter on *Ritournelle*, where it is in fear, weakness and powerlessness that the



*Pirouette*. Courtesy of ARTUM  
Foundation Ewa Partum Museum

song and any art originates. I believe that the alienating powers of culture can be subsumed as natural for humans. Therefore, the theory of weak resistance is a materialist effort to tackle the contradictions and paradoxes embedded in the artistic process, the contingency of the artistic gesture and the possible strength of a gesture of weakness and fear.

Partum's art clearly posits her as a member of the Polish and European avant-garde, someone who deals with issues of authority, rights and representation. It is also an announcement of the radical course of the artist and a declaration of her continuing the demands of earlier artists, such as Katarzyna Kobro, Władysław Strzemiński and other representatives of the Polish avant-garde.<sup>31</sup> In the early 1970s Partum started to work on a project which was perhaps her longest one, *Change. My problem is the problem of a woman*, in which she explored the constraints of women's participation in society and culture, resulting in the process of the transformation of their bodies due to aging. In *Change* Partum worked with a stylist, who transformed one half of her body to make it look older. The outcome was a fascinating contrast between the "young" part of Partum and the old one (the project was done as a performance, video work and a set of photographs). Another project, also started in the early 1970s, *My Touch is the Touch of a Woman*, and consisted in leaving traces of lipstick – pressed lips, to be precise – on pieces of paper, sometimes with poems or other inscriptions. Perhaps the most famous version of this project was carried out after the introduction of Martial Law in December 1981 (the state of emergency was only cancelled in late 1983), when the naked artist pressed her lips to a large piece of white paper on a wall to produce letters forming the word "Solidarność" ("Solidarity", which was also the name of the suddenly delegalized independent workers' union (*Hommage a Solidarność*, 1982).

I believe, following to a certain extent Jacques Rancière, in the power of specifically artistic means of production, in reconfigurations of the sensible leading to transformations of the social.<sup>32</sup> In Partum's work, a woman's artistic production has been granted perhaps maximum visibility, transforming the public perception of female artists and actually making it possible for women to be perceived as artists, not merely as companions of male artists, as the traditional art world would have it.

In this sense, Partum performs a new “partition of the sensible,” including women's experience of culture in the visible and articulated spectrum. In her works exploring weakness, discussed above, this insertion was confirmed not only by younger artists, who decided to follow in her footsteps, but also by the comments of media and art critics in the early 1980s, which recently were presented during the monumental retrospective exhibition of Partum's work at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in 2015 – *Nothing Stops the Idea of Art*, curated by Maria Morzuch. The astonished comments of TV journalists, speculating about the proportions of Partum's body, and discussing its beauty, contain some surplus excitement, which – observed today, some 30 years later – operates as a dismantling factor, a decomposing element of the patriarchal narrative, always situated as expert discourse about women. But when a naked woman becomes not only part of a work of art, but also its author, following conceptual art's script perhaps at its best, the inability to analyze this situation, permeated by a sense of masculine domination and a hegemonic position, results in an explosion of the patriarchal script. The impossibility of professionally discussing a work of art, because it was created by a naked woman and tries to shift the critique onto the female body, so important for male-dominated culture, transforms the comments of those “alleged” art experts from 40 years ago into unprofessional speech. Therefore, the weakness of Partum's performances works as a tool to destroy masculine hegemony, without ever presenting itself as authority or expertise. Her works do what Judith Butler discussed in *Excitable Speech* – they constitute a radical performative response to the hegemonic prejudice embedded in patriarchal culture, a response that leads to the decomposition of stereotypical speech without opposing it from yet another hegemonic position. It is a resistance of the weak *par excellence*, a resistance that makes it impossible for hegemonic speech to remain consistent.<sup>33</sup> Butler argues, that

an aesthetic enactment of an injurious word may both use the word and mention it, that is, make use of it to produce certain effects but also at the same time make reference to that very use, calling attention to it as a citation, situating that use within a citational legacy, making that use into

an explicit discursive item to be reflected on rather than a taken for granted operation of ordinary language.<sup>34</sup>

The works discussed here most definitely do that, especially *Stupid Woman*, in which the stereotypical, prejudiced name given to women behaving in frivolous, careless ways, is taken out of its context and exposed to light, while referencing an artist at work, lucid and distanced. This ironic work repeats a fragment of discriminatory language, only to disarm it and explore its limits. Some weakness definitely fuels this work and makes it an effective subversion of norms.

In feminist artistic production efforts to reconstruct women's legacy have been combined with strategies of emphasizing the impossibility of the so-called "second sex" joining the men-centred canon. The famous essay by Linda Nochlin, suggesting that the question: *Why were there no great women artists?* should be replaced by an analysis of how the concept of genius had been shaped as an element of masculine cultural experience, is perhaps the most prominent example of this feminist strategic revision of the canon.<sup>35</sup> This could also be said about Ewa Partum, who started her career in the mid-1960s with works that discussed the presence and absence of the artist and an extremely courageous diploma work at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, in which she wrapped two works by Tadeusz Kantor in grey paper, producing a sort of *emballage*, and presented it as her own work, together with a theoretical paper.<sup>36</sup> Doing this, she not only created an example of remix or appropriation art, but she also questioned the authoritarian master-pupil relationship so dominant in Polish art schools of the time, which forced the students to merely copy their art professors.<sup>37</sup> Her 1969 piece was an extremely interesting way of challenging academic hierarchies, but also a very early example of sampling and questioning copyright, prefiguring contemporary debates over the issues of intellectual property, found footage etc., and also shedding some critical light on the concept of the avant-garde artist, who theoretically questions all hierarchies, but, at the same time, becomes an unquestioned authority.

## Weak Constitution of the Feminist Avant-garde

Theories on the avant-garde usually focus on its power and strength rather than weakness, however, as I would like to suggest, in the most recent discussions in art theory and aesthetics, one can detect a narrative of the weak avant-garde. In his essay entitled *What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?* Hal Foster made several distinctions which I find particularly useful in the interpretation of Ewa Partum's oeuvre, as well as other feminist artworks from the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>38</sup> This analysis is also interesting because it makes the transition from classical avant-garde to weak avant-garde, which I am trying to argue for here, more plausible. Foster emphasizes the irony and distance, crucial for the neo avant-garde. He suggests that after a period of hysteric repetitions of traditional/everyday practices, there came a time for an aesthetics of differentiating, of reflexive repetition. Partum's work from the 1970s and 1980s sometimes still emphasizes the hysterical, yet it also is self-reflexive, it moves between pastiche and self-analysis, it oscillates between the two, demanding the dismantlement of the binary oppositions still active in Foster's writing and yet already contradictory to its declared purpose.

Foster argues that through appropriation, which undermines the *status quo*, genuine avant-garde practice introduces new modes of production. Ewa Partum's art, and particularly *Pirouette* and *Stupid Woman*, does precisely that. It advances the search for new art-forms, and undermines patriarchal gender constructs. Foster defines the neo avant-garde as follows:

Such art often invokes different, even incommensurate models of practice, but less to act them out in a hysterical pastiche (as in much art in the 1980s) than to work them through to a reflexive way of working – to turn the contradictions inscribed in these models into a critical consciousness of



*Change*. Courtesy of ARTUM  
Foundation Ewa Partum Museum

history, artistic and otherwise.<sup>39</sup>

As much as *Women, marriage is against you*, *Pirouette* or *Stupid woman* fit in this definition, they could also be regarded as using the Brechtian strategy of producing the effect of alienation, allowing liberation from the contemplative, and therefore conformist, analysis of reality, which has become one of the crucial elements of not only avant-garde theater, but also the visual arts.

According to Foster, the hegemony of the classical definition of the avant-garde introduced by Peter Burger in the 1970s should be confronted. He argues that

The Burger narrative of direct cause and effect, of lapsarian before and after, of heroic origin and farcical repetition, which many of us recite with unconscious condescension toward the very possibility of contemporary art, this narrative will no longer do.<sup>40</sup>

His demand for a subtler reading of artistic practice, however, does not immediately call for giving up hegemonic, dominant, powerful work, modes and forms of expression. Foster doubles down, criticizing Burger for a romantic vision of the avant-garde based on rupture and revolution, while in contemporary art it is generally subtle displacements, rather than stark oppositions, that play the most important role.<sup>41</sup> Foster's argument could be amended: the implications of contemporary avant-garde art can still be oppositional, but the intentions of the artists and their attitudes have definitely moved from the romantic, heroic, and masculine towards a more ironic, indirect and feminine agency, emphasizing idiosyncrasies and localities, but also weaknesses. These changes required the access of women, and other subjugated groups, to artistic production. This has been repeatedly ignored in all major narratives about the avant-garde, including Foster's and Groys'. In Foster's essay only 3 out of 50 artists discussed are female, which is troublesome, and all are white, which again is very problematic. Some parts of Foster's essay however might be seen as a step towards a feminist, non-heroic vision of the artistic avant-garde. He makes an interesting remark, connecting his theory of the avant-garde to the topics of weakness and



vulnerability, when he speaks about: "art that critics and historians need to register: not only symbolic disconnections but *failures to signify*."<sup>42</sup> This moment in Foster's postmodern theory allows him to bring together the neo avant-garde, postmodern theoretical rupture – also signaled by the appearance of Gianni Vattimo's "weak thought" – and poststructuralist theory, leading to a feminist art practice which overcomes the modest presumptions of postmodernism and offers subversive strategies of resistance which can be seen as elements of a larger, more universal project of the weak avant-garde working for social and cultural change.<sup>43</sup> Some years later Foster called all contemporary art "precarious," not so much in an effort to define it, but rather to capture its predominant condition.<sup>44</sup> In 1994, however, he conceptualized weakness only as a refusal to universalize, which is perhaps a major premise of postmodern philosophy, but not necessarily the core of avant-garde practice.

In contrast to Foster, Boris Groys defines the avant-garde as a practice which proceeds from "weak universalism" in its inclusiveness and tendency to abstraction, resulting in extremely accessible forms. For him avant-garde artworks are distant reminders of Walter Benjamin's "weak Messianism," with their weakening of signs, the de-professionalization of art and reductions.<sup>45</sup> What is missing in Groys's analysis though, is an assessment of the materiality of art on the one hand, and of its makers and/or participants, on the other. Idealist theories of culture, art in particular, pretending that artists' embodied experiences do not inform their practice, should be replaced with an understanding of art as a materialized, historicized practice of particular people, in a particular time, using a particular technology and mindset. This was clear for Benjamin, it should also be clear now, yet in Groys' narrative the political involvement of artists is ignored, the deep evolution of the means of their production is neglected, the massive appearance of women and other hitherto excluded groups in the field of art is missing – all the aspects, in which the materiality of art transforms resulting in its subsequent successful de-heroicization and de-homogenization, are not taken into consideration, resulting in the making of yet another art theory moving freely above the embodied labor of art producers. In this sense Groys' theory constitutes



perhaps a “bad abstraction” of art, in which the visionary concept of “weak universalism” constitutes a moment of truth in the larger project of analysing artistic production which fails in its defense of art as immaterial.

## The Power of the Weak

The idea of the weak avant-garde follows an analysis of failure as an act of resistance to neoliberalism, but also to sex/gender regimes as discussed by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*.<sup>46</sup> Halberstam rightly emphasized the pop-cultural ridiculing of hegemonic masculinity, which often leads to creating its alternatives – the queer, feminine, un-hegemonic political agents. From the perspective opened up by queer theories of failure, Partum’s artwork can be seen not only as a feminist critique of hegemonic masculinity, but also as its performative ridiculing. This, I would like to argue, provides a very powerful performative criticism of the role of the artist as a “vessel for the artistic force.” Halberstam argues that we should perceive failure as a form of resistance to neoliberal productivity, as a symptom of a possibility of oppositional, subversive or alternative forms of life and sociocultural agency, with an emphasis on gender and sexual performance. S/he suggests that “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world”, than the neoliberal preoccupation with success.<sup>47</sup> It might sound complicated to imagine how to apply this critique to a female artist working in socialist Poland around 1980, however the non-heroic descriptions of the individuals and whole states of the former Soviet Bloc, offered by the East European intellectuals of the time, make this operation much easier. In *The Power of the Powerless* Vaclav Havel very openly argued that during the Cold War, both the Soviet Empire and the Western world no longer needed to emphasize their heroic victory. The organization of the world, stabilized by the presence of the two hegemonic forces, did not require grandiose gestures on their part. In those conditions resistance seemed futile; however, for Havel an everyday resistance remained compelling: all apparently meaningless private acts of refusal to participate in events orchestrated by state apparatus signal

disagreement with the dominant order.<sup>48</sup> In the closing chapter of his 1978 essay, Havel suggested a possibility of uniting these individual gestures in a massive movement. Many members of Poland's "Solidarność" movement from 1980 openly state that his essay was a directly inspiration for their acts of resistance. Paradoxically, while Havel's paradigm was leaning towards liberal political inspirations, separating the individual from the public domain, the "Solidarność" movement was a counterpublic, built on a political agency trespassing the public/private divide. In addition, as a strike and a workers' union, "Solidarność" definitely had many socialist inspirations. Yet, Havel's idea of ordinary, small acts of resistance constitutes a paradigm of what can be done to oppose a totalitarian state.<sup>49</sup> Similar to Guy Debord, whose analysis of consumerist capitalism in the 1960s equated life with survival (in French: *vivre* and *survivre*), Havel depicts the life of a citizen of a communist state in 1978 as having nothing to do with heroism, just like any eventual acts of resistance. Partum's art seems to follow a similar logic: her trademark lipstick kiss came from her daily experience of leaving red marks on glasses, clothes, or cigarettes: a trace of a woman, as she would later call some of her works. The wedding dress, ice skating shoes, mirror, becoming a party girl – these are ordinary objects and strategies turned into ordinary acts of resistance. Interestingly, these and other East European depictions of a possible political strategy of resistance resonate with Rosa Luxemburg's vision of revolution, which she often described as consisting in necessary failures, and as being never entirely accomplished.<sup>50</sup> As Lorelea Michaelis argues, Luxemburg often portrayed failure as the most natural element of the revolutionary's everyday, as something, which should never lead to disappointment, affordable only to the privileged, and rejected by genuine activists.<sup>51</sup>

This ordinary resistance by the sheer presence of an embodied individual is a striking element of Partum's well-known set of photographs entitled *Self-identification* – a series of photo collages from early 1980. In these pictures the figure of the naked artist is inserted into images of the streets of Warsaw – crowds, the Presidential Palace, shops and official buildings. What seems most striking today, is the grayness, fatigue and boredom of the people, buildings and

landscapes surrounding the pale silhouette of the artist's naked body. These images announce a desire for political agency, an urge for a "new distribution of the sensible" in times of stagnation. They seem to me like an early announcement of the strikes, mobilization and change, that "Solidarność" brought about in the summer of 1980. Beginning with a specific "problem of a woman," Partum touches upon a larger problem of the exclusion and submission not just of women in a patriarchal society, but also of the majority of society being dominated by state communist rule, which petrified political agency by its central management instead of liberating it in socialist, egalitarian forms of action.

According to Havel, and also Adorno, in conditions of totality, small gestures are the only ones capable of subverting the dominant norm, and might also be more difficult to appropriate or assimilate for the mainstream narrative. This vision of micro-resistance is similar to Halberstam's theory of failure, however he pushes it further, suggesting that unpredictable, unconscious, unplanned interventions in the political, sometimes caused by a mistake, failure or lack of attention, can add to the transformation of the paradigm. In Partum's works discussed here, the non-heroic, absurd and failing can be seen as subversive and critical in an alternative way to themes explored by traditional avant-gardes, in which the self-transparent, masculine subject would contradict specific elements of the reality he despises.

In Partum's work, whose condition is that of weakness and subversiveness, at times embarrassing social norms are undermined and dissolved rather than openly contradicted. This somewhat counter-Antigonian strategy contrasts with previous dramatic efforts by women trying to position themselves in art galleries and in the art canon.<sup>52</sup> If we look closer, the heroic does not present itself as the main element of feminist strategy; it was vital in the suffragists' day, or it sometimes persists as an element of feminist politics, yet in art history, most feminist artistic interventions have been based on irony and distance. The performances of Valie Export, with her notorious *Tapp und Tast Kino* (1964), Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), the Guerilla Girls interventions from the 1980s and 1990s – to name just a few – all react to gender inequalities without the heavy burden of dramatic staging, heroic gestures and messianic hopes. However, they nevertheless express

involvement in change, or even a revolution.

## Failing to Win

The weak avant-garde, similar to queer failure as depicted by Halberstam, develops in a fruitful, yet accidental and risky interaction with the social norm, be it that of gender, class or sexuality. Failure denotes not only misfortune in accomplishing an existing gender and sexual identity in a heteronormative culture organized by binary codes, but also a systematized form of resistance consisting precisely in finding in this impossibility of complete gender subordination a powerful method to dismantle, subvert or at the very least disturb the system of symbolic reproduction.<sup>53</sup> This is how Jack Halberstam explains how to investigate queer failure in *The Queer Art of Failure*:

This book uses "low theory" (a term I am adapting from Stuart Hall's work) and popular knowledge to explore alternatives and to look for a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations. [...] And so the book darts back and forth between high and low culture, high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge, in order to push through the divisions between life and art, practice and theory, thinking and doing, and into a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing.<sup>54</sup>

Partum's performance of *Stupid Woman* fits this description perfectly. This piece could obviously be read as an element of classical avant-garde art, but since it draws on everyday experiences and gender stereotypes, they would be lost in the quest for the new, the formal dimensions or utopian aims. What is most important, is that it explores failure – a failure of the artist, the subject and the woman, whose claims of recognition are still dependant on her ability to follow the rules of patriarchal society. By repeating the behaviour pattern of a silly teenager, Partum transgresses whatever she managed to achieve as an independent artist, taking on the risk of being rejected by the "serious" men who dominate avant-garde circles. While undermining her own position, while joking about the seriousness of the artist and of art, she opens up a space for revising cultural canons, for subverting or even

overthrowing existing hierarchies; she also revises the norms of gender, of art and that of femininity. Halberstam's suggestion that "Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers"<sup>55</sup> allows the boundary crossing that Partum engaged in to be accentuated.

The stupid actions performed by the artist in *Pirouette*, in a similar way to the that discussed by Halberstam in the *Queer Art of Failure* in passages devoted to *Dumb and Dumber*, seem like a smart way out of contemporary cultural and social constraints, which imprison the individual in a supposedly necessary regime of productivity and perfection. Anticipating Lady Gaga, Partum created space for breaking with tradition both on the level of a "reasonable woman" and of a "shiny future", opening it up for both failure and also experiments with the norm. Partum's performance can be read in the context of the courageous act of the first Afro-American ice skater to win the World Ice Skating Championships and became the main competitor of Katarina Witt in the Olympics in Calgary in 1988 – Debi Thomas. In the highly Cold War invested "Battle of the Carmens," Thomas won the bronze medal – becoming the first black person to win a medal at the winter Olympics. People were very excited by her success and her performance not only during the Calgary Olympics, but also in 1986, when during the World Ice Skating Championship she decided to go embrace ridicule. In the free style part of the competition, wearing a "Yellow Bird" costume, she showed everything that the professional ice skater should fear – clumsiness, lack of stability and certitude, falls and jumps on the fence. Thus she dismantled her competence and talent in front of the very same public that was supposed to judge it in one of the world's most important competitions.

In performing failure and exposing herself to harsh criticisms Thomas, like Partum, risked exclusion and discrimination. As women, and due to their ethnic background (the Jewish origins of Partum, the Afro-American origins of Thomas), they have so much more to lose than white, privileged men in similar professions. However, there are other ways of looking at failure. As we read in the opening pages of *The Queer Art of Failure*, the book "dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we

currently live. Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world"<sup>56</sup>. With the overwhelming focus on productivity and success, so typical in the neoliberal capitalism, particularly in times of crisis, mastering failure can perhaps be the way to live, not just to survive. In both cases – of the Afro-American ice-skater and the Polish-Jewish artist – the queer art of failure means that the norms of the game – of sport competition and artistic production – are always already being subverted any time their less privileged participants decide to “fail.”

### The Common Revisited

What I have always found particularly interesting, and at the same time slightly problematic, in the *Queer Art of Failure*, as well as in other queer artistic and theoretical projects, was the individualistic character of the interventions discussed and depicted in them. The viewers of a “stupid film” or artistic performance, which challenges gender and sexuality norms by emphasizing failure, are invited to subvert the existing norm or watch this subversion being done without any hint of possible collaboration with others, or solidarity. I would like to suggest that the avant-garde of the weak offers a possibility to overcome this individualism of performance and spectatorship via a commonality of experiencing failure and weakness. Halberstam seems to be pointing in this direction, especially in *Gaga Feminism*, when he depicts the massive cultural events created by queering pop stars as “safe spaces” for queer youth etc. However, the star is always alone, s/he clearly does not share his/her high ranking position, reducing all the queer followers to what Gregory Scholette aptly depicted as “the dark matter” of art.<sup>57</sup> Although Halberstam suggests cooperation and shows how previously individualistic experiences can be shared, he does not offer a vision of solidarity which the weak aesthetics invites. Following the *Emancipated Spectator* project by Jacques Rancière, in which the public is finally rescued from the instrumentalization and paternalistic reductionism of critical theory, I would like to suggest a possibility of reading artworks preoccupied with failure as offering the experience of the

common, but also a more general political agency.<sup>38</sup> This suggestion also works in line with Deleuze and Guattari's image of the deterritorialized refrain, in which more subjects participate while the noise is transformed into music.

Although many of Partum's works follow the individualistic strategy of representation, her later undertakings involve sharing as she invites other women, including immigrants like her (she moved to Berlin in 1983), to join her in her gestures and enjoy the privileges of being members of the art world. In 2006 Partum shared the highly individualistic gesture of leaving a lipstick mark with other women. As has been mentioned, the performance, entitled *Pearls*, consisted in making a flag of Spain with lipstick kisses on the piece of cloth. The women invited by Partum all came to Spain from South America, and their status is marked by class and racial/ethnic inferiority in Spanish society, combined with a lack of symbolic capital. In the Museo Vostell (Maltiparda de Caceres) in Spain their status suddenly changed. Not only that – they were invited to participate in the joys of making art, but also in the glamour of the art world. Technically they were all servants of "real" art world workers. But this one time, *via* the precarious lip marks and their work on the performance, which starts with sweeping the floor and continues with kissing the material, they are all included in the highly privileged group of cultural producers, and therefore also become equals of their employers, who usually are separate from them not only due to their material status, but also their cultural capital. From now on they are artists as well. The participatory mode of art production definitely has a history of its own, but I believe that feminist and queer pieces have allowed them to have a herstory, or "theirstory", as well.

Ewa Partum's work overcomes the *status quo* by offering the weak power of universalization. She shares a specific experience of exclusion – as a woman, as a female artist – and finds ways of expressing it as a common oppression. The weak avant-garde presents itself in this example as a strategy of universalization, but also as a way to use the artistic form of production to transform exclusive political agency into a type involving ordinary



*Change*. Courtesy of ARTUM  
Foundation Ewa Partum Museum

resistance, the common. The weak avant-garde as a concept for feminist agency helps to situate the ephemeral and uncertain on the map of art history, suggesting that masculine hegemony has already been challenged by non-heroic, weak models of resistance. The concept of the weak avant-garde, as I have tried to present it in connection with the artworks of Ewa Partum, opens up the possibility of the common in revolt, via art but also engaging other fields as well. Via a frivolous take on Beuys' "everyone is an artist," Partum adds to this more general tendency.

There is one last aspect of the weak avant-garde, that I would like to emphasize here. Like the author of *Antigone, Interrupted*, Bonnie Honig, I think the separation between the cultural models of Antigone and Ismene should be dismantled.<sup>59</sup>

Working parallel to other distinctions in the cultural spectrum of segregated femininity, it strengthens separation and distinction, excluding solidarity and prospects of a common struggle.

## Footnotes

1 I would like to thank the artist, Ewa Partum, for her kind support for my extravagant theorizing of her work. My gratitude extends as well to: Agata Lisiak, Wojtek Kosma, Kuba Szreder, Kasia Bojarska, Krzysz Pijarski, Patricia Reed, Gal Kirn, Marta Dziewanska, Rosa Barotsi and Walid el-Houri for all our discussions concerning the power of the weak.

2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 235.

3 Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, transl. Brian Masumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 351.

4 In Poland opinions on the topic of who actually is/was a feminist artist are divided. On one hand such authors as Aneta Szylak, Ewa Tatar or Andrzej Turowski do not seem to have any trouble in perceiving Ewa Partum as a feminist artist,



Turowski even speaks of a specific category, "feminist conceptualism" precisely to grasp Partum's influence on feminist and conceptual art. On the other hand, however, theorists such as Piotr Piotrowski clearly suggest that since Partum did not situate her work in the context of feminist theory, we should not impose this framework on her practice. I think this is a form of self-colonizing simplification, and in another text devoted to Partum I have criticized these kinds of statements as misinterpretations of the history of feminist aesthetics. I find it interesting how feminist art – not just in Poland, but globally – often has this peculiar capacity of problematizing issues which are systematically problematized in theory only decades later. See: Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012); Andrzej Turowski, *The Greatness of Desire: On the Feminist Conceptualism of Ewa Partum in the 1970s*, in: Aneta Szylak et al (eds.), *Ewa Partum* (Gdansk: Fundacja Sztuki Wyspa, 2013).

5 The problem of democratizing of the avant-garde was discussed in: Boris Groys, *The Weak Universalism*, in: e-flux 04 (15)/2010. I need to emphasize that I partially disagree with this analysis, and as will be demonstrated in my essay, the weakening of the avant-garde, partially resulting from feminist interventions, class and ethnic equality demands and queer activism, is the strongest point amongst contemporary avant-gardes, one, that actually leads to their democratization, making them closer, and not opposed to, transcendental philosophy, which I, in contrast to Groys – and in agreement with thinkers as different as Marx, Žižek, Badiou, Siemek and Fraser – perceive as axiomatically democratic.

6 Boris Groys, *The Weak Universalism*, e-flux nr 15/ 2010: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61294/the-weak-universalism/> Accessed February 2, 2017.

7 Gianni Vattimo, *Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought*, in: Idem (ed.), *Weak Thought* (New York: SUNY, 2012).

8 James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

9 Jacques Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,

1991).

10 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14 (3) 1988: 575-599.

11 Renate Lorenz, *Queer Art: A Freak Theory*, (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2012).

12 See: Vaclav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," transl. Paul Wilson, *International Journal of Politics*, Vol. 15, no. 3/4, "The Power of the Powerless" (Fall-Winter 1985-86): 23-96; Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Open Court 1996); Jacek Kuroń, *Wina i wiara*, (Warszawa: Oficyna Nowa 1990).

13 Gerald Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge*, (New York/Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013). See also: Ewa Majewska, "The Common in a Time of Creative Reproductions: On Gerald Raunig's Factories of Knowledge", *e-flux*, no. 62, 2015.

14 Gerald Raunig, "What is Critique? Suspension and Recomposition in Textual and Social Machines", in: *Transversal*, 08 2008, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0808/raunig/en>, accessed 2 February 2017.

15 Ewa Plonowska-Ziarek, "Feminist Aesthetics: Transformative Practice, Neoliberalism, and the Violence of Formalism", *Differences* 2 (25) 2014.

16 Sascha Scott, "Awa Tsireh and the Art of Subtle Resistance," *The Art Bulletin*, (95:4/2013): 597-622.

17 Kirstin Orav, "The Role of Visualizing Failure in Estonian Art, 1987-1999: The 'Winners' Generation'," *Source: Signs and Society*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 2015):103-131.

18 See: Turowski, *The Greatness of Desire*.

19 Interview with Ewa Partum, in: Maria Morzuch (ed.), *Nic nie zatrzyma idei sztuki/ Nothing stops the idea of art*, (Łódź: Museum of Art, 2015), 173.

20 For more information, see the major monographs: Szylak et al (eds.), *Ewa Partum* and Morzuch (ed.), *Nic nie zatrzyma idei sztuki/ Nothing stops the idea of art*, op. cit. (both publications are bilingual, PL-EN). For a more contextual reading, see: Gabriele Schor (ed.), *The Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works from the Sammlung Verbund* (Munich: Prestel, 2016).

21 See: Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *October*, Vol. 70, The Duchamp Effect (Autumn, 1994): 5-32.

22 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 137.

23 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 233.

24 Ibid., 247.

25 Ibid., 126.

26 Ibid., 256.

27 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 342 and following.

28 Ibid., 350.

29 Ibid., 343.

30 Elisabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 23.

31 For more information about Kobro and the Polish avant-gardes, see: Monika Król, "Collaboration and Compromise: Women Artists in Polish-German Avant-Garde Circles, 1910-1930", *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930*, ed. Timothy O. Benson (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2002), 338-356.

32 Jacques Rancière, "Aesthetics as Politics", in: idem, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, transl. S. Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009). Interestingly,

Rancière's preoccupation with the autonomy of the art form clearly follows the prescriptions suggested in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. In this context, the open rejection of the critical paradigm that Rancière emphasizes so much just does not hold. See also: Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*.

33 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

34 Ibid., 99.

35 Linda Nochlin, "Why were there no great female artists?" in: idem, *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988).

36 In an interview for the Wysokie Obcasy magazine, conducted by Dorota Jarecka, Partum claims that she called her work "a territory managed by imagination." "Ewa Partum: artystka performerka," *Wysokie Obcasy*. 14 06 2008. <http://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/1,96856,3539283.html?disableRedirects=true>, accessed February 2, 2017.

37 This and all other works by Ewa Partum are perhaps best described in the catalogue: Szylak et al (eds.), *Ewa Partum*.

38 See: Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *October*, Vol. 70, The Duchamp Effect (Autumn, 1994): 5-32.

39 Ibid., 8.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 17 and 26.

42 Ibid., 30.

43 See: Gianni Vattimo, *Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought*, in: Idem (ed.), *Weak Thought*. (New York: SUNY, 2012). For the theme of weak thought, see: Giovanna Borradori, "Weak Thought" and Postmodernism: The Italian Departure from Deconstruction, *Social Text*, No. 18, Postmodernism. (Winter, 1987-1988), 39-49.

- 44 Hal Foster, "Precarious", in: Marc Leger (ed.), *The Idea of the Avant Garde and What It Means Today* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2014).
- 45 Groys, *Weak Universalism*.
- 46 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.
- 47 Ibid., 2.
- 48 See: Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 An interesting analysis of Luxemburg's preoccupation with failure has been offered here: Lorelea Michaelis, "Rosa Luxemburg on disappointment and the politics of commitment", *European Journal of Political Theory* no. 10, 2011.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 For a brave, non-heroic feminist interpretation of Antigone, see: Bonnie Honnig, *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 53 See: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.
- 54 Halberstam, *The Queer Art*, 15.
- 55 Ibid., 3.
- 56 Halberstam, *The Queer Art*, 2.
- 57 Gregory Scholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, (London: Pluto Press, 2011).
- 58 See: Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).
- 59 See: Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*.