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To Participate and to Disappear

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Joanna Jopek, *I'd Rather Not*, ed. Justyna Stasiowska
(Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2016)

Joanna Jopek's book is the multi-layered, open and unfinished record of a project on strategies of participation, ways of (non)being and negotiations with presence: it remains filled with possibilities and potential. The tragic death of its author [in 2014] has left it without closure, apposition or explanation. The book is a collection of diverse texts – partly a journal of Jopek's fascination with certain themes and phenomena, partly a review of intellectual challenges, a periodic reading list of the author, or perhaps an invitation for other researchers. I have no doubt that *I'd Rather Not* is primarily an invitation to co-thinking, as well as a field full of promise for those who will take up the pioneering threads, theses and interpretational proposals indicated by its author.

In terms of its theme, the book spans a description of active participation, engagement, establishing and enacting performances of presence, harnessing mediality into practicing presence with the example of an analysis of Krzysztof Garbaczewski's theatre, and a description of strategies of disappearing, annihilating that which testifies to existence, of eluding presence.

In the chapter 'Participations', Jopek analyses Agata Siwiak's curatorial project *Wielkopolska: Rewolucje* [*Wielkopolska: Revolutions*], and reflects on the causative potential of participation and on consequences of its refusal in community enterprises.¹ In subsequent descriptions of works of Michał Borczuch, Mikołaj Mikołajczyk, Jolanta Janiczak and Wiktor Rubin, Jopek brings to the surface the theme of establishing local communities and constructing from them active micro-communities of action. She considers strategies and practices of building local communities, showing through examples how those are most frequently constructed around alienation, otherness and difference. Citing the findings of Markus Miessen from his book *The Nightmare of Participation*,² she revolves around questions of whether implementing social order and its introduction to life in a community must always be marked by violence and whether it always ends up excluding someone from the given community. Is a truly causative community founded exclusively on the category of common experience? Are dialogue and mutual interaction between different forms of culture (with particular emphasis on the distinction between high-brow and low-brow culture) an important

1 See Joanna Jopek, 'Revolutions versus Participations', *Polish Theatre Journal* 2015,

2 Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation* (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2013).

cementing factor in community founding and in being together? Another aspect of community existence examined by Jopek is the relationship of culture and institutions – to what extent do institutions operate within the framework of social exchange, supporting the community, and to what extent they colonize the community instead, thus widening the range of social impact of ‘participation nightmare’? If culture is an element of that which is public, then community becomes established through activity in the public sphere. Art, space for artistic creation, could then recognize itself as an element of that which is communal – neither private nor public. Certainly supported by state institutions, but still common and shared.

Issues of cultural life of a community and community access to culture are problems worthy of consideration while discussing participation. The idea of the *Wielkopolska: Revolutions* project was based on enabling avant-garde artists and small local communities to meet. According to Jopek, those meetings revealed the facade-like, phantasmal nature of the participation strategies employed. The main reason behind the superficiality of participation was the inequality of access to culture. Jopek does not use Pierre Bourdieu’s³ category, but she is very aware of the tension between habitus and distinction in the analysed phenomena. She is aware that artistic production and aesthetic practices are always mercenary – determined by cultural factors, process of education, socialization, level of symbolic capital, with all of these influencing the cultural competence of an individual. Habitus becomes shaped in the process of socialization and is a class and culturally conditioned competence in the area of participation in culture – it is cultural competence and norm embodied. Distinction, in turn, is a class and culturally conditioned process of differentiation of social competence, which makes it possible to determine to which social class an individual belongs. The aforementioned superficiality of participation noticed by the author lies in the fact that one cannot participate without being colonized. In other words, artistic experiments proposed in *Wielkopolska: Revolutions* revealed a battle of taste, judgement and competence hierarchies, showing the unavailability of cultural practices for local communities in small centres and the elite, exclusive character of artistic and aesthetic practices. Jopek seems to enquire whether artistic activity must always expand the area that enhances social stratification. And by the same token, to condemn to inequality and exclusion along the distinction-habitus line. At the same time, she raises doubts as to the positive dimension of participation, and of founding community identification on participation strategies.

The community as described by Jopek is the intersection site of social, aesthetic and political discourses – discourses that vary considerably, don’t enter in dialogue with one another and are incompatible. It is a hierarchical community, based on interdependencies, subordination mechanisms, grading and exclusion. A community that only rarely manages to unite in being together, and to establish a collective of equals. Expanding the area of the issue, one could say that the author reflects on how effective it is to construct a community through culture and whether culture can be an element in establishing community at the level of everyday practice. The artist’s activities assumed the

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Piotr Biłos (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2005).

temporariness of a community that gathered around a given problem, a particular narrative, a symbol from the space. Temporariness foreshadows disappearance...

In temporariness and disappearance lies the potential of resistance against subjugating, norm-imposing social reality, which at the same time is a potential for counter-culture. In negative performativity – Jopek's original, pioneering project – I notice a remarkably important research problem, which deserves to be continued and awaits subsequent researchers. What is the category of negative performativity proposed by Jopek? This category has many faces, it is unfocused – it blurs and spills into many areas. At times, it consists of practicing failure, ignorance and stupidity; at other times, it is a search for the most efficient way of disappearing from social life. All activities and the refusal of action analysed within the framework of negative-performativity theory share a common assumption, after all – they have a counter-culture dimension and constitute a gap in the symbolic field and socio-political system. Negative performativity is a performativity of resistance.

If communities are built according to a normative order, seeking majority rules, negating historical and identity majority, producing strong subjects and hard identities – Jopek is interested in all that allows for escape from such togetherness. She wants to find an alternative to removing the complexity of human action, to eliminating dialectic, to organizing a world without contradiction, strangeness, weirdness and diversity, to replacing memory with mythologizing narratives. She constructs her negative performativity theory by analysing works of Joanna Rajkowska and focusing on those aspects of the artist's work that revolve around presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, the ephemeral and duration, community and emancipation, history and memory. *Pozdrowienia z Alej Jerozolimskich* [Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue], *Dotleniacz* [Oxygenator] in Grzybowski Square in Warsaw, *Dziennik snów* [Diary of Dreams], *Wodnik* [Aquarius], *Wirnik* [Rotor], the *Zniknąć nad Wisłą* [Disappear by the Vistula] project – these are just a few of the artist's projects and proposals, which for Jopek constitute a field for building her research and her theory of negative performativity.

The theory recognizes the effect of power-knowledge, colonization, establishing meanings through subjugating discourses – and it knows how to escape those mechanisms by inventing subversive strategies. For the author, performing does not mean producing and confirming presence, identity, visibility – performing means dissolving the fixed, current categories and norms to be cited. Negativity consists in a refusal to take part in a defined structure of reality enclosed by a symbolic cordon. Negativity means oscillating between knowledge and ignorance, practicing mistakes, failures, errors, forgetfulness. It is a refusal to take part in the discourse, to live inside a myth. It is practicing invisibility for visibility systems, systems of production, capital. Those practices are aimed at visibility, productivity and presence. They allow one to negotiate with those regimes, they encourage performing cognitive failure, they produce alternative information fields, modes of perception, at the same time invoking alternative strategies of interpreting the world and participating in it. Those strategies allow for phenomena to be interpreted beyond their usual context or against it, thus allowing each time for new self-defining.

Jopek writes:

Practice failure is perhaps the most subversive call in the face of the ruling, capitalist dictate “perform (produce, be present, introduce change) or perish”. One cannot withdraw from the necessity of performing within the social framework – although one can gradually detonate it: such action and such power lies, I believe, in the negative practices presented here.⁴

I'd Rather Not is a book on negativity bearing a revolutionary counter-culture potential. The theory of negative performativity proposed by Joanna Jopek has a chance of creating a community of researchers who also ‘would rather not’.

Translated by Karolina Sofulak

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⁴ Joanna Jopek, *I'd Rather Not*, ed. Justyna Stasiowska (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2016), p. 161.

ABSTRACT

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To Participate and to Disappear

In this review of Joanna Jopek's book *I'd Rather Not*, the author identifies and illuminates the most important – and awaiting researchers willing to develop them – ideas from Jopek's research project. These include the mediality of the theatre, negative performativity, and participation in the social space through art. Iwanczewska describes the pioneering nature and innovativeness of the concept of negative performativity and analyses its resultant interpretive uses for cultural phenomena. The review is a testament to reading of the late author's research and academic oeuvre.