Frowst

Joanna Piotrowska

The suffocating nature of family relationships, the oppressive role of social institutions, physical and structural violence against women, the need for power and control over animals — these are the main topics that accompany Joanna Piotrowska's work. With exhibitions in leading art institutions around the world (including Tate Britain in London and MoMA in New York), Piotrowska is today one of the most important Polish artists of the young generation. On 18 September, Zachęta — National Gallery of Art will open its monographic exhibition Frowst. This is the first such extensive presentation of the artist's works in Poland.

The exhibition will include, among others, the series Frowst (suffocation, mustiness), which brought the artist international recognition. The famous series of photographs refers to Bert Hellinger's pseudo-scientific method of family constellations, popular in Poland, which has been very controversial for years. The staged photographs resemble photographs from a family album. A daughter sits on her father's lap, a brother puts a hand on his brother's shoulder, sisters lie on the same armchair. Forced proximity of adults causes discomfort and anxiety. The 'suffocation' visible in the works perfectly describes complicated family relationships.

In her staged photos and videos, the artist focuses on exploring human relationships and their bodily expression. She examines characters entangled in the context of social institutions, struggling with manifestations of power, emotional dependencies and the violent element of human nature. In addition to subject related to family, sense of security and home, the position of women and the psychology of girl rebellion play an important role in the circle of her interests. Her black-and-white, handmade, gelatin silver prints and videos on 16 mm tape are more of a record of performance or spectacle than a documentary.

Under the influence of texts by the American feminist and developmental psychologist Carol Gilligan, who dealt with the issues of women's voice and resistance, a series of photographs was created, presenting teenage girls in poses taken from self-defence textbooks. These works refer to the ubiquitous, structural and physical violence against women, but they are also a story of a rebellion of women and girls against a culturally sanctioned narrative that disciplines women. Oppression also appears in works depicting models pointing out 'sensitive spots' on the body — the places most vulnerable to attack and pain.

The exhibition will also feature the latest series of photographs documenting cages and animal enclosures arranged in a pattern of human dwellings. The photographs reveal the dominance of humans over the animal world, the need for control, the lust for power, as well as fear. Some of the works depict objects used to play and stimulate animals, which look like instruments of torture, medical instruments or erotic toys.

The exhibition closes with a presentation of the project in which Piotrowska asked her friends to build hideouts in their flats, imitating children's games. The photographs reveal not only the temporariness and lack of security, experienced today especially by young people, but also the illusion of material comfort. It turns out that it is difficult to build a true refuge from the piles of things we own.

Joanna Piotrowska — visual artist, photographer. She was born in 1985 in Warsaw. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków and the Royal College of Art in London. Her monographic album FROWST was released in 2014, to the delight of critics. Her works have been presented, among others, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, at the 10th Berlin Biennale, at Tate Britain in London and at a solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel in Switzerland.

Exhibition:
Joanna Piotrowska. Frowst,
18 September –
6 December 2020,
Zachęta — National Gallery of Art,
pl. Małachowskiego 3, Warsaw

Curator: Magdalena Komornicka
More information: zacheta.art.pl

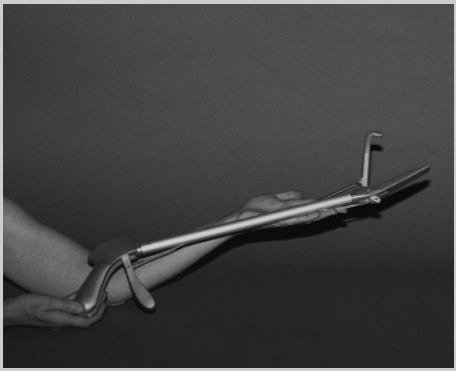
INTERVIEW WITH JOANNA PIOTROWSKA

MAGDALENA KOMORNICKA

Magdalena Komornicka: Why do you photograph zoos?
Joanna Piotrowska: My interest in animal cages is a continuation of the themes that appear in my earlier works — in Frowst, domestic spaces, patterned carpets, curtains, blankets, wall units and cramped rooms act as spatial frameworks for the bodies that inhabit them. This theme crystallises in my later project of 'shelters' which presents built in rooms, shrunken-down 'residential forms' that are even closer to the body, are even smaller, radically limiting the movements of the household member. During my visit to the zoo I realised that cages have common features with domestic spaces — they are similarly arranged, there is, for example a bed, i.e. a place to sleep, a corner for eating, doors, corridors, windows, an exit to the garden, sometimes a place to play or, as in the case of monkeys, a place for rest and enrichment, such as a hammock. We design for animals just like we design for ourselves — to provide them with everything they need, according to our ideas about their needs. What's interesting is what's common for the space for humans and animals, because it speaks to our responsibility towards other species.
I am interested in designing cages and paddocks for animals because it is a specific architecture of oppression, completely different from, for example, prisons, which are always out of our sight. Cages are a kind of showcase — they serve for a better presentation of the animal; they are the scenery in the centre of which we place the animal like an object. In the case of zoo cages, we are dealing with two very important and at the same time opposing phenomena: protection and responsibility, and enslavement and oppression. This dichotomy is the starting point for most of my works.

MK: Unlike your previous works, these are documentary photos.
JP: Yes. These are the only works where I don't arrange anything. Everything that is in cages or in the paddocks has already been carefully arranged by someone else. Cages in the zoo are scenery full of well-thought-out props such as a tree trunk, ball, blanket, plate with food, artificial stones or plants. In the Warsaw zoo, there were human clothes lying on the ground in the gorilla paddock. This made a strong impression on me, it made me aware of the proximity of our species.
MK: When we look at a series of photographs from zoos or photographs of objects for animal stimulation, we immediately think of violence or rather power.
JP: You cannot look at zoos without thinking of them as places created for the subordinate Other. The animal-human relationship is an extreme form of the hierarchies we create and brings to mind other forms of inequality functioning in societies — patriarchy in the family, inequality between men and women, racism, etc. Through the joint effort of many people, a huge industry was created for the production and sale of objects designed to allow animals to exist in

conditions other than natural ones. It was created so we could observe animals. This evokes some very negative associations for me.
The purpose of some items used to 'care' for or stimulate animals is ambiguous. Some, such as toys or mirrors, could be objects for children or, conversely, tools of torture. There's a grabbing tool that looks like a gun. It is used to hold the animal at a safe distance, a kind of extension of the hand, an object for touching.



MK: This is interesting in the context of your previous works, where there is the theme of touch.
JP: Yes, there's a theme of touch in many of my works. First in the works from the Frowst series, in the context of intimate family relationships. It is also present in the film showing hands in a therapeutic gesture. Then in subsequent works in the act of physical conflict, self-defence. It is important for me to create such connections and move from animal to human, from human to house, from house to cage, from cage to shelter, safety, intimacy, touch. I circulate between these points of reference, trying to explore the relationships between them.

MK: Touch, the body and violence appear in the pictures showing teenage girls in poses taken from the self-defence manual.
JP: That work, like the previous *Frowst* series, stems from my interest in non-verbal communication and process-oriented psychology. In contrast to classical psychoanalysis, therapeutic techniques based on body work pay attention to gesture and movement. Since the body reacts to things like our private life, emotions and problems, it cannot remain indifferent to our socio-political life. I mean not only the extreme political decisions concerning things like the introduction of a total ban on abortion, but also the stereotypical thinking about upbringing, about how a child should sit, play, use their voice, *et cetera*. The body, if it is not repressed by imposed conventions, traditions or endless rules, is at best simply ignored. The methods of Moshé Feldenkrais, Alexander Lowen or other similar tools for developing body awareness are still niche, while in my opinion, they should be part of education.
When I came across instructional books for self-defence, I was fascinated by the fact that the body is treated in them as a weapon, and the number of tricks and gestures is a kind of alphabet, an autonomous body language. During that time, I was also reading *Joining the Resistance*, in which author Carol Gilligan describes how adolescent girls unconsciously self-censor, subordinating themselves to the commonly prevailing patterns of girlhood or femininity in patriarchal culture. Social relations are perme-

ated with male domination, and the categories of attachment and concern characteristic of female psychology give way to paternalism and power. The injustice and inequality that Gilligan writes about exist at many levels, often 'between worlds'. It seemed interesting to me in the context of the body language of self-defence. The girls and women in my photographs are in domestic spaces, most often in their rooms, and they assume uncomfortable positions. It's not immediately apparent that these are bodies that are defending themselves. We also don't see what they're defending themselves against, we just see that they're in an intense relationship with something incapacitating, which is outside the frame.

MK: N There was also a performance based on this.
JP: First, there were photos, then the film and the performance. The latter is particularly interesting because it involves the audience more directly. In the choreography of the performance, which I initially worked on with Magdalena Ptasznik, I use holds and gestures from self-defence. They are often looped, performed with different strength and frequency; there is also the sound of a tired performer breathing or stamping her leg. Alicja Czyczel, the artist who carried out this performance, modified her movements a bit each time, reacting to the surroundings or the audience. This activity also involves working with the performer's gaze on the viewer and pointing out sensitive points on the body. This gesture has a very symbolic meaning for me and is impossible to render in a photograph.

The performance is an important part of my artistic practice and appears in most of my projects, even those that are ultimately photographs. A very strong performative element is also present in the project, in which adults build their shelter-hideouts.

MK: Adults building a hideout are playing a children's game, in which children pretend to be adults, playing house.
JP: Yes, that's what this project was about. In the act of building the hide-

out, the shelter, there is, on the one hand, convention and innocence that characterises children's games, and on the other hand, the seriousness of consciously seeking physical and emotional comfort in adult life. The work is justly associated with homelessness and the basic need of people to have a home and feel safe. It also refers a little bit to materialism and consumerism — to all those things that we have piling up and from which the adults in the pictures build fragile constructions that create an apparent shelter and seemingly give them an identity.

MK: The photographs from the *Frowst* series, which have already been mentioned, depict people actually related to each other — mother and son, father and daughter, siblings — and are a kind of directed family portraits.
JP: I call them situations. They are staged, some were inspired by the relation of bodies in Hellinger's constellations, specific gestures, how people set themselves up against each other, where they direct their gaze, and so on. The participants of the classes, according to Bert Hellinger's method, stand in a closed circle, on a kind of stage where the bodies, just like in self-defence, have their own language built up often from repeated gestures. It was very inspiring for me to see a subtle body language in the context of a method in which history and social conditions are of great importance (by the way, personal stories related to the experience of war appear very often in Hellinger's constellations).
I asked my friends to work with me in creating situations in which they pose with their family members in arrangements partly taken from 'therapy' sessions and partly from their own photographs from the past. The result is completely fictitious situations photographed in the documentary convention.

MK: It was difficult for the people in the photos. It turns out that it's not easy to be close with your loved ones, and that we rarely touch each other. For example, the touch of the daughter and father in your pictures seems ambiguous.
JP: Of course, some positions were not physically comfortable, but sometimes my models surprised me with their naturalness in this unnatural posing. In the case of the picture showing an adult daughter sitting on her father's lap, I remember the lightness and cheerfulness of posing — the atmosphere was completely different from that emanating from the finished

work. Some of the photos bring to mind emotional or physical dysfunction and an inconvenient interdependence. One of the most successful pictures from this series, in my opinion, is associated with the effort of motherhood and childbirth. It shows an adult man lying stiffly next to his mother.

MK: Did watching your family lead you to Bert Hellinger's family constellations? Or was it the opposite — did observing the choreography of bodies during the constellations initiate this project?
JP: I find family constellations very interesting in discovering the complexity of interpersonal relationships. I was interested in Bert Hellinger before the idea for this series of photos was born. I observed some constellations, I read a lot of books on the subject, I was practically fascinated by this method — mainly because the constellations look a bit like a play. On the one hand, it is a staging, and on the other, real, sometimes very strong emotions appear. The same can be seen when observing family life, because we often rely on patterns of behaviour and take on specific roles — in the role of the caring mother or the provider father, in what is considered to be a traditional Polish family.

MK: Hellinger's constellations are considered harmful because they are based on manipulation. What is your attitude towards them and does it matter to your work?
JP: I'm not a supporter of this method and I don't know if I would subject myself to it, but it doesn't change the fact that certain aspects of the constellations are fascinating to me. This method has something unreasonable, irrational, shamanic. I have always been intellectually drawn towards that which is difficult to understand. This method also makes us look at our current situation from the position of the body and think about the role of past family experience in our lives. I'm curious about this alleged combination of past events with the body here and now. For hundreds of years, shamans in different cultures have talked about such a combination, and this has been the reason for the rituals of encounters with ancestral spirits. These days, we rarely refer to spirituality other than through religion, which is a pity.

MK: What does *Frowst* mean?
JP: The importance of this title is crucial for the project. It is an interesting word which, in English, serves as both an adjective and a noun. It means mustiness, stuffiness, or suffocation. It's an impression when we enter a room that hasn't been aired out for a long time and there's barely any air to breathe. In my opinion, this can also apply to family relationships. I associate this feeling with the Polish winter, with apartment blocks, where it's very warm. I have such a childhood memory — curtains, drapes, carpets, wallpaper, a blanket on the couch. It is a memory of cosiness, but also of visual claustrophobia and emotional suffocation. We can use this word in a positive sense — to 'frowst by the fire' means to 'warm up by the fire'.
The photographs from this series have a degree of anxiety, but their overtones are not clearly negative. Two sisters sit, carefree, in the same chair. A brother has his hand on his brother's shoulder. It's a gesture of closeness, support, reassurance. I wanted to present these gestures in such a way that their obvious connotations are no longer obvious, to show their hidden meaning and to make them question their own status.

ILNESS WITHOUT A PATIENT

JOANNA BEDNAREK

Two women stand close together, tossing a small ball between each other. There. And back. And back again. It looks like there's no end to this . . . game? It also doesn't seem to be bringing them much joy. It seems a bit obsessive. Girls, looking at the camera, show different points on their bodies. Instructions? But for what? A young woman sits with her head tilted back; the hands of someone outside of the frame hold up her head; or are they holding it down? Help or violence? What is going on in these photographs and videos and why, even though they are not drastic, are they disquieting?

THE AMBIGUITY OF POWER

Help or violence? This ambiguity is at the heart of power. Power is not really just what we associate with the word when we use common sense. 'When we speak of power, it is spontaneously conceived of as law, as interdiction, as prohibition and repression; and we are quite disarmed when we follow it in its mechanisms and in its positive effects.' [1]

Power, meanwhile, is not the same as institutions such as the state, the law or the police; it is not a set of rules and norms that prohibit or forbid. This is because it does not limit something that would have already existed — our desires or unorthodox forms of subjectivity — but it produces this subjectivity and those desires, while at the same time shaping and regulating them through systems of interrelated discourses and practices: medicine, clinics and hospitals, psychiatry and hospitals for the mentally ill, law, police and prisons. A prohibition, if one appears, is something secondary.

Thus, 'power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbour and preserve in the beings that we are.'[2] We have 'always' been entangled in power; there is no way out of it — there is no area of pure freedom where power is simply absent. For Judith Butler, this entanglement is linked to an infant's primal dependence and the love for the caregivers it forces on the child: 'there is no possibility of

not loving, where love is bound up with the requirements for life.'[3] Because this love is born in conditions of extreme inequality and dependence, it is susceptible to abuse — 'the desire to survive, "to be", is a pervasively exploitable desire'.[4]

This does not mean that resistance is impossible. Power is a field of strategic relations enabling certain individuals to influence the actions of other individuals. This influence can be hostile and oppressive, but it can also be beneficial. A primary school teacher obviously not only know more than the children they teach, but also has the task of, in addition to conveying information, to instil in them the self-discipline necessary for learning. The process can take on an oppressive form (which the school as an institution often enables), but it can also bring out the children's creativity, curiosity and initiative. Likewise, the 'invention' of homosexuality by 19th-century sexology pioneers made the people assigned this label the object of attention of doctors and police, but also enabled homosexuals to fight for their rights on the basis of this very identity[5].

Foucault draws attention to the need to distinguish between power and domination; power relations are mobile, reversible and susceptible to change, often freeze, creating hierarchies that are immune to transformation; 'power relations, instead of being mobile, allowing the various participants to adopt strategies modifying them, remain blocked, frozen'[6].

Resistance to dominance understood in this way does not take the form of a search for an external territory of freedom, but of working on power relations 'from within', of trying to dynamise them. If power is everywhere, so is resistance and freedom. However, they take on a form as complex and ambiguous as power — they are never 'pure', they carry the stigma of being entangled in states of domination from which they emerge and from which they want to free themselves.

FAMILY — A CURSE AND A BLESSING

Nowhere does this reveal itself as clearly as in the case of family — the basic building block of society to which most of us are condemned for better or worse, if only because it has shaped us in our childhood; it is the subject of the photographs from the Frowst series. Although the nuclear family, made up of a married couple and their children, emerged relatively recently — more or less in the 19th century[7] — many representatives of 20th-century humanities and even science have naturalised it, considering it an eternal, permanent environment in which human subjectivity is shaped. Tales of human evolution or the functionalist psychology and sociology of the 1950s presented the nuclear family as both a basic fact that allowed for the explanation of specific human characteristics, and a normative point of access, an ideal of socialisation to which everyone should aspire. The fact that the majority of real families did not measure up to this ideal has been the reason for constant academic interventions by psychologists and socialists, therapists and social

workers. Family happiness was presented as the ultimate fulfilment — the more attractive the more real families deviated from the ideal.

The greatest contribution to the mythicisation of the family was probably made by psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud's vision of the developing subject created in response to the inability to satisfy the drives that turned towards objects from their closest surroundings — generally, the parents — placed the individual permanently in the horizon of private relations of the nuclear family, which in psychoanalytic optics appears as much as a blessing as a curse, but above all as an impassable territory defining the nature of the desire not only of the child, but also the adult. The fact that Freud's theory not only did not meet contemporary scientific standards, but also those of his time[9] makes little difference in terms of the cultural influence of psychoanalysis. Despite its unscientific nature, it expresses the fears and desires of people shaped by capitalist modernity — it is a powerful myth of this era.

This myth resists being unmasked and shown as unscientific; however, this does not mean that discussion with it should be avoided. It is a reflection of the modern changes that gave the family the form we know today, as well as created the private individual. It is, however, a distorted reflection, presenting these historical processes as an expression of eternal forces that cannot be fought against. In this way, it reinforces the aforementioned discourse about the ahistoricity and necessity of the nuclear family, making it impossible to see that it is not our fate.

However, exposing psychoanalysis as unscientific from a positivist perspective has limited effectiveness. Interpersonal relations and the social sciences and humanities that deal with them only partly belong to the field of rationality and remind us that we are not strictly rational beings. This does not mean, however, that the domain of unreason to any myth that succeeds in gaining popularity; however, the critique of myths must take place in part in their own territory.

Although Freud's 'discovery' of the unconscious remains extremely important to contemporary humanities, the discoverer himself, as well as his successors, have done much to erase its radical character[10]. Freud defined the unconscious as subordinate to insatiability, scarcity and the threat of castration (which Lacan would later reinterpret as a symbolic castration, necessary for the subject to constitute itself). Despite the assumption of plasticity of desire, Freud decided that it was doomed to fit into gender roles defined by the society in which he lived.

The family and the individual subject, as well as the primacy of the Oedipus complex and castration remain the main point of reference and model for psychoanalysis, including in situation when its representatives attempt to analyse social and political phenomena.[11] This makes psychoanalysis not so much diagnose the entanglements of subjects as perpetuate them, taking the sides of fathers, the patriarchy and heteronormativity: 'Reading the history of culture in a way that aligns a patriarchal psychology with civilization, we see its discomfort or neurosis as the price we have to pay.'[12]

Thus, it is good to assume that investments in what is social and political precede the creation of a subject and investments in the choice of the object defined by the family context. This does not mean that the mechanisms described by Freud do not exist. Rather, Freud and orthodox psychoanalysis do not perceive what happens within the unconscious on a level preceding the castration and the Oedipal selection of the object. 'Castration! Castration! cries the psychoanalytic scarecrow, who never saw more than a hole, a father or a dog where wolves are, a domesticated individual where there are wild multiplicities.'[13] Although in a capitalist society, the family makes a power appropriation of desire, it is neither natural not necessary. The 'defamilisation' of the unconscious, however, turns out not to be a simple matter, as evidenced by the example of feminism and its fight against patriarchy, far from being over.

Despite several hundred years of women's struggle for equality and the unquestionable achievements in this field, we are still far from overthrowing the patriarchy. Formal equality, the right to education and competition in the labour market were not enough to eliminate the inequalities that have existed for thousands of years. Every feminist offensive meets with a counterattack — the current attack of the extreme right on reproductive rights and women's rights in general is just the latest part of this conflict.[14] Emancipating women constantly face a wall of prejudices resistant to rational argumentation and formal, legal reforms. This is because the patriarchy is not rational — although the justifications that cite its naturalness and roots in the human unconscious take the form of rational, scientific argumentation, they are only justifications of emotions and attitudes that are not.

This is why feminism faces a difficult task: it must transform the structures of the unconscious, the area of unreason, resistant to law and reason. For this reason, 'reasonable' people looking at it from the outside often criticise its inappropriateness and excessive radicalism, suggesting that feminists are not successful because of their aggression or inappropriate tone. Behind such remarks lies the outrage of scandal of revealing the hierarchies that structure our supposedly democratic society. As Jacqueline Rose puts it, the task of feminism is 'to push us all too far, by bringing to the surface those secrets of history and of the heart which most fiercely, and fatally, resist the light'.[15]

Feminism is therefore confronted with an area of ambivalence, with the power that oppresses us as much as it calls us into existence. This is well illustrated by the issue of stories of women's trauma, which are a particular sub-genre of public confessions. Apart from fighting for changes in legislation or exposing prejudices, they are an integral part of feminist politics. Describing women's experience, devoid of means of expression in the patriarchy, is an emancipatory practice, which shows the role of consciousness raising in the

development of the second wave of feminism. In turn, the #MeToo movement showed that personal confessions about the harassment experienced, if there are enough of them, can bring about social changes on a large scale.

However, there is a danger to using stories of injustice as a political tool. As Mary Beard points out, drawing a parallel between the ancient ban on women speaking in public and the still existing aversion to women moving about in the public sphere, 'there are only two main exceptions in the classical world to this abomination of women's public speaking'.[17] One of them is speaking on behalf of women as a particular group. In the second, 'women are allowed to speak out as victims and martyrs, usually to preface their own death'.[18] Modern feminists do not intend to commit suicide, unlike Lucretia, who obeyed the patriarchal norms — they use the convention of speaking about their own harm to take a place in the public sphere and transform it. Despite this radical use, however, stories of harassment, rape or domestic violence remain burdened with the history of past, not necessarily emancipatory uses.

Foucault points out that confession was the main institution of Western Christian culture, creating the subject, making them credible and at the same time visible.[19] It granted an identity that could become the basis for fighting for one's own rights, but at the same time offered truth of the subject of power. Confession, therapy and statements politicising the personal experience or identity (such as coming out or consciousness building) are therefore developments of one ambivalent convention. In the case of women's stories about a true, most often traumatic, experience, this means becoming entangled in a mechanism that links the word of a woman with the status of a victim, which can result in permanent victimisation and the inability to transform it into agency. There is also a risk that the act of making a statement will become a sexualised spectacle — the aforementioned convention links political statements with representations of women who have been raped or driven mad, present in patriarchal literature or visual culture, constituting the object of unhealthy fascination.

And even if this does not happen, the statement can simply be considered as an expression of a woman's subjective feelings, to which, as Rebecca Solnit states, women's statements are often reduced; they are 'credible' only in the sense that they convey the emotions of the speaker, without in any way reflecting reality.[20] This is an effective way to neutralise them.

This does not mean, of course, that the political use of the trauma narrative must end in failure and be reduced to previous patterns. However, the relation to them means that this practice remains forever marked by ambivalence and entanglement in power relations. In this context, the role of art suspending the issue of the credibility of a confession and questioning the conventions of speaking about trauma proves particularly promising.

ANTI-SPECTACLE

In one of her interviews Joanna Piotrowska distanced herself from photographers 'fascinated by how something looks rather than interested in what that thing means'.[21] The *Frowst* series refers to family photographs[22]; however, unlike them, it does not present a scrubbed clean, official image of the family, free from all peculiarities and tensions that characterise relations between its members. The staged (the artist's relatives and friends served as models) representations of people whose actual status remains a mystery to us, but in whom, by the power of convention, we see family members, are inappropriate and disturbing. The photographed people are too close, they assume uncomfortable, unnatural poses, or remain embraced or intertwined in an uncomfortable way (the fact that they are often not fully dressed does not help). When we think of a modern family, the suggestion of incest — its threat, its supposedly universal ban, the ultimate transgression it represents — always remains on the horizon. For capitalist modernity, the family is a model of human relations supposedly untouched by the self-interest we have to show by competing with each other in the market, and which provides a respite from that competition. At the same time, its actual func-

tioning and the success of the therapeutic industry, which is supposed to correct its deficiencies, show that the burden on the family to provide authentic, close emotional connections puts it under enormous pressure, with which it cannot cope. That is why we often have the impression that the family home is full of frowst — even if the relatives are not clearly incestuous, their relationships are often too close, burdensome, full of tension, 'unhealthy'.

The second important context for *Frowst* is, as the artist herself points out, the tradition of documentalism — individual photographs are only marked with Roman numerals, and the lack of colour brings to the foreground the forms and arrangements of the photographed subjects.[23] The impression of severity and authenticity clashes with the knowledge that although we have 'real' relatives before our eyes, we do not know their history and do not know whether they are really linked by the relations suggested in the pictures. This is important in the context of another reference important for the cycle — the Bert Hellinger family constellation method.[24] It is based on the assumption that recreating the system in which the living and deceased members of the family remain together, releasing the related emotions and forgiving the abusers should have a healing effect on an individual. The constellations take the form of spectacular sessions, during which the participants, who take on the roles of the members of the patient's family, are supposed to experience the same emotions by virtue of being in their place within the constellation. As critics point out, this effect is achieved by means of suggestion to which those who choose this form of assistance are vulnerable.[25] They also stress that Hellinger's concept of the 'knowing field' responsible for the constellations is pseudo-scientific in nature, and the method itself does not meet the ethical standards for therapists, due, among other things, to its manipulative nature.[26] Nevertheless, Hellinger's method remains artistically attractive[27], probably because of its drama, its 'performative logic'.[28] This is because it enables the transformation of problematic human relations into abstract constellations, which can then be

subjected to various transformations showing the mechanisms that produce these constellations and how they can be dismantled. Joanna Piotrowska does this not only in *Frowst*, but also in works with the working titles of Self-defence and *Sensitive Points*. The former shows poses from a self-defence handbook made in the absence of the attacker; this lack of reference makes them just as strange as the arrangements in *Frowst*, We do not see the attacker, just as we do not see the patriarchy shaping and haunting the bodies of women assuming the poses, as much oppressing them as giving them an identity; however, their presence is visible in unnatural and awkward poses that betray the tension of the models. The girls in the Sensitive Points film and photos show the places on the body most vulnerable to attack. Thus, they demonstrate their own vulnerability, turning it into a cool, abstract show.

This is important in the face of the aforementioned mechanism of transforming women's suffering (as well as suffering generally caused by, for example, domestic violence) into a spectacle. If one wanted to find one term for these works, it would be anti-spectacular: Piotrowska takes performances about women's family entanglements and oppression out of the context of personal narratives, appealing to equally personal emotions and influencing through empathy. Such a reaction is simply not possible with *Frowst* or *Sensitive Points*. Stanley Wolukau Wanambwa considers this a kind of weakness or defect, commenting: 'these photographs, abandoning autobiography in favour of a performative variety of therapy, transform emotions into rootless abstraction. They show the illness without the patient, and the power of their fiction makes us immune to the disturbing psychology they so eloquently express.'[29] I think that this immunisation frees us from the 'visceral' emotional reaction to stories of family trauma, which can force us to stay with the initial shock without making us think.

To start thinking about power, we need not so much emotional identification as a cool metacommentary — it is provided by all the artist's works, but

probably the most important is the film *Animal Enrichment* which presents the models' interactions with mysterious objects (used to stimulate animals, but the viewers do not need to know that); as they are taken out of their original context, these objects resemble strange fetishes or disciplinary tools. They force women to take repetitive actions which seem (because of the expressionless models' faces) laced with obsession or aggression. Discipline and desire are closely linked to each other, and they create a subject in the course of successive repetitions, ensuring obedience, but also creating the possibility of repetition, which will include deviation, difference.

Works that appeal to emotions would not bring this mechanism to the surface — instead of the illness, they would make us focus on the patients and their individuality. Piotrowska's photographs and films depicting an 'illness without a patient' suspend the reality of power relations, a procedure analogous to the phenomenological epoché — a reduction of the assumptions about the way the world or object exists, which allows it to be reconstructed in the right way. The artist's works make such a reduction, reaching the pure form of power, or, to put it more in Marx's terms, 'determinate abstraction' which creates a 'concrete' of family life and patriarchal conditions, not as unique and special as the convention of confession suggests. This treatment denaturalises power without underestimating its effectiveness.

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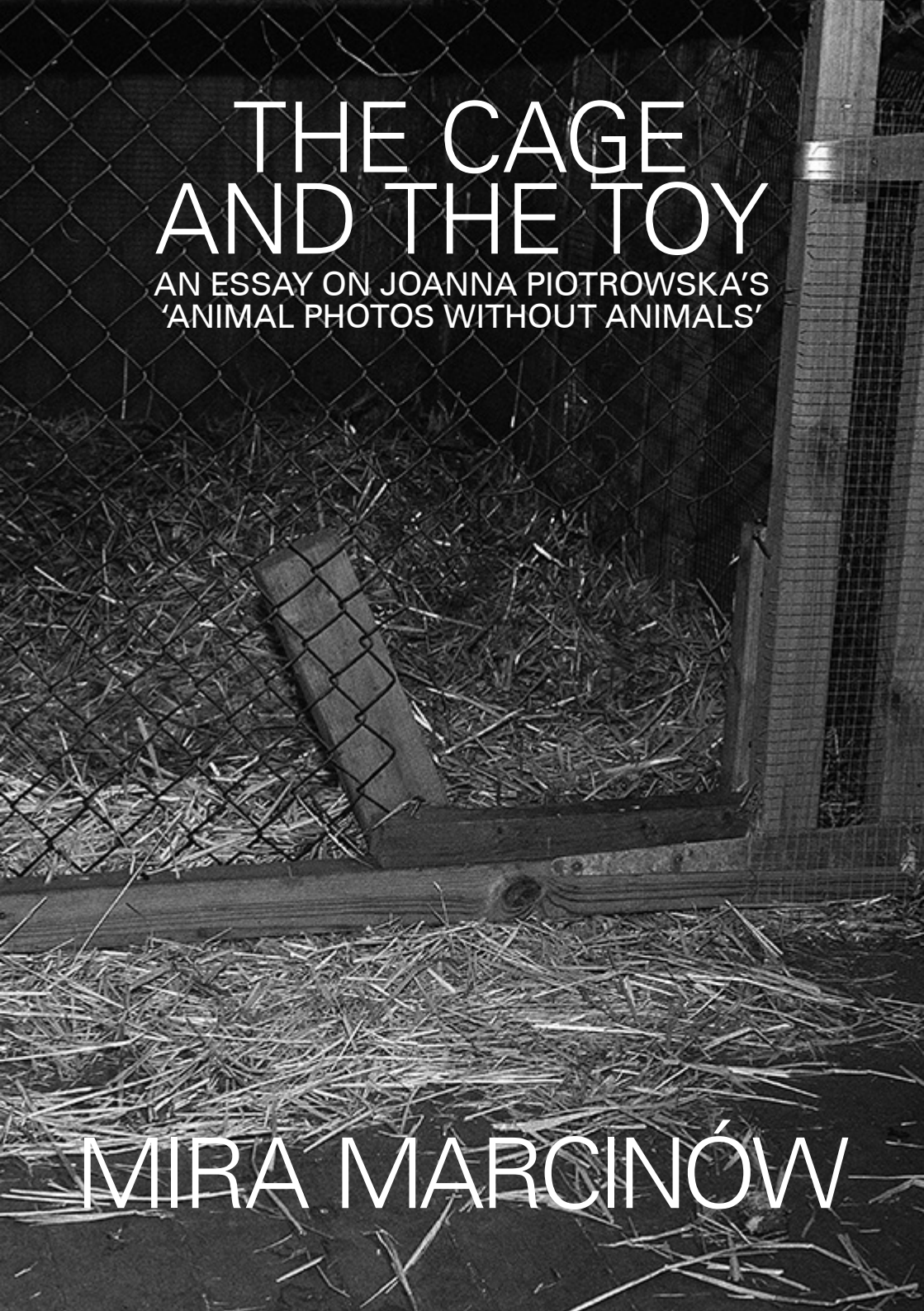

THE CAGE AND THE TOY

AN ESSAY ON JOANNA PIOTROWSKA'S 'ANIMAL PHOTOS WITHOUT ANIMALS'

MIRA MARCINÓW

The cage stayed shut so long
that a bird was hatched inside

the bird stayed still so long
that the cage
corroded by its silence
opened up

the silence lasted so long
that behind the black bars
laughter rang

Tadeusz Różewicz, *Śmiech*

trans. Stanisław Barańczak, Clare Cavanagh, in *Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule: Spoiling Cannibals' Fun*, Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1991

1

Every day for the last two months, I've been approaching these photographs and then backing away quickly. I need some air. It's hard to breathe near them. Like in an old house of even older people with no one to clean anymore. These prints smell of sickness, medicines, steel, zoos, hay full of manure on a hot, stuffy day.

To say that these pictures smell like that is to say nothing. There's a foulness. An unhealthy air rises from these photographs. Not the city air, poisoned with smog and hatred, but a miasma that reminds us that we've been locked up. And before us, so many people and animals from outside the human species have been locked up. Since the middle of March 2020, since the outbreak of the pandemic, I have been in isolation. Like many others. And that's more or less everything I know about being locked up, about cages and lack of air.

2

Enclosures. A large empty cage. Locked. There's a bit of hay peeking out from under the door, like a trace of a stranger's presence. It's most interesting in the broken spot. It looks like a photo of a photo on the screen on the right edge. Bars, stretched out diamonds. The pixels fit together like that. There was someone there. An x-ray of the picture frame starts to dissolve the wooden columns. They're closer, but it's hard to focus on them. Something is peeking out from the post on the left. A gap in the wood. The sun doesn't shine; it doesn't even come through the barred, ajar window. But it's not a window, more like some kind of vent. Something smaller. Slightly open, there's no draft. Is it a way to avoid stuffiness? Is there enough air to breathe in there? But that's happening off to the side; the cage is in the centre. It may seem that it's a photo of a cage to be repaired, for lease or for sale. The renter has gone for a walk or died. You have to take a photo quickly. A record of places where people live and die. It has to be documented. But you can see that it's not a document, not in the way Jacques Rancière defined the concept: a report of what happened. It's more like its opposite — a monument, or what preserves memory through its existence alone. It is a carrier of the memory of someone's presence. 'Here is the place where someone was imprisoned'. All places of imprisonment look like cages. All cages have wires. You can see it's been poorly set up. This is not a cage with a view.

And one more thing: where does the scene in this photo play out? On what animal is it focused? And for whom is the photographer here? Surely not for someone who was locked up here? The artist's distance from the bars is safe. The photographer does not approach it. Would she have kept this distance to the cage if an animal lived there? I don't think so. If there was someone there, she would probably move closer. But here, the dangerous object is the cage, not the animal.

3

This is not an easy time to look at these pictures with their miasmas and the pandemic spirit of house arrest. I cannot move away from these images, get out, breathe freely and go back to the photography having gotten some air. Because when I look at Joanna Piotrowska's photographs, you can only go outside, to get some air, in masks and only for essential purposes. And you can't breathe freely anyway.

When I finally move away from Piotrowska's photography, I have them. I remember. They return in different settings and provoke reflection. I think more about those who live in cages, zoos, prisons, detention centres, slaughterhouses. I think about how important it is to breathe deeply. I remind myself to breathe. Breathe in. Breathe out. Piotrowska's photographs become my *memento* for this time: 'Breathe!'

4

Enclosures. And so I look at this picture of the cage and feel I can't write about it any other way than spasmodically fighting for some air. In one breath. It's difficult to remain indifferent to the thickened, tense matter of suffocation. A cut of supply of air that rises somewhere else, fog from above the ocean hides the other pictures. And here, I remember all the zoos, cowsheds, circus tents stables and slaughterhouses from the early nineties. I was six, maybe eight, no more than ten years old. There were different places, different summer holidays. But the same muggy air. The same stinging smell of faeces, hair and sticky animal bodies. A warm scent crushed in the stalks of hay. Air held in a child's cheeks. And then you could run out, let out the frowst of those difficult rooms. I remember those few breaths. But the trick doesn't work anymore. Not here.

It's not comfortable looking at this place, although we know it so well. The photograph shows a room that we leave quickly, as soon as we get the

chance. As for the picture, you can't do that. But you can ask: whose cage is it? Who did it belong to? Except that the cellar-coloured painting won't answer. A photograph that seems like it should be wet to the touch as well. And if you were to smell it, it'd feel musty. I know its smell better than what it represents.

5

Thanks to these photos, we will not escape to warm countries, we will not break away from a difficult reality. This is not escapist art, rather its opposite — confrontational photography. Because it doesn't just look gloomy and put you in a melancholy mood. It also makes you ask some tough questions. Questions that go beyond the human species. Can an animal be 'kept' in such places? Can it end well for anybody? And what are the consequences of living in confinement?

Specialists speak of zoochosis — psychosis caused by isolation, captivity, subjecting caged animals, as if in a kind of zoopticon, to permanent surveillance. Some veterinarians and behaviouralists say that there are no animal mental disorders other than human-induced madness. We have no evidence that an animal living in the wild, outside the anthroposphere, could go mad. This is because animal psychiatry can be talked about in relation to animals to which we assigned some functions. The functions that other species are forced to perform for us. Thus, pet, fur, laboratory or circus animals are treated by zoopsychologists, which leads to the conclusion that only imprisoned animals suffer mentally. Thus, animal psychiatry is the result of human appropriation. Perhaps it's a kind of anthropomorphisation? And if it is an anthropomorphism, is it the empathic one, which aims to help other animals outside the human species, or is it the oppressive one, the one that is possessive? Or maybe it's just another case of the psychiatrisation of the world, from which not even the 'dog who rode trains' would escape — that mad traveller, the pathological vagrant suffering from dromomania, a dissociative fugue?

6

Zoochosis is not only driven by life in confinement, but also by the increasingly richer animal psychopharmacological industry, which is estimated to be worth nine billion dollars in the United States. In Poland, the animal psychotropic market is unregistered, but we have human psychotropics, which we share with non-human animals. You can make money off this, too.

The suffering of animals caused by isolation manifests in various ways. Sometimes as persistent, repetitive behaviour that zoopsychologists compare to obsessive-compulsive disorder in people. Compulsive behaviours are characteristic of many animals indoors. They bring some relief, although they are not adaptive. An animal chasing its own tail or shadow all day, licking its paws instead of sleeping, eating or walking, is a warning sign for the owner that something is wrong, that the balance has been disturbed by confinement, isolation or simply captivity.

The most discussed animal outside of the human species suffering from OCD is Gus, a polar bear kept in the New York Zoo. This famous 'mad bear' spent eighteen hours a day swimming, performing figure eights in the pool. Gus did not eat, drink, sleep; he neglected activities important for his survival. It was only a simple intervention of the zoo workers, which consisted in throwing barrels into the pool and thus breaking up the animal's boredom, that helped the bear to recover. So the cure for the madness of animals kept in captivity is sometimes fun. An entire arsenal of animal stimulation devices has been created for the use of humans keeping other species indoors. This is what Piotrowska's next photographs are about.

7

The situation with Joanna Piotrowska's photographs of animal stimulation devices is different than with the photographs of cages. You can still do something with them; after all, they're depictions of things used for fun. Still, cata-

logued in a presentation gesture, the objects do not put you in a very ludic mood. Toys like this are described as a safety valve, allowing for a release. Different still: that playing with them is compensatory.

Since the publication of Johann Huizinga's famous book *Homo ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938) people have discussed the value of play. They have discussed the fact that the person who is playing is not actually doing something that serves no purpose at all. On the contrary, *homo ludens*, 'man playing', is the basis of our culture. Huizinga writes that there is a clear connection between play and everyday life, these spheres intermingle. However, he also write about pathological fun. Play as an element of culture. A culture in which animals are locked in cages. And caged animals suffocate and go mad. And then we give them toys in response to this 'inhuman suffering'.

8

Animal Enrichment. When I look at photographs showing tools to activate animals or just pictures of toys for non-human species, it is hard to imagine having fun. They bring to mind iron instruments of torture, perhaps perverse games, but not those to improve the mood. Not the recipient's.

A metal device laid on the forearm and hand extends slightly beyond the fingers. The hand holding the animal stimulation tool holds the object in a gesture of presentation, recording. A register of unknown, unnamed, difficult objects. A list of instruments of torture. We can see how serial these gestures are. The person holding the prop seems to make it clear that she has come to terms with the situation and allows more pictures to be taken, even though she does not know what it is all for. There is no caption. There is no other title, except the collective *Animal Enrichment*. The only thing that's left is 'a stimulation device'. I can imagine a similar register of toys for people in isolation. Stores that sell gadgets for adults have recorded sales several times higher since the beginning of the epidemic. Their list shows that they're not used for fun either. Desire has been replaced by need.

9

Animal Enrichment. A chain hangs from the edge of the photograph. It hands like a curtain, a ponytail or a long fringe. At the end of the chain, there is another animal stimulation device. In the middle, an object shielded by hands. Probably made of wood, or maybe it just looks that way. It looks like it's valuable.

Underneath the upper edge of the photo, the animal stimulation tool hangs on a chain like a punching bag. In my flat, my stairwell, a boxing bag was hung up at the beginning of a pandemic. I hit it or hug it. In the foreground of this photograph, I also see something that can be chewed, although there is no saliva in the picture, or embraced — that's what these hands are for. But I don't know anything more about the human and non-human games that protect against madness.

10

'The cage stayed shut so long that a bird was hatched inside.' Finally, I perversely return to Tadeusz Różewicz's poem. Because it was his words

that came to my mind when I was looking at photographs of places of animal isolation. Even though there are no animals in Piotrowska's pictures, or at least the close crop did not cover it. But beyond the frame, there's suffering, the panting of enslaved animals. Różewicz also wrote a poem about a cage in which first there is no bird and then there is no laughter. The poet's imagination fills the empty cage with an animal, and then with a sound. Similarly, Joanna Piotrowska's photographic imagination fills cages and toys with images that are not there. Looking at her pictures, which I have tried to comment on, I experience their power to represent 'nothing'. It's a transforming power, one that makes you look in silence and focus on what this photograph says and about what it is silent.

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***Joanna Piotrowska. Frowst*,**
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