

# Spaces of Intimacy

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The problem of identity is most discussed in the field of cultural studies nowadays. It has become clear that the concept of identity in the late modern age has changed greatly and taken on an open form of unstable process. New technologies, which are considered extensions of the human mind and body, have influenced their identity. Technological contexts of all these processes make the current research on identity closely related to the issue of cyberculture and its characteristic instruments of expression: new digital communication media. Debates on identity in the context of new media aim to develop critical discourses concerning the position and features of the individual in the age of the global transcultural communication.

After Mark Poster, I distinguish between the notions: *individual*, *self*, *identity*, and *subject*.<sup>1</sup> Within this system, identity is nothing but a continuous process of self-negotiation (and re-negotiation) of the subject. If we talk about identity, we refer to “an individual who is deeply confused about who he or she is.”<sup>2</sup>

Identity of an individual is sort of a play between its three aspects: individual, social and cultural. It is experienced by the individual through his feelings of constancy, consistency and separate character. The mutual dynamics between them are subject to continuous transformations. Variability is just one rule here. Identity thus becomes a self-constructing process of changes.

The fluidity of identity transformations is subject to continuous disruptions. Instead of an even, wide, single current, it takes the form of numerous currents flowing into different directions. Sometimes they come together. Sometimes they diverge. Even the individual no longer comprehends such a form of identity himself or herself. And this is the source of the question ‘Who am I?’ which is asked over and over again. This question can be answered with stories. Identity becomes a series of narratives.

Auto-narrative discourses as methods of creating identity accompany the individual during their whole lifetime, which proves not only that identity has a polyphonic character, but also that it remains at a permanent stage of reorganization. In situations where relational disturbances occur between the individual and his social and cultural aspects of identity, auto-narration turns out to be the most effective (or perhaps the only one?) strategy for identity self-organization and its basic form of articulation.

It is because of auto-narratives that the issue of intimacy becomes an important factor of the identity. Close relations with the others or the painful lack of them develop the space within which individuals construct their own identity, and this is also the space of numerous media artworks. In the following part of my paper I will discuss different approaches of Polish artists to their work.

I shall begin with the art of **Jozef Robakowski**. In the late 1970's and the 1980's his camera became a tool of an uncommon scale of subjectivity. With the help of video Robakowski could lead the viewers into the world of his own thoughts and emotions. Numerous works appeared in this period. *About my fingers* (1983) and *My theatre* (1985), are examples where viewers are allowed into the privacy of his experiences.

Besides the works creating the intimate relations between the artist and viewers, Robakowski made a number of tapes building another form of correspondence. Videos from the *cycle Dedications* possess their own particular addressees. Each of them is a sort of visual incantation or tribute to someone else. In these works, subjectivity acquires the dimension of concrete interpersonal communication. It is no longer just the figure of the author, but also the real person to whom the work is directed.

In the cycle *Vital/Video* in turn, the ironic attitude joined the intimate character discussed above, finally creating the characteristic quality of the oeuvre of Jozef Robakowski. In the paradoxical way, in the framework of the artistic attitude of Robakowski, subjectivity and privacy meet game-playing, irony, and manipulation, towards the ironic concept of fluent, performed, hybrid identity.

Another position was taken by **Anna Baumgart**. In a series of works the artist reveals the mechanisms that lead to the subservience of the individual to social conventions. She analyses the social and cultural perceptions of gender differences, roles that are ascribed to women through the patriarchal order and their own acceptance of relations between parents and children. She shows the world of men as reflected in the male ego, adored by women, and the world of women as seeking the approval of the male gaze, confirming their worth in male acceptance.

Baumgart takes the subject of its study from the labyrinths of isolated identities that are in flux, lack a full understanding of themselves, and passive. The labyrinth is a model of identity itself as well as an attempt at self-knowledge.

Three narratives persist throughout Baumgart's work. The first is directly concerned with questions of identity. Who is this person that I call "I"? Who emerges when you remove the mask of cultural convention? The second narrative is concerned with "surrogate" lives, of taking on other people's roles, manufactured or promoted by the culture industry. The third narrative addresses absent voices, those marginalized by society. The women who speak through Baumgart's works do not get a chance to speak out in their everyday lives, the majority remaining silent not by choice. In her work they speak out with their own voices. All three narratives are concerned with the problems of identity, viewing it as a conflict between individual existence and the cultural paradigm.

The attitude of **Piotr Wyrzykowski** combines the conceptual inspirations originating in Polish art in the 1970's with those of performance art, especially body art, of the 1980's. Wyrzykowski puts into focus the problem of body with its various connotations, in order to discuss bodily influenced visions of transformations of identity. In his works he concentrates on the issues of the influences of technologies on a perception of a human body. Phenomena such as telepresence, which means also a possibility of existing in a number of places simultaneously through a digital or analogue representation, are the tools for extending human corporeality. The tape *Runner* creates the visions of body movements in the context of constructed city space. The tape *Watch Me* is a visualization of the transformations of the artist body through digitalization process. Interactive, Internet-based *There Is NoBody* present a vision of fluid, undefined, and indefinite form of posthuman corporeality. All these examples bring the issue of somatically shaped digital identity into the front line.

The art of **Kinga Araya** is built on biography, on memory, and on the most private divulgements. Along with this insistence on privacy — as if in response — there is the appearance of irony. It allows not only for a distancing from the self, creating a sceptical self-portrait, but it is also a strategy that confuses tropes. It provides a method for translating the individual experience into everyone's feeling. With the aid of irony, memory is being transformed into imagination. Nothing is certain any more, except the experiences of form and emotion. This ironic dialogue with oneself usually accompanies the artistic experience of displacement. It helps to liberate oneself from the feeling of spiritual homelessness to overcome the pain of alienation. It emerges as a source of artistic creativity.

The displaced and estranged art — that which Kinga Araya creates — expresses emotions stemming from the state of dwelling in-between. Her work expresses

the sensation of estrangement coupled with the need for intimacy. Both feelings grow from the experience of displacement and alienation. These sensations direct us towards the idea of the Self. Further, they inspire introspection and reflection on one's immediate surroundings. They lead us towards contemplating the passage of time and our place within it. Displaced art is actually an art of estranged emotions.

In her artistic activities **Barbara Konopka** undertakes the problems of transformation, which are undergone by human body and human identity whilst facing revolution connected with rapid development of telecommunications and IT. As a leading person in cyber-feminist current in Polish art she finds a real cooperation with machines, learning their specific logic, complex perceptive apparatus and ways of expression a significant experience. Those ways of perception reinforce human abilities and habits and open new areas of activities.

The artists discussed above represent a sort of approach, which leads more towards explorations of personal life rather than formal investigations. The artists examine the problems of personal and social identities; reflect on the character of cultural and transcultural relations. Sometimes they are distant and ironic, sometimes dramatic and emotional. The works they produce are both analytic and immersive at the same time. They present different ways of communication between the private and the social, between the inner space of perceptions, feelings and thoughts, from one side, and the external world, from another. Reviving the hybrid character of contemporary identity their works can help us realize who we are not.

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1 Poster, Mark. 2001. *What's the Matter with the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 6-11.

2 Ibid. p. 7.