

In this episode we discuss the concept of weak avant-garde in relation to the artwork of Ewa Partum, her three performances from the early 1980. In these artworks the artist challenged her own position as recognized artist, and invited stupidity, idioticism, naivete as her allies. Theories of Boris Groys and Jack Halberstam are referenced, and the discussion goes direction neo-avant-garde - showing that Partum's artwork, just as many post-1960 art project by women, people of ethnic and sexual minorities, as well as groups, do not fit in the 'neo-avant-garde', as defined by Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloch, but nevertheless can be seen as avant-garde practices.

Host: Ewa Majewska

About:

Ewa Majewska:

Associate professor at the SWPS University in Warsaw, Poland. I am a feminist critical theorist of culture, working in the fields of cultural, feminist and critical studies, and researching the vast fields of social, political and artistic agency to discuss resistance and avant-garde, in their non-heroic, ordinary and weak formats. As a feminist scholar, I am sure that another resistance - one that had not been shaped accordingly to the masculine privilege and socialization, is possible, and I have conceptualized it as weak resistance. The notion of weak avant-garde quickly followed, as an offspring of my research into feminist, queer and other minoritarian strategies of negotiating and resisting the canon.

References:

Read more from Ewa Majewska:

"Feminist Art of Failure, Ewa Partum and the Avant-garde of the Weak." *Widok. Teorie i Praktyki Kultury Wizualnej*, no. 16 (2016).

<https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2016.16.761>

"Słaba estetyka - w stronę feministycznej teorii awangardy." *Estetyka / Inestetyka: Współczesne Teorie Działań Artystycznych*, edited by Piotr Graczyk, Cezary Woźniak, and Mateusz Falkowski. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2020.

<https://wuj.pl/ksiazka/estetyka-inestetyka-1>

"Towards a Weak Avant-Garde, Re-Shaping the Canon." *Arts* 12, no. 2 (April 3, 2023): 70.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12020070>

References for the topic of weak avant-garde and neo-avant-garde:

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

Benjamin Buchloch, *Neo-avant-garde and Culture Industry. Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2000.

Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis and Manchester: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *October*, 70 (1)1994: 5-32.

Boris Groys, *The Weak Universalism*, in: *e-flux* 04 (15)/2010

Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," transl. Paul Wilson, *International Journal of Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 3-4, "The Power of the Powerless" (1985-86): 23-96.

Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Maria Morzuch (ed), *Nic nie zatrzyma idei sztuki (Nothing stops the idea of art)*. Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2016.

Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Open Court 1996).

Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012).

Jacques Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

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

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).

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

Transcript:

Welcome to episode one of the podcast *Post-critical Psychodeographies - From Weak Resistance to Weak Avant-Garde*, which is hosted by me, Ewa Majewska, with the generous support of Sergio Frutos, who is helping with the website and sound engineering, and which is sponsored generously from the yearly grant of the Ministry of Culture and Heritage of the Republic of Poland.

In this episode, I discuss the work of Polish feminist artist Ewa Partum, example of what I call the **weak avant-garde**. Therefore, the title of this episode is simply *Introducing the concept of weak avant-garde, Ewa Partum versus the 'neo-avant-garde practice'*. For decades now, artists have worked hard to democratize artistic production, following Joseph Beuys for instance and his statement: "everyone is an artist", which you must have heard. Some of them have rejected the very label of the avant-garde, or the practice which was called 'neo-avant-garde'. Some others tried to continue the traditions of early 20th century European avant-gardes.

In my work, I claim that a broader category is possible, that of the **weak avant-garde**. It combines the feminist rejections of patriarchal visions of genius and creativity and emancipatory claims originating in peripheries with the demand for an expanded epistemology, one shaped from marginalized and colonized perspectives. I'm not sure if Ewa Partum wholly agrees to be called a representative of the weak avant-garde. She never protested, though, against me using this kind of conceptualization of her work since 2016. And as you will see, I am using a very specific selection of her artworks to discuss this concept of the weak avant-garde. I am not claiming that the whole artistic production of Ewa Partum could be called the weak avant-garde, although one day perhaps we should try that as well.

I am basically thinking about early 1980s work of that artist as representative for the weak avant-garde and I am also thinking that it is an interesting concept for different reasons that are going to be enumerated, but also because it is a concept that was shaped within feminist, queer and decolonial investigations, and with vocabularies coming from those three theoretical positions. However, it can help analyzing the avant-garde production that is not made by people representing those minorities. Thus it doesn't necessarily have to be about women's art, it doesn't have to be about queer art. It's more of like queer moments and queer and feminist moments in the concept of weak avant-garde.

Weak avant-garde could be described as one which was built in minority, but it embraces also the work of artists who are not in any way representative of minorities. According to Boris Groys, it is precisely the democratizing power of the avant-garde art that makes it weak, as in weak universality, which he described this in his essay in 2010. Following the artists from the East and from the West, Groys suggests that the weak messianic force has manifested itself in 20th century avant-garde, determining its democratic force on the one hand, and leading to its rejection by the public on the other. What for him stands as genderless, classless paradox of the 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.

In what comes next, I discuss Ewa Partum's feminist artwork as an example of a feminist weak avant-garde, my claim that the notion of **weak avant-garde** allows discussing the practice coded as neo-avant-garde, the practice of those who reject the concept of avant-garde entirely, and the artwork of some other artist who continue with the 20th century early avant-garde without contesting its grounds, and others. The interest in the power of the weak or simply in weakness has already been expressed in the fields of art's history, philosophy and cultural theory. Gianni Vattimo, for instance, argued for a *weak thought*, where dialectics is not seen as ultimately hegemonic, but as strategy of preserving weakness in the historical process and reflexive stank minds, for which the strategy of deconstruction seems the most suited. James Scott, on the other

hand, depicted the rebellious farmers from Asia and their political agency as *weapons of the weak*. These farmers were using what Scott saw as weak strategies of protests, walking without violence or even demands. This simplification of their strategy, allowed masses of uneducated, desperate people to join the protests.

Jacques Rancière's book *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, on the other hand, offers theoretical language for possible new understandings of resistance with the weak, of avant-garde of the common and politics of multitude, beyond categories shaped in masculinist, self-affirming, heroic tradition of privilege. Rancière's studies of the proletarians, who in the 19th century decided to learn reading while engaging themselves in communist fight and struggle is another example of a minority, who does not take the heroic victorious strategies, but who behaves in a very moderate, weak manner, and yet who achieves quite heroic gain of becoming literate and therefore contradicting their *habitus*.

The concept of **weak avant-garde** invites to search for universality, starting with partial, situated experience. It is indebted in several rather distinct theoretical contexts. One of them, as Jack Halberstam's book *The Queer Art of Failure* from 2011. The other inspiration comes from utterly different context, the writings of East European dissidents from the 1970s and 80s, such as Václav Havel and Jan Patocka. Their concepts of the *power of the powerless*, Havel, or **solidarity of the shaken** from Patocka allow understanding 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 in weakness, failure and collapse, perhaps typical for Central and Eastern Europe.

The third set of my inspirations originates in the critical analysis of the concept of **neo-avant-garde** as it is used by Benjamin Buchloch and Hal Foster. Ewa Partum is one of the first Polish feminist artists. She's currently based in Berlin. The first work that has earned her wider recognition was *Legality of Space*, a public art piece from 1969, staged in Łódź in Poland. Since the early 1970s, she has been developing several strands of work, one originating from concrete poetry, using letters, signs, and literary texts, involving references to deconstruction. The more performative and body-oriented performance entitled *Change*, started in 1974. The artist had shown herself in several takes dealing with the process of aging and how the body reacts to it with time. In 1980, Ewa Partum pronounced a statement that she will always perform naked, since there is no place for women in art and art history, otherwise than as a model or another artist's wife. Her nudity would demonstrate, in her opinion, her disagreement with this state of women's exclusion from art world. Even in works such as *Hommage a Solidarność* from 1982, made after the introduction of the martial law state in Poland, she performed naked. In the mid-70s she started to use lipstick traces as her signature gesture.

Her participation in major feminist exhibitions in Western Europe and USA, together with growing numbers of her works in important art collections, both private and public, have made her one of the most important contemporary feminist artists globally. However, it is perhaps important to notice that in Poland and other places as well, opinions on the topic of who actually is or was a feminist artist are divided.

On the one hand, such authors as Aneta Szyłak, Ewa Tatar or Andrzej Turowski do not seem to have any trouble with perceiving Ewa Partum as a feminist artist. Turowski even speaks of a specific category, feminist conceptualism, precisely to grasp Partum's influence on the feminist and conceptual art. On the other hand, however, theorists such as Piotr Piotrowski clearly suggest that since Ewa Partum did not situate her work in the context of feminist theory, we should not use this framework to discuss her practice. I think that is a form of self-colonizing simplification, and I have criticized this kind of statements as misinterpretation of history of feminist aesthetics and aesthetics more broadly.

I find it interesting how feminist art, not just in Poland but globally, often has this peculiar capacity of problematizing issues which are systematically discussed in theory only decades later. I am also using theories of such authors as Patricia Miscigano, who wrote about *de facto feminism*. She spoke of how feminist art, or feminism in art, should be separated from identity and claims to feminism and should be perceived as, well, facts speaking for themselves. If there is feminist content within our art practice, then we call it feminist. And we can use the notion whether the intention of the artist, whether the consciousness of the artist was there or not. A similar perspective has been described by Agata Jakubowska, who spoke from that position about Partum but also about other artworks from the 1950s, 60s and 70s as containing feminist elements while the theory, the feminist theory was not yet present.

The majority of the artworks of Ewa Partum express her efforts, undertaken in the first 20 years of her career, to dismantle the masculine domination in arts and society and to gain the position of artist in the patriarchal Polish society. In the early 1980s, however, she created several artworks, mostly of performative nature, which directly challenged her own seriousness and credibility as woman, human and artist. By directly challenging the serious character of her own artistic endeavour, Partum has taken a huge risk. Artworks from the early 80s, such as *Pirouette*, *Stupid Woman*, and *Women, Marriage is Against You*, may be seen as ironic, self-ridiculing and anti-heroic neo-avant-garde, as it is described by Hal Foster as opposed to the serious traditional avant-garde from earlier decades. It may be argued, however, that in these works the artist does not take any ironic distance from the naive emotions and beliefs expressed.

Following Eve Kosovsky-Sedgwick and Jack Halberstam, I will show how the other, more vulnerable, sincere and empathic

attitudes are present in her artwork, such as the weak affect, contradicting the possibility of classifying these works as examples of neo-avant-garde, and yet still allowing to speak of them as avant-garde practice. *Women, Marriage is Against You* is a performance, in which the artist walked a catwalk like a model wearing white wedding gown and a transparent plastic wrapping which she cut and tore to finally present herself naked with the slogan "Women, Marriage is Against You". She acted as if she was cutting herself from a trap or a gift wrap. This piece, in which the stereotypes are approached via the practice of failure and dismantlement of social norms, was first performed already in 1979. It can be read in relation to Yoko Ono's famous *Cut piece*, in which the Japan-born artist gave scissors to the audience, asking to cut pieces of her clothes away.

Yoko Ono's piece is also discussed in *Queer Art of Failure*, where Halberstam rightly points out that it cannot be reduced to a mere repetition of the supposedly masochistic femininity and aggressive or sadistic masculinity. Halberstam argues that such reductive reading ignores the potentially reparative aspects of this artistic practice. It is not noticed, however, that in versions of the cut piece Yoko Ono would add that the audience should cut a piece of her clothes to commemorate the time offered to them by those caring women in their households, families, who never demanded any money or recognition for this invisible labor. *Cut piece* therefore becomes a tribute to women's affective and care labor.

Partum's performance *Women, Marriage is Against You* does not contain signs of ironing or distancing. The artist wears a wedding dress, quite dramatically cuts herself out of it and presents a political slogan, affirming emancipating but also rather naive political content. There are no traces of Brechtian or other classical modes of distancing. She does not cancel the naivety of her statement and behavior, which does seem either to be a sign of her acceptance of her weakness as a woman, but also as political artist. These are gestures stating common knowledge and she is conscious of the simplicity of her slogan. Why would she still make the art piece like that?

Partum's vulnerability is 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 by the resignation from offering any dense theoretical or literary context in favor of a very simple popular slogan. She shows desire to challenge the existing patriarchal norm while at the same time emphasizing her own weakness. Her naked body finally appearing from under layers of the wedding dress and plastic seems structurally similar to the truth of everyday resistance suggested by Vaclav Havel as the power of the powerless. It also resonates with other feminist projects in which, like in Barbara Kruger's famous image, woman's body actually is a battleground. Not ironically at all. A simple mimesis of a feminist constation of a simple fact, rather than sophisticated symbolism, works here as a weak abstraction perhaps. But it does not qualify as irony, so thus, I would say, does not qualify as neo-avant-garde.

Stupid Woman is Ewa Partum's performance staged several times between 1980 and 84, in which the artist, naked, wearing only red lipstick and high heels, invites the public to the performance where she will be a stupid woman. Somehow frivolous and flirting, she starts dancing and laughing, impersonating the degrading stereotype of a party girl, lacking seriousness and good manners. After 45 minutes, the artist officially thanks the audience, closes the performance and leaves.

Adorno once depicted the woman's situation in patriarchal culture as "the reverse side of the masculine domination". Partum's *Stupid Woman* definitely works as a reversal of this power, its patriarchal, masculine domination and 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 into the gallery, where the naked artist stages the carnivalesque roleplay of a silly party girl, somehow clownish, you could say, seems perplexing at the very least. These men's uncertainty as to how to act in the face of a woman, who is pretty and tempting, but also a very autonomous artist and in front of the camera - all this makes us laugh while watching it today because of the perfect ambiguity of the situation. Those men normally, normally meaning without the presence of as an external observer, would probably start stupid jokes about how the artist looks like, or whether she's pretty or not whether she is a good feminine commodity, or other *jokes* of the 1980's era. But then with this camera in this situation, these men are self-censored in their behavior, their sexist misogynic behavior. What happens is that they perform kind of handicapped versions of the sexist behavior, which is funny in itself.

In *Aesthetic theory*, Adorno argued, that *only as finished molded objects that they, the artworks, become force fields of their antagonisms. Otherwise, the encapsulated forces would simply run parallel to each other or dissipate*. Ewa Partum's art pieces are always finished ones, perhaps especially those which involve failure or laughter. They are polemical on several levels, they discuss the social distribution of power between genders, never solely between men and women, but always also between artists and the public, the rational and the irrational and others.

For Adorno the artwork should be successful, but at the same time there are no perfect artworks. In the works depicted here, Partum definitely does not try to merely reconcile the existing social antagonisms. She also strongly opposes the dominant notion of success. Most interesting, perhaps, the artist's work is very often perceived as hermetic, while it actually fulfills yet another of Adorno's characteristics of artwork. As he suggested, I quote, *Inherent in many artworks is the force to break through the social barrier that they establish*. Due to the accessible, comprehensible form of the performance, both *Stupid woman* and *Women marriage is against you* create and dismantle the barrier at the same time. In another performance I

would like to bring here, *Pirouette*, Partum conjures the future by performing ice skating pirouettes on a large surface of a mirror placed on the floor, which breaks into pieces obviously when the naked artist, wearing only ice skates and her lipstick, turns on its surface into pirouettes. In the video documentation of the piece, Partum says that she wants to intervene, to change her future by using the mirror. However, in most European countries, and Partum must be conscious of that, breaking the mirror predicts long years of unhappiness, usually seven years.

The artist is conjuring the bad future upon herself, knowingly, and therefore reminds of all contemporary discussions concerning marriage, love and happy, shiny scenarios of the future, compulsively prescribed to neoliberal, feminine subject who wants her life to be successful. Partum is ridiculing that very demand, and the demanding sport discipline, which in fact is ice skating, and ridiculing herself, both as artist, and as person. Partum entered the domain of idiocy, highly unwanted in state communism of the People's Republic of Poland as well as in contemporary neoliberal capitalism, but also as in the art scene of both epochs. It might be worth recalling the Greek etymology of the word *idiot* here: it originally referred to someone, who confuses the private and the public who is unable to securely isolate her intimate life, and expresses it in the public. Partum plays the pessimistic belief of seven unhappy years and she uses a somewhat childish form of expression, ice skating. You can say that she very knowingly puts question mark over these hopes for successful future. And in this joins what was in Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure*, depicted as a resistance to the neoliberal scenario of success.

Stupidity performed by the artist in *Pirouette*, similar to the one discussed by Halberstam in the *Queer Art of Failure*, in the passages consecrated to the low-key movie *Dumb and Dumber*, seems 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 the space, perhaps, for breaking up with the patriarchal tradition, both on the level of reasonable woman and shiny future, opening it for both failure but also experiments with the norm. Partum's performance can be read in the context of courageous act of the first Afro-American ice skater, who won in the World Ice Skating Championships and became the main competitor of Katarina Witt in the Olympics in Calgary in 1998, Debbie Thomas. In 1996, during the World Ice Skating Championships, she decided to go for the ridicule. In the freestyle part of the competition, wearing the sort of yellow-feather costume, she showed everything the professional ice skater should fear: clumsiness, lack of stability and certainty, falls and silly jumps on the fence. She dismantled her competence and talent in front of the very same public, who was supposed to judge her skills in one of world's most important competitions. Performing failure and exposing herself to harsh criticism, Thomas, like Partum, risked exclusion and discrimination, as a woman and due to her ethnic background. Thomas was seen as representative for her minority, she won the first Olympic medal in ice skating for African-American community. Such performance as the one she did in 1986 World Championships was just too much to handle for some viewers.

There are however other ways of looking at failure. As we read in opening pages of the *Queer Art of Failure: under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, and making, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing, may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative being in the world*. In the overwhelming focus on private activity and success, so typical in neoliberal capitalism, particularly in the times of crisis, mastering failure can perhaps be a way to live, not just to survive. The idiocy embedded in the three performances of Ewa Partum depicted here, is not ironic. The irony is perhaps external, but the artist does not bring it up to the stage, thus remaining fiercely loyal to what Eve Kossofsky-Sedgwick said about revisiting the weak affects. Those that are neither victorious nor wise, rather embarrassing and shameful. By doing the pirouette on a mirror, by demonstrating her discontent with patriarchal practice of marriage, or playing the silly woman in a gallery, Ewa Partum embraces the sincere, naive resistance to the sad, patriarchal reality.

Theories of the avant-garde usually focus on its power and strength rather than weaknesses. However, in the most recent discussions in art, theory and aesthetics, one can detect a narrative of the weakness of the avant-garde. In his essay *What's Neo about Neo-avant-garde*, Hal Foster made several distinctions, which I find particularly useful for the interpretation of Ewa Partum's work, as well as perhaps also other feminist artworks from 70s and 80s. Foster emphasizes the ironic distance crucial for the neo-avant-garde. He suggests that after the time of hysteric repetitions of traditional everyday practices, there came a time for aesthetics of differentiating of reflexive repetition. He defines the neo-avant-garde as follows: *such art often invokes different, even incommensurable modes of practice. but less to act them out in historical pastiche, as in much art of the 1980s, than to work them through to a reflexive way of working, to turn the contradictions inscribed in these models into critical consciousness of history, artistic and otherwise*. Partum's performances, discussed here, *Women Marriage is Against You*, *Pirouette* or *Stupid Woman*, do not fit entirely in this definition, as they do not seem to aim at creating any specific consciousness of contradictions. They are also not really hysterical, although this might be debatable. We would have to look at it. I don't see hysteria there, but perhaps you could see.

These artworks, perhaps because they were created in the beginnings of the artist's new stage of life as an immigrant in Germany, and in the sad time of martial law in the early 1980's Poland imposed to suffocate the Carnival of Solidarność, present what was later called **new sincerity**. They can easily be compared with the book *I Love Dick* by Chris Krauss or artistic and social media work of Miranda July. According to Foster, the hegemony of classical definitions of the avant-garde introduced by Peter Berger in the 1970s should be confronted. And in this I agree with Foster. He argues that, *Berger's use of direct cause and effect, of lapsarian before and after, of heroic origin and factual farce. style repetition which many of us*

recite with unconscious contention towards the very possibility of contemporary art. This narrative will no longer do .

Foster demands another reading of artistic practice, however, he does not immediately call for resignation from hegemonic, dominant powerful work, mode and form of expression. Foster criticizes Berger for a romantic vision of the avant-garde based on rapture and revolution, while in the contemporary art, I quote, "it is rather subtle displacements than stark oppositions that play most important role. *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 away from the romantic heroic masculine towards more ironic, indirect and feminine agency, emphasizing the idiosyncrasies and locality, but also weaknesses. or perhaps their weaknesses. These changes required the access of women and other subjugated groups into the realm of artistic production, the gender change in art world as well as access of representatives of ethnic and sexual minorities working with the topics and strategies central for their groups. All this had been notoriously ignored in all major narratives about the new avant-garde.*

In Foster's essay, only 3 out of 50 discussed artists are women, which is already troublesome, and all of them are white, which is even more problematic. Some parts of Foster's essay, however, might be seen as step towards a feminist non-heroic vision of artistic avant-garde. He makes an interesting remark connecting his theory of avant-garde to the topics of weakness and vulnerability, when he writes: art that critics and historians need to register not only symbolic disconnections, but failures to signify are important. And I believe that whatever Partum is doing, she fails to signify. She acts like an elephant in the porcelain store in those three performances I discussed. She is announcing her message so strongly that for some critics it's invisible, it's becoming invisible, they don't see it because they are searching for deeper meanings. And there is no deeper meaning here, so in this sense, Partum behaves like as if the facade, the first layer was important. That distinguishes her.

*Differently from Foster, Boris Groys defines the avant-garde as a practice, which proceeds from the weak universalism in its inclusiveness and tendency to abstract, resulting in extremely accessible forms. For him, the avant-garde artworks are distant reminders of Walter Benjamin's **weak messianism**, with their weakening of science, the deprofessionalisation of art, production, and with its reductions. The idea of the **weak avant-garde** follows the analysis of failure as an act of resistance to neoliberalism, but also to the sex, gender, regimes as discussed by Halberstam, who rightly emphasized that the pop-cultural ridiculing of hegemonic masculinity often leads to creating its alternative to queer, to feminine, to un-hegemonic political agents. In the perspective opened up by theories of failure, Partum's artwork can be seen not only as a feminist critique of hegemonic masculinity, but as a performative, ridiculing, turning-off of the role women are forced to fulfil in patriarchal society.*

Not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world than the neoliberal preoccupation with success. In the essay The Power of the powerless, Václav Havel, the Czech dissident and then president of Czech Republic, very openly argued in the 1970s that in times of 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 two hegemonic forces in their constant embrace, did not require grandiose gestures on their sides. In those conditions, resistance seemed futile. However, and especially in Czechoslovakia, for Havel everyday resistance remained compelling. All apparently meaningless private acts of refusal to participate in the events orchestrated by the state apparatus could signalize the disagreement with the dominant order. And those mini-gestures, those everyday gestures, not heroic, not victorious, could also amplify because they could be put together, if many people generated them.

*Ewa Partum's work overcomes the status quo by offering a weak power of universalization. She speaks to matters most women need to face, the demand for them to marry, the expectations of happy future. the demand to be "everybody's sunshine" in social contexts such as parties and public venues like openings of art exhibitions etc. With many women, Partum shares a specific experience of exclusion as woman, as artist who identifies as woman, as East European and she 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 the exclusive political agency into one involving the ordinary resistance, the common and the weak. The concept of **weak avant-garde** helps situating the ephemeral and uncertain on the map of art history, suggesting that the masculine hegemony has already been challenged by the non-heroic, weak models of resistance.*

*The concept of the **weak avant-garde** as I tried to present it in this short discussion of selected artworks from Ewa Partum opens up the possibility of a common in-reverse via the means of art but engaging in other fields as well. The artists working in what I call weak avant-garde format situates herself or situate themselves between and with the spectators, not above them. Partum does not seem to pretend to know anything better or to teach anyone any lesson. In this, Partum joins the postulate of emancipated spectator y Jacques Rancière, who spoke about how today artists should not indulge themselves in didacticism. This seems to be a genuinely egalitarian proposal to be in such scene moment together, much as in watching cartoons or low-key movies.*

*I will return to the topic of **Weak Avant-Garde** on many occasions in many episodes of this podcast. Now I would like to*

thank you for listening. And if you want to ask questions you can contact me always.

This is the end of the episode 1 of the podcast Post-Critical Psychogeographies. From Weak Resistance to Weak Avant-Garde, which is hosted by me, Ewa Majewska, with generous technical support of Sergio Frutos and the financial aid of yearly stipend of the Ministry of Culture and Heritage of the Republic of Poland. Please feel welcome to the future episodes very soon. You can read more in the bibliography I compiled here, and can ask questions over the email given on this website. Thank you very, very much. Have a good night, day or evening. Bye bye.

Keywords:

feminist, transdisciplinary, avant-garde, weak, weak avant-garde, social, political, artistic, art, Ewa Partum, Poland, performance, 1980s, stupidity, idioticism, naive, Boris Groys, Jack Halberstam, discussion, neo-avant-garde, post-1960, women, feminism, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloch, podcast, discussion, practice

Cite this work:

Majewska, Ewa, host. "Introducing the concept of weak avant-garde." *Postcritical Psychogeographies. From Weak Resistance to Weak Avant-Garde*. June, 10, 2025. Podcast, season 1, episode 1, 36:15.

<https://ewa-majewska.com/podcast/1/>

Credits:

Host: Ewa Majewska

Writer and Producer: Ewa Majewska

License:

This work is licensed under the **CC BY-SA** Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (BY credit must be given to the creator & SA: Adaptations must be shared under the same terms).