

Investigations

Inga Iwasiów, Maciej Kowalewski

Standing Still in Feminist Protest: Single Body and Freedom of Not Moving

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DOI:10.18318/td.2023.en.2.10 | ORCID: Inga Iwasiów 0000-0002-5090-1961
Maciej Kowalewski 0000-0003-2650-3792

Introduction

The solitary, standing-still protest is an interesting figure – a political act on behalf of the group and at the same time a particular type of non-mobility that is a role reversal, a testimony to the “power of the powerless.” Standing in a public space, with a few exceptions, is unusual, a counterpoint to the everyday hustle and bustle. The evocation of the meditating person would be proper here: the protesting person presents herself or himself as respectable, consciously refusing to be chased into the ranks of everyday life. This situation is therefore worth analyzing – both in the field of literary and sociological studies.

In this paper, we aim to investigate solitary protest political phenomenon in the context of cultural research on im/mobility. The case we describe involves two modes of political action: (1) non-movement – a performative practice present in protest tactics such as sit-in and die-in protests,¹ and (2) single-person protest – a solo variant

1 See Susanne Foellmer, “Choreography as a Medium of Protest,” *Dance Research Journal* 48 (3) (2016): 58–69; Christopher

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Inga Iwasiów – Professor in the Institute of Literature and New Media at the University of Szczecin. She is deeply committed to feminist language, not only as an academic tool of interpretation but also as a daily form of communication. Email: inga.iwasiow@usz.edu.pl.

Maciej Kowalewski – Associate Professor in the Institute of Sociology at the University of Szczecin and chair holder of UNESCO Chair for Social Sustainability. His research and teaching are in the field of urban sociology and social movement studies. His current research focuses on relations between politics and urban imaginary. Email: maciej.kowalewski@usz.edu.pl.

of such protest tactics as a hunger strike, street demonstration, political prayer, political art, and self-harming.² Both are interesting as a contradiction of the essence of political protests, that is, the dynamics of collective action.

We analyze a stand-alone protest in the Polish small town of Gryfice on March 23, 2018, held by Beata Katkowska, a female activist involved in various movements against the populist right-wing government in Poland after 2015. In 2016, spontaneous protests against the tightening of the anti-abortion law began to function as the Women's Strike. The consistent use of the term "strike," previously reserved for labor movements, is significant. Researchers of women's social movements Julia Kubisa and Katarzyna Rakowska note a conceptual shift in the movement, where the struggle for reproductive rights became equivalent to the struggle for rights in the sphere of labor and production.³

In 2018, Beata Katkowska protested alone in the main square of Gryfice against the #StopAbortion legislative initiative filed in the Sejm by Catholic activist Kaja Godek. The initiative, launched in 2017, eventually led to a ban on abortions carried out on embryopathological grounds. Many of the participants of the protests emphasized the importance of collective action (e.g. using the slogan "you will never walk alone") but also articulated the individual, inner conviction that they were speaking out on their most pressing and intimate issue.

The theme of the protest and its small-town location are also significant. We witness the experience of a woman who spoke out on behalf of the collective, but also for herself. Polish women like her, often for the first time in their lives, publicly expressed their own opinion, crossing the barrier of disengagement. This is much easier in the big city, where it can even be a part of a certain lifestyle but in a small town, it is associated with the risk of publicly revealing subversive opinions on women's rights and the intimate sphere that, in Poland, is largely controlled by Catholic discourse. Her photo became one of the icons of the protest and was reproduced in the local, national, and foreign

W. Schmidt, *The Sit-ins: Protest and Legal Change in the Civil Rights Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Jesse A. Goldberg, "Scenes of Resurrection: Black Lives Matter, Die-ins, and the Here and Now of Queer Futurity," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 30 (2) (2020): 127–139.

2 Cf. Alan Schussman and Sarah A. Soule, "Process and Protest: Accounting for Individual Protest Participation," *Social Forces* 84 (2) (2005): 1083–1108; Jacquelin Van Stekelenburg, "The Political Psychology of Protest," *European Psychologist* 18 (4) (2013): 224–234.

3 Julia Kubisa and Katarzyna Rakowska, "Was it a Strike? Notes on the Polish Women's Strike and the Strike of Parents of Persons with Disabilities," *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 30 (4) (2019): 15–50.

press. She was also one of the protagonists of a documentary presented in a Watchdocs series.⁴

The campaign of protests against successive regulations tightening the right to abortion in Poland had its climaxes in 2016, 2018 and 2020. Solutions triggering a de facto total ban on abortion in Poland led to protests across the country.⁵ The protests were held simultaneously across the country, including small towns and small and medium-sized cities.⁶ Gryfice, where Katkowska protested, has a population of sixteen thousand.

The aesthetics of standing alone in public is associated with a particular spatial context and subversion of constraints in favor of contemplation and conscious disruption of dominant rhythms. Standing alone in public is unsettling and unusual, a counterpoint to the mobility enforced by the forces of order. Solitary protesters are not ghosts but rather monuments to moments of defiance.

In our understanding, a single-person protest allows us to transcend binary oppositions of active vs. passive, but also agentic vs. marginalized. As we argue, in the history of women in the public space, resistance in stillness is about breaking the association with exposing a passive self, showing oneself as a living mannequin. Here, stillness is fully controlled and thus invalidates the stereotype of a lack of agency, of being an object of consumption.

Alone: In the Act of Protest

The Latin roots of the word protest (*prōtestātiō*), meaning declaration, solemn statement, calling, confessing, testifying to something, and bearing witness to something,⁷ indicate the public nature of protest, an act targeting institutions of power or a collective. The term does not pertain only to organized

4 *In the street*, 2019, 47', dir. Robert Kowalski. See more <https://watchdocs.pl/en/festiwal-objazdowy/filmy/film-mauris-lorem-vel-fermentum-sem-porttitor>, accessed June 3, 2024.

5 Jennifer Ramme, "De/Constructing a Polish Nation. On the Entanglements of Gender, Sexuality, Family and Nationalism in Right-Wing Sexual Politics in Poland," *AG About Gender-International Journal of Gender Studies* 11 (21) (2022): 35–67.

6 On other cases of small-town protests in this campaign see Karolina Gembara, "Małe miasta protestują. Obraz prowincji na fotografiach Archiwum Protestów Publicznych" [Small towns are protesting. The image of the province in the photographs of the Public Protest Archive], in *Władza sądzienia* 19 (2020): 146–173; Magdalena Muszel and Grzegorz Piotrowski, "Women's Protests in Small Polish Towns," *Ethnologia Polona* 43 (2022): 83–100.

7 Marian Plezi, *Słownik łaciński-polski. Tom IV* [Polish-Latin dictionary, vol. 4] (Warszawa: PWN, 1974).

groups – individuals can also protest without the presence of others, using a variety of protest tactics, such as taking part in consumer boycotts or signing petitions. However, in these cases, separate individual actions function in an organized manner as a collective behavior.

The number of people participating in a protest is included, among others, in Charles Tilly's concept of the strength of social movements, referred to as WUNC (an acronym for worthiness, unity, numbers, commitment).⁸ According to Tilly, this strength is determined by actions exhibiting the social value (worthiness) of the protest and protesters (worthiness), their unity, numbers, and commitment (willingness to sacrifice). If any of these values in the social assessment falls to zero, the strength of the movement also falls to zero, and the protest loses credibility. However, high values of one of WUNC components can compensate for low values of another. Thus, a protest demonstrating an individual personal sacrifice or high personal cost for a single person can have a force comparable to the action of a large number of consumers carrying out a consumer boycott in a loosely coordinated manner.

According to Mario Diani and Donatella Della Porta,⁹ the choice of forms of protest is always defined by a certain kind of framework for action, defined as: (1) the logic of numbers, that is, the logic of seeking and manifesting a majority – a numerical and visible advantage; (2) the logic of damage, which involves the use of disruptive and destructive actions; (3) the logic of bearing witness, which involves the demonstration of personal and emotional commitment and actions associated with personal costs. A lone protest fits primarily into the logic of bearing witness, although some protest actions by individuals are disruptive or associated with self-inflicted violence (as in a hunger strike). A protest tactic that combines a dramatic gesture with the logic of self-harm is self-immolation. Some of the best-known self-immolating protesters are Jan Palach and Ryszard Siwiec who burned themselves in protest against the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.¹⁰ Acts of self-harm, although radical and dramatic, are a much rarer tactic than other forms of solitary protest.

8 Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

9 Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1999).

10 Sabine Stach, "An Ordinary Man, a National Hero, a Polish Palach? Some Thoughts on the Memorialization of Ryszard Siwiec in the Czech-Polish Context," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 113 (2016): 295–313.

Researchers use various terms for solo protesters: lone, single, individual or one-person/man/woman protest.¹¹ Its essence is to intentionally perform an independent, individual act of protest. Such protesters often remain anonymous, but may also become iconic figures, such as Rosa Parks¹² or Greta Thunberg.¹³ In the context of single-person protests, it is also significant that activists are most often not covered by the public assembly law and its resulting restrictions, but also by legal protections.¹⁴ As researchers suggest, in authoritarian political contexts they may be a safer option, as testified by a significant number of single-person protests in Russia between March 2006 and December 2017 (369 single-person protests in Russia, carried out by 287 different protesters¹⁵).

The protest of a single person is most often reinforced with an additional element, such as a banner held in the hands, an information board, certain attire, and music. Such artifacts of protest completely change the nature of the single-person protest, by displaying certain demands in a public space.¹⁶ Equally important is the spatial context and associated expectations with regard to publicly visible behaviors. As Susanne Foellmer puts it, "acts visible to the public that are organized in a physical, spatial, time-conscious way may be understood as a protest that, in particular, momentarily uses locations of power for alternative purposes and reformulates them."¹⁷

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- 11 Mattias Wahlström and Magnus Wennerhag, "Alone in the Crowd: Lone Protesters in Western European Demonstrations," *International Sociology* 29 (6) (2014): 565–583; Polina Malkova and Olga Kudinova, "Exploring the Interplay Between Freedom of Assembly and Freedom of Expression: The Case of Russian Solo Pickets," *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 38 (3) (2020): 191–205.
- 12 Virginia Parks, "Rosa Parks Redux: Racial Mobility Projects on the Journey to Work," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106 (2) (2018): 292–299.
- 13 Thomas Olesen, "Greta Thunberg's Iconicity: Performance and Co-performance in the Social Media Ecology," *New Media & Society* 24 (6) (2022): 1325–1342.
- 14 Michael Hamilton, "The Meaning and Scope of 'Assembly' in International Human Rights Law," *International & Comparative Law Quarterly* 69 (3) (2020): 521–556.
- 15 Marie Dewaegaene, "You're Not Standing Alone: Singleperson Protest in Russia (2006–2017) (unpublished Master's thesis, Ghent University, 2018).
- 16 Joshua Sbicca and Robert Todd Perdue, "Protest Through Presence: Spatial Citizenship and Identity Formation in Contestations of Neoliberal Crises," *Social Movement Studies* 13 (3) (2014): 309–327.
- 17 Susanne Foellmer, "Choreography as a Medium of Protest," *Dance Research Journal* 48 (3) (2016): 68.

As has been repeatedly pointed out, protest arises and is realized in a specific space; tactics of resistance, such as demonstrations, occupations of space, and marches, are overwhelmingly spatial tools.¹⁸ The significance of protest as a political tool lies in the fact that its effect is not only to express certain claims, but also to reconstruct identifications and symbolic spheres, including the transformation of spatial meanings. Much of the spatial tactics of protest involves disrupting functionality – traffic blockades, picketing, sit-ins, and protest marches exert pressure by impeding the use of urban infrastructure. In this context, standing alone as a form of protest is ambiguous – after all, it is not a physical blockade, but a symbolic figure that forces other passersby to stop.

Therefore, it is not always the space or the crowd that is crucial in interpreting the political meaning of a protest. Pieter Verstraete in his work *The Standing Man Effect* analyzes various instances of lone protesters being motionless. The title refers to popularized images of a man standing alone in an act of protest for about eight hours in Taksim Square, in Istanbul, Turkey. Significantly, this type of standing still attracted the attention of passersby and the police that tried to prevent the lone protest.¹⁹ The symbolism of that standstill, according to Verstraete, is crucial – so let us take a closer look at immobility in public space.

In urban practices, stopping alone is routine, although not very common. We can stop to wait for another person, to look around, to rest, to think briefly about some important matter. Urban space has specific places where stopping is understandable, but even then, a person waiting too long in stillness can be perceived as suspicious. Standing is a disruption of the “familiar scene of urban public space.”²⁰ There are exceptions¹ to stopping alone in the public space, those linked to festive and religious practices.

Krzysztof Konecki gives the example of soldiers serving as official guards and people praying.²¹ In these cases, standing still is a sign of dignity. Apart from these rituals, standing still in public also has a purpose and in the case

18 Maciej Kowalewski and Marek Ostrowski, “Projektowanie protestu: przestrzeń publiczna (nie) przyjazna demonstracjom ulicznym” [Protest design: public space (un)friendly to street demonstrations], *Journal of Urban Ethnology* 21 (2023): 137–148.

19 Pieter Verstraete, “The Standing Man Effect,” *IPC-Mercator Policy Brief* (2013).

20 Steven Stanley, Robin James Smith, Eleanor Ford and Joshua Jones, “Making Something Out of Nothing: Breaching Everyday Life by Standing Still in a Public Place,” *The Sociological Review* 68 (6) (2020): 1252.

21 Krzysztof T. Konecki, “Standing in Public Places: An Ethno-Zenic Experiment Aimed at Developing the Sociological Imagination and More Besides...,” *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review* 53 (6) (2017): 881–902.

of protest it is a departure from expected situations, from rituals accepted in public space. It is a transfer of an activity to the public – it is the passersby who must react in some way. The motionless person is “in the service” of a specific cause, perceived by them as momentous, similar to how Konecki’s example of soldiers standing on guard duty seems.

The standing protest we are describing here took place within the framework of the Women’s Strike – which is also the name of both a registered NGO, the Polish Women’s Strike Foundation, a social movement, as well as a sequence of many events that were part of the original, loose assumptions of the strike. The choice of the word “strike” was not accidental. It was about alluding to the long-standing discussion about the absence of women in the narrative of political change in Poland after the fall of communism in 1989. The abortion ban is seen as a consequence of an unwritten agreement between the Catholic Church and Solidarity activists on the division of power and the organization of the state after the communists were removed from power. Calling a public protest a strike implicitly implies a departure from the social machine that functions without the consent of some social actors, namely women.

“Standing still,” as Paul Harrison writes, is not simply “not moving”²² just as meditation is not simply not-thinking. Invoking the figure of the meditating person is right on target here: the protesting person presents themselves as respectable, consciously refusing the rigors of everyday life. Therefore, Konecki proposes to incorporate the category of “being mindful” and Zen meditation into the understanding of standing in public spaces.²³ If we adopt this point of view, the act of protest involving the stopping of a single person is a form of eloquent and perhaps even desperate action. We would add here that it is associated with personal risk and presenting the actual state of affairs that politicians and part of the public refuse to notice.²⁴

Fragile Single Body and Freedom of Not Moving

Theories of political resistance, derived from the writings of Hannah Arendt, focus on the question of the alliance of fragile bodies and visibility, understood

22 Paul Harrison, “Making Sense: Embodiment and the Sensibilities of the Everyday,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18 (4) (2000): 497–517.

23 Krzysztof T. Konecki, *The Meaning of Contemplation for Social Qualitative Research: Applications and Examples* (London: Routledge, 2021).

24 Sophia Dingli, “We Need to Talk About Silence: Re-examining Silence in International Relations Theory,” *European Journal of International Relations* 21 (4) (2015): 721–742.

as a postulate and the beginning of the construction of political agency.²⁵ Fragility is an inalienable feature of the human condition, experienced universally, regardless of the new conditions of the media age that have revolutionized the concept of “visibility.”

In accounts of the protests, there is a repeated indication of the price paid not only by the social persona but by the biologically determined individual. This is occasionally praised by poetry. Several generations of Polish schoolchildren memorized Władysław Broniewski’s *Elegy on the Death of Ludwik Waryński*. The stanza describing dying alone in prison elevates the physical decay that does not tame the spirit of the activist and his will to act: “The gums eaten through by scurvy, / legs swollen and lifeless, / it’s the end, the lungs spewed out already / – but the open eyes are burning.”²⁶

Since the 1980s, the personal and long-term effects of political involvement have been described in terms of emotional labor, ethics, and the economies of care. At the same time, a personal example has become a tool of political struggle, democratizing the earlier need for leadership – nowadays everyone knows how politics imprints itself on her/his body and biography, and summarizes the impact of her/his activity on all spheres of life.²⁷ It may involve pain, injuries sustained, but also fatigue, injury, freezing, dehydration, getting wet, cold, somatic and psychosomatic illnesses, burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, troubles at work, and family problems. This variety of fragility is related to the biological nature of human beings, but also, it seems, to the long cultural memory of violence, especially unspoken violence, pushed from the horizon of perception, controlled by socially constructed shame, can be exposed or protected through an alliance with another person or with others.

The long persistence of the rituals of violence that founded the Polish and Central European experience was pointed out by Kacper Pobłocki in his book *Chamstwo*. The author ponders on the consequences of the use of ritualized violence for centuries, positing that its remnant is a uniquely enduring patriarchy.²⁸ He recognizes that the description of patriarchy through the history of the female body – and thus in terms of biopolitics – appeared in the poems of Anna Świrszczyńska, above all in the series *Jestem baba*, which was translated

25 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

26 Władysław Broniewski, *Elegia o śmierci Ludwika Waryńskiego* [Elegy on the death of Ludwik Waryński] (Warszawa: Wyd. Iskry, 1982), 6. Translated into English by Michał Biel.

27 Lance W. Bennett, “The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644 (1) (2012): 20–39.

28 Kacper Pobłocki, *Chamstwo* [Rabble] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2021).

into English and interpreted by Czesław Miłosz. On the other hand, Pobłocki abrogates the belief present in Polish historiography that peasant revolts in Poland were incidental and the modernization of the country came from outside with little to do with the actions of those treated as a formless mass of subjects denied any influence on history. As an aside, there is an important difference between the history of the Polish peasants written in the communist People's Republic and books published in the twenty-first century. In the former, economic merit and historical injustice were brought to the fore. In the latter, peasant culture is reconstructed and its agency examined – issues extremely interesting from the point of view of emancipation movements. They raise analogies with important questions for second-wave feminism about correlations between race, class and gender, and between colonialism and patriarchy. Is gender like serfdom, one might ask?

With violence being the most common experience of the working class and peasants in Polish history, protection against it seems an essential element of any social protest. Simply put – by taking to the streets, people exercise their rights of assembly and expression obtained in the twentieth century. But despite having these rights, each protester suddenly finds themselves in a long history of fear of violence, acutely aware of the fragility of one's body and the need for its protection.

The political contexts in which the discourse of resistance is placed can and should reach beyond a purely culturalist perspective, that is, the perspective in which we abstract from the local, individual experience of the protesters to emphasize the dynamics and peculiar choreography of protest, involving the performance of bodies being empowered through coexistence with other people that demand agency and then through media broadcasts, including those controlled by the public authorities and the seemingly private, for example on YouTube, Twitter, or Telegram.

Studies on the theory and practice of protest/strike, without abandoning the notion of “fragility” to which we will come back later, develop the question of the underlying invisibility and sensitivity of those who are placed outside the political scene but nevertheless fall within the public sphere as outlined by Arendt. It goes first and foremost to the question of gender, which Judith Butler draws attention to when she shows the inadequacy of the division between the dark, domestic, and biological sphere of life and going above and beyond it in protest, bringing bodies (implicitly: male bodies) into politics. Butler, in her article *Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street*, on the “alliance of visible bodies” (at the expense of those that remain in the dark private sphere), refers to the reflections of Adriana Cavarero, who often uses examples of ancient narratives to show the paradoxical difference between the legitimacy of the male voice and the scandal of the female counter-narrative where “male”

activity evokes death and female “passivity” evokes life.²⁹ The source story of this distinction would be the story of Antigone, a tale of solitary protest, initiating the birth of an active agent with its own history. An agent at risk of execution/death.

The history of violence, which we may subconsciously shy away from, reinforces a sense of fragility and has more than just general, “culturalist” conditions. It has been extensively described in Ewa Majewska’s comparative analysis where she analyzes strategies of “weak resistance,” building counterpublics against violent policies.³⁰

The strategies and spontaneous actions of groups/people without clear agency (and visibility) are rooted in the need to exhibit pride and subjectivity, as well as a “personal narrative,” but also in a deep-seated tradition of violence. This is true for the descendants of slaves and serf peasants, but also women, non-normative people, and working-class people unrepresented in the capitalist system, especially those not protected by labor contracts such as migrants, and those employed illegally. None of these groups can gain visibility/agency and become the subject of politics or the disposer of their own narrative if they do not risk exposing their biological, symbolic, social and economic fragility not only to the public eye but also to possible violence from the authorities.

The circumstances of a lone protest/strike like that of Antigone are complicated. On one hand, it involves giving up the “alliance of fragile bodies,” and on the other, it invokes a whole range of associations, from subliminal individualism and messianism, to seizing the power of the gaze and playing with risk. Although often a single “exposure” in an act of intervention and resistance has a practical rationale (as when a group cannot be assembled in a small city as part of the Women’s Strike), the performative media effect is created at the intersection of established symbolism and is always contextualized.

So, first of all, if the “alliance of fragile bodies” exposes its claims to the gaze, and thus makes the demands visible and object to a political game, a solitary and often silent protest, although it does not block the city or permanently stop the production machine, nonetheless potentially attracts attention for it marks risk, recklessness, and even bravado. It is worth mentioning here that the actual stoppage of work, that is the cancellation of lessons,

29 Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” in *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism*, ed. Meg McLagan and Yates McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 117–137.

30 Ewa Majewska, “Słaby opór. Obraz, wspólnota i utopia poza paradygmatem heroicznym” [Weak resistance. Image, community and utopia beyond the heroic paradigm], *Praktyka teoretyczna* 32 (2019): 7–20.

school activities, and the wearing of Women's Strike emblems has in recent years become a reason for initiating disciplinary hearings or lawsuits. This is another argument for the relevance of the word "strike" in the case of the women's movement in Poland. During the Women's Strike, the slogans "all of us can't be locked up" and "you will never walk alone" were used, building confidence in crossing a critical mass, forcing change, constructing a political representation of the pro-choice movement and its allies. In this situation, individuality seems to be networked, de facto included in the greater whole, and yet constitutes a separate act of intervention in public space.

Second, violence which always threatens protesters, can be amplified or weakened if it were to be used against an individual. In either case, the effect is spectacular – sending the police to an ostentatiously defenseless person is always impressive. A lack of police intervention does not invalidate the performance, as long as it is broadcast. A lone protest is a spectacle of resistance despite evident fragility.

Third, the lone protester does not multiply (herself), but at the same time she does not enjoy the protection afforded by being in a crowd – a potential political argument and a literal physical argument, a kind of cordon.

Women's presence in public spaces has been well recounted in feminist philosophy. Adding sociological, literary and activist perspectives, we see the possibility of juxtaposing "solitary protest" with the eminence of figures such as the imprisoned but still disobeying Antigone, or Lot's wife. Becoming numb from pain (and punishment) may seem extremely distant from stepping out in front of a magistrate with a piece of paper containing a slogan, and yet in both cases the figure focusing attention on herself silently expresses the drama of breaking the narrative, breaking the continuity of her biography.

A closer context is provided by the modernist visibility of women as consumers in the space of the modern city – mannequins, exhibitions, display cases, and eventually in photography and film as a result of their objectification. In this discourse, a silent presence is not capitulation but rather a refusal to play the game. This premeditated visibility of women, not as a political subject but as a visible object, can be found in the conceptual feminist art of the 1970s and 1980s. Ewa Partum's (Polish performance artist) *Self-Identification* series literally showed the fragility of the female body in public space, as well as the limits of visibility and invisibility, related to the sexualization of the gaze. Partum produced photographic collages, assembling her own nudes and street situations typical of the era, such as queuing in front of a grocery store and crossing the street. During the opening, she mingled with a wedding procession, casually standing next to the gallery. The most famous photo in the series shows the artist facing a policewoman directing traffic. Partum's goal was to draw attention to the inequality of men and women in art, yet

the meaning of the works, those manipulated with and those created during a performance confronting a naked woman, gallery audience and outsiders in a real space, goes beyond an artistic manifesto. The naked woman facing a policewoman in a uniform becomes an iconic representation of the difference between a fragile body and power. Partum has captured the moment when the eponymous self-identification occurs – by demonstrating the hypocritical manipulation, and methods of silencing and invalidating women.

Protests against the tightening of anti-abortion laws often used the costume of the handmaids – characters created in Margaret Atwood's novel, popularized by the TV series. An interesting compilation of specific series choreography, mythological and fairy-tale motifs constituted the performance *The Empress's Silent Clothes*.

“At 5.30 pm about 30 women gathered on the Defilade Square in front of the Palace of Culture and Science [in Warsaw – I. I.]. They were all dressed in white robes, with garlands on their heads. The event was not accompanied by any sounds or speeches, the title of the performance – The Empress' Silent Clothes – was meant to speak for itself. The women walked in a fixed formation for several minutes and then doused themselves in red paint. In this way, women from different social groups oppose the assault on their freedom and objectification by the Polish government, while demanding absolute respect for full human rights” – the organizers reported.³¹

The performed muteness – like the nude act in Partum's work – exposes and undermines prohibitions, unspoken premises, stereotypes, and systemic, camouflaged violence. The empress is not naked – like the emperor in Andersen's fairy tale – her robes are bloodstained, screaming, but the authorities prefer to pretend that illegal dangerous abortions do not happen. The silence of the performers is all the more telling because the motif of “reclaiming the voice” is an important part of the tradition of feminist art, also influencing the poetics of poems, novels, and dramas. We will only mention two examples here: *The Chorus of Women*, a theatre directed by Marta Górnicka, and *The Witches' Choir* according to the idea of Ewa Łowżył and the text of Malina Prześluga. Both of these ensembles scrutinize the issue of women's presence and voice, producing an extraordinary amount of sounds, resorting to historical, mythological, and religious associations, on the edge of what a traditional

31 Kacper Sułowski, “Niecodzienny performance na pl. Defilad. Kobiety w zakrwawionych białych szatach” [An unusual performance on the square. Parades. Women in bloody white robes], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November, 10, 2020, accessed June 3, 2024, <https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,26499547,niecodzienny-performance-na-pl-defilad-kobiety-w-zakrwawionych.html>.

choir is, and what it can become when it declares war on disciplinary norms and descends deeper, to screaming, echolalia, and rage. The expansive and corporeal stage presence in both of these ensembles derives, of course, from the reinvention of theater, including ancient theater, especially comedies that mock the aspirations of women. Here, however, we are concerned with juxtaposing these high-profile bodily presences on stage with Partum's tacit nudity, with the hand-me-down costumes appearing during the protests of recent years, either in red dresses or in white dresses stained with intense paint. The powerful means used in both examples utilize the found symbolism of suppression, objectification, and taking away voice and agency.

Conclusions. The Aesthetics and Political Nature of Non-movement

Ambiguous, deconstructed – in political discourses and artistic practices, the silent, solitary exposure – a desperate strategy, yet producing the effect of an almost mimetic unity of demands and means. A lack of rights makes an individual body offensive and it is sufficient to show oneself to the authority to make a stand. By showing the consequences of a broken democracy, one makes a personal attempt to restore contact between the government and the people.

Table 1. What is a single standing-still protest?

Single standing-still is:	Single standing-still protest is not:
Disclosure (exposure)	Being in a crowd (anonymous)
Keeping guard	Passively looking on
Acting on behalf of others	Standing by (as a spectator)
Performance that arouses curiosity	Pause (from performance)
„Living” monument	Only an artistic activity
Bearing witness	Strength of numbers
The power of the powerless (exposure/play with vulnerability)	A threat to public order (like a mob)
Creates the potential for establishing relationships	Separation/distinctness/abandonment
Proof of presence, persistent insistence on one's dignity	Hiding
An act of determination	A mechanical, ritualistic practice

Source: own study.

Our interpretations of a standing-still protest are presented in Table 1. All these meanings of single “standing for a cause” protesters make a gesture as if holding a board, a banner, or simply a piece of paper. There are no letters, no words, no slogans. What is left is a defenseless body, but even that can signal a political struggle. Standing in the rain in the market square of a small Polish town, a woman wearing a T-shirt with the word *Constitution* on it addresses the authorities and those who do not join in. One can, of course, see affinities in this action with the strategy of Greta Thunberg and the Climate Strike, but one can also place the protester in a wider sequence of events – violence, patriarchy, reclaiming one’s voice, suppression, and nullification. She gains strength because she is visible, thanks to the media broadcasting her single strike.

A single-person protest is a break from political rules, right-to-move and not-to-move, and regimes of im/mobility.³² It accomplishes a reversal of police surveillance tactics, in which the cry of “Don’t move!” is the primary tool of discipline, security and control. Early demonstrations at the turn of the twentieth century were met with responses from law enforcement, who shouted to the demonstrators “silence!” “quiet!”³³ The subordination of movement in public space to the rules of discipline is read as a desire to maintain order, symbolic and real power over space, but above all to prevent the spread of revolution, to maintain bourgeois expectations of behavior in public space, and to maintain the state’s monopoly on violence. In her act of protest, Katkowska reverses this police call to stop, performing a subversion. We read her solitary act of stopping in motion as a subversion of discipline and expected behavior in public space.

Her protest in a small town brought together organization, politics, and the local community in a single space, originally designated for ceremonial and ritual practices. At the time, protests often appeared in such places for the first time; unlike in cities with large populations, this was political activity at home, blurring the line between private space and public.

32 Nina Glick Schiller and Noel B. Salazar, “Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39 (2) (2013): 183–200.

33 Joachim Albrecht and Bernd Jürgen Warneken, “Als die Deutschen demonstrieren lernen: das Kulturmuster friedliche Straßendemonstration” im preußischen Wahlrechtskampf 1908–1910: Begleitband zur Ausstellung im Haspelturm des Tübinger Schlosses vom 24. Januar bis 9. März 1986 (Tübingen: Tübinger Vereinigung für Volkskunde, 1986).

Abstract

Inga Iwasioń

INSTITUTE OF LITERATURE AND NEW MEDIA, UNIVERSITY OF SZCZECIN

Maciej Kowalewski

INSTITUTE OF SOCIOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF SZCZECIN

Standing Still in Feminist Protest: Single Body and Freedom of Not Moving

A protest by an individual standing still in a public space is a departure from the framework of a collective street demonstration; that is, movement in space and bodily interaction with others. We investigated aesthetics of this gesture in the context of cultural studies on immobility and individual protests. Our point of reference is the solo protest against the restriction of abortion rights held by female activist Beata Katkowska in the square of the small Polish town of Gryfice, on March 23, 2018. We argue that the aesthetics of standing alone in the public are associated with its spatial context and subversion of constraints in favor of contemplation and conscious disruption of dominant rhythms. Although a single-person protest is usually undertaken in response to systemic violence, one's decision to stay immobilized is voluntary, evoking the figure of a meditator – an honorable individual consciously defying the rules of everyday life.

Keywords

feminism, protests, abortion, standing still, body