

# Representation of Illness, Disability, and Ageing in Visual Arts, Dance, and Theatre as a Way of Combating Social Exclusion

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## Abstract

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a noticeable shift of interest in topics related to disability, illness, old age and the discourse of exclusion, both in practice and theory. Numerous artists, who often employed diverse strategies and aesthetics in their works, would confront similar themes, engaging in activities aimed at counteracting various forms and manifestations of social ostracism. This article describes and analyzes selected projects by Polish representatives of critical art and independent theatre which address these issues. The primary aim of this text is not to catalogue as many artistic undertakings as possible but to highlight a certain trend and demonstrate the significance and purpose of art that boldly explores disability, illness, and deteriorating, ageing and dying bodies. Such themes are often taboo in consumer culture, while the task of art is to expose the mechanisms of exclusion and stigmatization and to draw public attention—often in a highly debatable manner—to topics that are omitted in the official discourse. The artistic projects discussed in the text demonstrate that persons with disabilities can be successful artists, dancers, performers, and actors.

**Keywords:** exclusion, representations of disease, disability, critical art, social change

## 1. Introduction

Polish artistic practices and the associated critical reflection have recently brought forth a considerable number of undertakings showing the ill, disabled, impaired, and aged body. Numerous artists representing various forms of art engage with the subject, often violating social and moral taboos. After all, as Roland Barthes claims, the body is not an object “eternally inscribed in nature; indeed, the body has been subjugated and shaped by history, by societies, regimes, ideologies” (quoted in Dziechcińska, 1996, p.14)<sup>1</sup>. The human body is subject to cultural transformations, becoming a social construct. Traditional philosophical narratives, beginning with ancient philosophers (Aristotle and Plato) and culminating in the Enlightenment (Descartes), have approached the body and related issues as matters of secondary importance. Today, it is impossible to talk about the identity of human beings while ignoring their corporeality. Izabela Kowalczyk is undoubtedly right in stating that “the question about our identity, about our ‘self’ is at the same time a question about our body” (quoted in Gajda, 2006, p. 47). Simultaneously, the discussion of disability or illness should involve a multifaceted approach, which embraces the medical, cultural, and social levels (see Opozda-Suder, 2016). In this article, the analysis focuses on works created from the early 1990s to 2018, reflecting interdisciplinary debates on the entanglement of the human body in nature and culture as well as on the position of persons with disabilities. My aim is not only to describe and analyze these projects but also to try to answer several questions: Why do artists readily take up the precarious subject of disability, illness, and impairment in their works? How do they tackle the issue of “playing on the emotions of the viewer”? Can their work be assessed on the basis of purely artistic values? When viewing such projects, is it possible to translate formal reception into ordinary human feelings? When shattering the normative social order and violating the boundaries of official discourse, are such projects merely shocking or do they have an actual impact on the reality around us, restoring voice to those silenced by practices of exclusion? Affected by illness and disability, are the depicted individuals merely an object or the subject of that art? The paper employs a variety of research methods to answer these questions, including a review of pertinent literature, content analysis (official websites, publicity material, interviews with artists), analysis of audiovisual sources (footage from performances, photographs), and participatory observation. It should be emphasized that within my research perspective, I focus on the approach to corporeality where the body is defined as a product of consumer society due to the processes of globalization. I am aware that 20<sup>th</sup>-century sociological and philosophical research stresses the importance of corporeality and the intersectional structure of identity (Crenshaw), but I decided not to use this framework in the article.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Polish are by Szymon Nowak.

Prior to the description and analysis of specific artistic undertakings which address the difficult and risky subject of illness, disability, or aged human body, I want to define the culture within and “thanks to” which such projects were created. Following a number of scholars (e.g., Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, Mike Featherstone, Zygmunt Bauman), I assume that present-day culture qualifies as consumer culture. Specifically, if culture is understood as the world of meanings and senses shared by members of a community, then a large part of those meanings and senses relates to consumption. Unlike modern societies, postmodern ones do not need their citizens to be producers but consumers. As Zygmunt Bauman aptly observed,

The differences are so deep and multiform that they fully justify speaking of our society as of a society of a separate and distinct kind—a consumer society. The consumer of a consumer society is a sharply different creature from consumers in any other societies thus far. If the philosophers, poets and moral preachers among our ancestors pondered the question whether one works in order to live or lives in order to work, the dilemma one hears mulled over most often nowadays is whether one needs to consume in order to live or whether one lives so that one can consume. That is, if we are still able, and feel the need to, tell apart the living from the consuming. (Bauman, 1998, p. 94)

We refer to contemporary capitalist societies as consumer societies, which is to assert that consumption has become the driving force of the modern world, well beyond the purely economic dimension. Consumption and the associated hyper-consumerism fuel the economy and influence cultural norms and values. Consumerism engenders meanings and affects interpersonal communication, human conduct, and the construction of human identity. Nor is human body immune to consumption and its related phenomena. Jean Baudrillard argues that

In the consumer package, there is one object finer, more precious and more dazzling than any other—and even more laden with connotations than the automobile, in spite of the fact that that encapsulates them all. That object is the BODY. Its “rediscovery,” in a spirit of physical and sexual liberation, after a millennial age of puritanism; its omnipresence (specifically the omnipresence of the female body, a fact we shall have to try to explain) in advertising, fashion and mass culture; the hygienic, dietetic, therapeutic cult which surrounds it, the obsession with youth, elegance, virility/femininity, treatments and regimes, and the sacrificial practices attaching to it all bear witness to the fact that the body has today become an object of salvation. (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 168)

In consumer society, increasing importance is attached to visual communication and aestheticization of everyday life, which largely involves the aestheticization of one’s image: “In line with the tendency to aestheticize life, contemporary culture places corporeality at the centre of attention [...]. The body, or

more precisely the awareness of one's own body is now a superior category in the process of identity formation, confining our consciousness to corporeality" (Jaxa-Rożen, 2011, p. 116). To a significant extent, the identity of the contemporary person is constituted by the external appearance: the figure, the proportions, hair or skin colour, and clothing. Since everything is a commodity in consumer culture, subjectivity becomes identical with visual manifestations. The body has become a language, a sign, a system of communication and that is why the postmodern human sets so much store by external appearance, which is considerably influenced by fashion and advertising. Richard Schechner explains it as follows: "Advertising encourages people to believe that by means of cosmetics, surgery, mood-altering drugs, exercise, diet, hairstyle, and clothes one can radically change personality. Who 'I am' is no longer a given, if it ever was" (2002, p. 241). Globalization and the mediatization of contemporary culture produce one desirable model of subjectivity: a body that is young, healthy, fit, slim, proportionate, hairless, tanned, and perfect. Through diets, cosmetics, drugs, and aesthetic medicine procedures, the contemporary person is constantly striving for one, universally accepted model, which for the most part has been fabricated by the mass media. In a consumer culture saturated with the images of the idealized body, there is no room for showing an old, obese body, let alone an ill or a disabled one. This is because everything that deviates from the commonly recognized norms, undermines the tenets of social order, or contradicts the established paradigms is marginalized or excluded from the dominant discourse. This is where the artists and the protagonists of their projects—with whom this article is concerned—come to aid, as I concur with Jolanta Brach-Czaina, who emphasizes that

It seemed that in contemporary culture the body has been subject to comprehensive exposure and has thus lost the capacity to reveal its own meanings and values. Meanwhile, positive solutions have been advanced in the works of artists focusing on the flawed or sick body which, failing to provide a beautiful front, must take on more serious tasks and create values of corporeal experience of the world and bodily presence. (2000, p. 9)

In this article, I will discuss the works of representatives of critical art - Katarzyna Kozyra, Artur Żmijewski, and Alicja Żebrowska - as well as dance and theatre projects by artists residing in Poznań. Before turning to these works, I would like to caution that the language used to describe them—used by both the artists and the commentators on their art—may seem inappropriate and exclusionary today. In these analyses, we find terms that are unacceptable nowadays, like "crippled", "deformed", "defect", "ugly", "weakness," and some ableist assumptions that are not currently allowed. On the other hand, critical art is controversial. It deliberately juxtaposed contrasting images, often causing shock or disgust. Its descriptive language may be perceived as offensive or exclusionary. Critical art and engaged art often use subversive strategies

that aim to expose certain mechanisms (including social exclusion due to disability) while using the original concept. It is about shifting meanings. Artistic activities often adopt offensive, discriminatory stereotypes and terms, but with a critical or ironic intention. In my analysis, I have tried to avoid outdated expressions, which was difficult, because the available sources, literature, and descriptions of artistic works were not edited and reflect the discourse of the time.

## **2. The issue of exclusion in Polish critical art**

The corporeality overlooked or excluded from the official visual sphere has become a compelling theme for contemporary art, especially for critical art, body art, abject art, and performance. My description and analysis of the projects by Polish artists focusing on human corporeality—which is often subject to social, cultural as well as illness-related constraints—will begin with the work of Katarzyna Kozyra. The artist has been recognized among the leading and emblematic representatives of Polish critical art, whose principal task was not to shock but to bring out difficult topics and prompt a public debate. Many of her works, such as *Olympia*, *Bathhouse* or the series *In Art Dreams Come True*, show the body as a cultural and social construct governed by numerous prescriptions and prohibitions, which is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's paradigm of "power-knowledge" (see Foucault 2009). In her projects, Kozyra also addresses the ubiquitous sexualization of (especially) the female body and the exclusion of the aged, unwanted, impaired, and ill bodies from the dominant discourse. Given the scope of this text, *Olympia* (1996) is a particularly interesting project: an autobiographical piece which documents the artist's struggle with cancer, it comprises a several-minute-long video and a series of three large-format photographs. The latter depict naked Kozyra lying on a hospital bed like Olympia from Manet's work; the artist in hospital during chemotherapy, accompanied by a nurse; and an old, wrinkled, lonely woman in a flat resembling a retirement home. Drawing on Manet, whose avant-garde painting showed the body of an ageing prostitute, Kozyra crossed the cultural barrier by showing the sick, ravaged, and aged female body, which is so often excluded from contemporary cultural imagery as a source of suffering and a social taboo. Izabela Kowalczyk notes that

The sight of the old body [...] is a source of anguish for the viewer, as it demonstrates the failure of all practices aimed at maintaining the quality of the body. Seeing an old body means coming face to face with the failure of existence; the old body proves to us that we are not in charge. It tells us about our future; it is a project of ourselves. It is a blueprint of death. (2002, p. 47)

The sight of an old body that has been devastated by illness is shocking to viewers who function in consumer culture, where a completely different feminine beauty ideal prevails. As Kozyra explains,

I allowed to photograph myself naked on a drip to prove that sick body has just as much dignity and is just as normal as the healthy one. When you look nice, you don't think about how you function. Looking at a sick body, you are thinking about its mortality. All the healthy people are OK, because they don't wear their physicality on the outside. And they walk around as their perfect selves. (Kozyra, n. d.)

By making herself the object and abject in *Olympia*, Kozyra demonstrates that the sick body should not be treated as something shameful that needs to be erased from the official discourse. Her later work continues to oppose cultural oppression and test the dominant codes of representation both in fine arts and daily life, engendering a debate on the forms of social exclusion.

Another Polish artist who explores the issues of corporeality, the category of the Other, the body with disability, and social ostracism is Artur Żmijewski. One of his most recognizable and widely discussed projects is *Eye for an Eye* (1998), a series of photographs portraying male bodies with missing limbs. In the photographs, Żmijewski compensated for those deficiencies using the arms and legs of healthy individuals:

In this way, strange, multi-legged and multi-headed beings were created. Simultaneously, an awkward interaction took place between the fit and the disabled. The "healthy" have been taken into the most profound confidence, allowed to perform the most shameful touch, the ultimate disgrace: they touch the scars. (Sienkiewicz, 2009)

Żmijewski further highlighted the contrast between healthy and sick bodies in *Out for a Walk*, a film shot at a rehabilitation facility for paralyzed persons. One of the elements of their therapy involves regular walks, during which the patients are accompanied by strong, healthy men, whose fitness and physical robustness is almost jarring when juxtaposed with the disabled, emaciated bodies of the patients.

Another film by the artist, *Caroline* (2002), is undoubtedly a drastic and poignant project. It shows a woman suffering from osteoporosis, a disease associated with excruciating pain, which can only be mitigated by morphine. Administered in large quantities, the drug condemns the heroine of Żmijewski's work to a slow, cruel, and certain death.

These works allowed Żmijewski to think about art, its significance, and its impact on the reality. His diploma project, entitled *40 Drawers* (1995), already betrays interest in the body, its plasticity and representations, its belonging to and dependence on culture and society. The artist's works demonstrate that art plays a considerable role in analysing urgent, yet often disregarded social issues. Finally, it is worth stressing that by aestheticizing bodies marked by illness, disability, or impairment, Żmijewski defies conventions and undermines the entrenched stereotypes.

Another representative of critical art is Alicja Żebrowska, whose interests also encompass the body and corporeality, sexuality, illness, disability, and the discourse of exclusion. In *Humanitarian Cases* (1994) (a video and a series of photographs), she juxtaposes two women of much the same age. One is a beautiful, shapely, physically fit woman with long hair, shown in the nude; the other, short-haired and fully dressed, uses a wheelchair for mobility. The screening of the film is accompanied by comments from the audience. By contrasting these highly distinct images, the artist provokes a discussion on the representation of the female body in consumer culture, which “naturally” presupposes an ideal, young, proportionate, and slim body that is pleasing to look at, or which should elicit a sense of pleasure. The second depiction is thoroughly remote from the widespread ideal, perhaps even makes one look away. According to the audience’s comments, it may induce embarrassment, discomfort, distaste, or even disgust. In her work, the artist underscores the fact that reading the body is not “neutral,” since it is often based “on a certain knowledge (accepted in a given place and time) of what the body is and should be. Although such knowledge is almost always asserted to be objective and universal, it is nothing more than a particularistic, discursive construct” (Melosik, 2010, p.12). Tobin Siebers is right in noting in *Disability as Masquerade* that it is the social representation of difference as negative or inferior, not the existence of physical and mental differences, that defines disability discrimination (Siebers, 2017, p. 79). In addition to an evident critique in the spirit of feminism, Żebrowska’s *Humanitarian Cases* addresses another problematic issue, namely the sexuality of persons with disabilities. When preparing the work, the artist conducted a series of interviews with young men who openly admitted that they find women with a disability sexually unattractive.

### **3. Disability and sickness in dance, theater, and performance art**

The above analyses focused on the visual arts, notably object art and Polish critical art of the 1990s. At this point, I would like to take a look at more recent undertakings within dance, performance, and theatre, since numerous current dance and theatre projects in Poland are concerned with illness, disability, and the social ostracism they give rise to. In this respect, the most recognizable companies include Theatre 21, Biuro Rzeczy Osobistych Theatre, OD-NOWA Therapeutic Theatre, Ubogi Relacji Theatre, the MAZOWIACY Integrative Song and Dance Ensemble as well as a number of individual artists working with people with physical and/or intellectual disabilities. From this abundance of diverse projects, I have decided to select works by artists residing in Poznań.

I will start with a dance performance directed and choreographed by Janusz Orlik (experienced in working with variously affected persons), featuring Pia Libicka, a dancer with disability. The project was curated by Joanna Leśniarska and premiered as part of the *Old Brewery/New Dance* residency. *Exérese*

*Monobloc* (2004) was based on the personal story of the performer, who was diagnosed with bone cancer shortly before defending her diploma at a ballet school. The young woman underwent six operations that cured the cancer but did not allow her to return to dancing. The performance shows the successive stages of the illness and the resulting mental crisis. The viewer experiences a range of emotional states of the protagonist, from disbelief and breakdown, to becoming reconciled with her situation and the need to forgo her life's aspirations and career goals. The set design of the performance is very basic: it is a white sterile space reminiscent of an operating theatre. The costumes of the performers are a hybrid of a hospital gown and the typical ballet outfit known as "tutu." The main character is Pia Libicka, who dances in a wheelchair and wielding crutches. Although a script based on her personal reminiscences provides the principal axis of the project, Orlik's performance

asks multiple questions about disability, or physical impairment, and its impact on dance movement. Can such movement be as accurate and speak to the viewer as effectively if it is conveyed by a person (dancer) with reduced physical capacity? Do we know what disability can be in dance art? Does it have a place there? How can it be reflected in elaborate choreography? (Orlik, n. d.)

The autobiographical nature of the story does not prevent the project from having universal significance. Brilliantly danced and performed, the piece by Poznań artists shows that persons with disabilities may be successful dancers, performers, or actors. Paradoxically, they reclaim subjectivity through art, as demonstrated by Pia Libicka's comments about the performance:

For me, the starting point for creating *Exérese Monoblock* was to showcase my capabilities rather than my limitations in the performance. As a student of ballet school, accustomed to perfection and ideal form (as defined by the classical dance environment), I could not entertain the thought that the performance might reveal my flaws. I would never agree to perform in a show that would evoke pity from the audience because of my handicapped movement. This is unthinkable for someone with a ballet mindset. The sensitivity that choreographer Janusz Orlik possesses regarding the capabilities of the human body, his ability to seek alternative solutions for movement, and his exploration of stage possibilities within my limitations allowed the creation of a performance in which I felt the harmony of my body. The creative process did not differ from that I remembered from before my illness. My movement limitations did not matter at all.<sup>2</sup>

Another Poznań-based artist working with persons with disabilities is Adam Ziajski, the founder of the legendary Strefa Ciszego Theatre and currently the leader of the Theatre Residency Centre Scena Robocza. I will discuss two per-

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<sup>2</sup> Private communication with the artist asked to comment on this article.



performances that he has directed. The first one, entitled *Don't Tell Anyone*, premiered in 2016. It was developed in collaboration with d/Deaf persons Ziajski had invited to contribute to the project. The script was inspired by *The Deaf Realm*, a reportage by Anna Goc, though it also drew substantially, or perhaps above all, on the personal experience of the creators. Again, the set design was very simple, as it consisted of a bright floor, five chairs and as many tables with glass filled with coloured powder. As the centrepiece, the stage featured a screen on which the text was displayed, i.e. simultaneous translation from sign language used by the actors. Still, the sound was perhaps the most interesting element: it was monotonous, loud, and sufficiently unpleasant for all spectators to be provided with noise-cancelling headphones. Using such a simple device, Ziajski impaired their sense of hearing, which enabled the viewers to get an idea of what the protagonists confront every day. The performance was reportage-like, consisting of personal narratives of the actors/amateurs who spoke of the daily struggles with their condition. Although the stories were touching, moving, and thought-provoking, they did not verge on cheap sentimentalism. A reviewer observed as follows:

The statements of the individual narrators are concrete and factual. No one bemoans their fate, but states: that is just the way it is with me. We look at simple situations through their eyes: a visit to the doctor's, attending to one's affairs at an office; we see more difficult, more complex situations, for instance, the hearing partner of a woman with impaired hearing faces genuine puzzlement of those who wonder why he has become involved with the "deaf one." (Tyszka, 2016)

Together with his actors, Ziajski raises vital questions concerning persons with disabilities. He asks about their private, sexual, social, or professional life. Without pitying the protagonists, without exploiting the difficulties of their situation, he opens a social discussion on the status of people with disabilities. We also see how difficult it is to overcome the typical course of life that the education system imposes on deaf persons who do not speak a phonic language, epitomized in the verdict: "Locksmith! Seamstress!"

The visually impaired are the protagonists of Ziajski's next undertaking. The script of *Look at Me* (2018) follows the pattern described above, with a reportage-like narrative based on personal stories of the people invited to cooperate. The director "interviewed visually impaired and blind persons for several months. From among them he selected the protagonists of the piece—a dramatic reportage—who would perform on stage" (teraz teatr, 2013). *Look at Me* premiered at an institutional venue, featuring sighted professional actors (from the Silesian Theatre in Katowice) and blind amateurs side by side. Ziajski and his collaborators, Mixer Group, opted for a very modest set design and costumes. All actors were dressed in white jackets and wore face masks. The main technical effects of the performance included the sound in the headphones and

the visuals, which played a major role in the show. Lines, circles, squares, abstract images “projected” and displayed on the white outfits unified the characters and made them blend in with the space. Importantly enough, the performance was staged with heavily reduced lightning or in total darkness. Consequently, the spectators “did not see” the protagonists and struggled with vision just as they do. In our ocularcentric culture, advanced eye disease brings social exclusion and stigmatization, because sight is the privileged way of judging and being in reality. The monologues of the five blind protagonists—the accounts of personal challenges—explored painful issues such as loneliness, helplessness, mobility in unadapted spaces, and difficulties with finding a job or establishing relationships. The conclusions one can draw from Ziajski’s performance are unfortunately rather gloomy: being blind means being invisible at the same time.

*Don’t Tell Anyone* and *Look at Me* demonstrate that people marked by illness and disability regain their presence aided by the medium of theatre. Using creative activities as a vehicle, they talk about their experiences or the problems of the marginalized community in which they function. Without sentimentality, without playing on the viewer’s emotions, or resorting to cheap pedagogy, they undertake social dialogue. It is a colloquy that concerns them directly but in which all those who wish to live in a democratic, equal, and involved society should engage.

Among the artistic projects which focus on illness, disability or impairment, one which also deserves mentioning is a performance directed by Przemek Prasnowski, a Poznań-based artist, activist, and founder of Barak Kultury. The foundation is dedicated to communities that are discriminated against, excluded, or subject to stigmatization, also due to illness or disability. *The Whole Life in Tracksuits* (2016) is an authorial monodrama created under the banner of Ba-Ku Theatre. Unlike the projects by Ziajski, it features an “able-bodied” person on stage, who discusses the experience of being a mother of a severely affected child with a disability. Playing herself, Justyna Tomczak-Boczko introduces the audience to her life, outlining her four-person family’s daily existence, largely determined by the serious condition of the eldest son, Jeremi. The entire performance follows the convention of stand-up, with the set composed of gym equipment and a screen showing photographs of Jeremi and material from the Facebook profile his parents had set up for him. By this means, the director skilfully brings the protagonist of the story onto the stage, as due to severe physical and mental handicap as well as dependence on medical devices, he could not appear in person. Although it explores a difficult subject, the story is told lightly, with a great sense of humour, distance, and self-irony. The experienced actress, especially given the monodrama format, approached caring for her son

as an art of living in which a sense of humour is essential. Because her life is neither as sad nor as frightening as it might seem. Perhaps this is why she sometimes hears from friends: “Justyna, you don’t look like the mother of a child with a disability at all.” (Barak Kultury, n. d.)

In a sense, the performance works through personal trauma, but it still manages to highlight the struggles of those who take care of persons with severe disabilities on a daily basis. The performance brings attention to how caring after a person with a disability may disrupt the life of the carers and change their professional, family, and social roles.

Finally, I want to refer briefly to initiatives which primarily pursue therapeutic and rehabilitative rather than artistic ends. Here emphasis is placed on the process in which the participants are involved, as opposed to the goal or outcome in the shape of a theatrical performance. Such undertakings may be characterized as dramatheatre or therapeutic theatre. This type of art therapy “has been practiced for several decades in the milieu of persons with disabilities, dysfunctional groups or those at risk of social exclusion, whereby it serves as an intermediary in the process of individual development of the actors and education/cultural animation of the group” (Encyklopedia Teatru Polskiego, n. d.). In this case, theatre is employed as a tool of diagnosis, rehabilitation, therapy, and social inclusion. Artistic activities can genuinely improve the condition of persons affected by illness or disability, as well as counteract exclusion and stigmatization of people due to their health. In Poznań, successful initiatives of this type include the Theatre Under the Fountain, headed by Janusz Stolarski, and Halszka Różalska’s *Efekt Motyla* [Butterfly Effect]. Both undertakings bring together professional actors, therapists as well as persons whose lives have been transformed by illness, disability, or addiction. The primary activity of those informal ensembles focuses on recovery and rehabilitation as well as socio-occupational development. Although their work is rooted in art therapy, appropriate care and collaboration with professional directors, stage designers, dancers, and musicians results in a fully-fledged artistic message. This kind of theatre enables persons who are ill, disabled, or addicted to grow into protagonists of art who, through this medium, reclaim their agency.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In the above analysis, I have referred to only few examples of artists from Poland—representatives of critical art and contemporary independent theatre—who engage with the issues of persons with disabilities. However, the aim of this text is not to catalogue as many artistic undertakings as possible, but to highlight a certain trend and demonstrate the significance and purpose of art that boldly explores disability, illness, and the deteriorating, ageing, and dying bodies. Such themes are often taboo in consumer culture, while the task of the art is to expose the mechanisms of exclusion and stigmatization, to draw public

attention—often in a highly debatable manner—to topics that are omitted in the official discourse. This is also the driving force behind theatre with and for persons with physical or mental disabilities.

The above examples demonstrate that contemporary art provides a critical commentary on the world around us. It can not only comment and encourage discussion, but also have an actual impact on social, political, and cultural realities. Art can prompt social change, which “begins with the opportunity to articulate one’s own opinions and culminates in the creation of sustainable social relations as well as organizational and spatial structures” (Rogozinska, 2009, p. 91). This is also where doubts may arise. Does art, a small fragment of which I have delineated in this article, actually fulfil such a function? Can the experience that its creators and protagonists undergo really improve their situation, solve pressing social problems, counteract exclusion, change reality? Does it not border on naivety to believe that this is the case? This text does not aspire to resolve such questions but to take a critical look at the functions, goals, and tasks of the projects which address important, yet sensitive or even controversial issues. On the other hand, the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus has rapidly made such issues conspicuous and tangible. In these circumstances, the well-known and somewhat overused quote from the American researcher Susan Sontag takes on a new meaning:

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. (Sontag, 1978, p.78)

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