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## STRATEGIES OF SCATTERING AND DISLOCATION OF A LETTER IN EWA PARTUM'S PERFORMANCES

**Abstract:** Artistic activities with a letter remain, in a way, on the margins of academic focuses, as they reveal themselves on the boundary of several disciplines: literature, concrete poetry, typography, performance or conceptual art. In this article, I focus on the use of the dislocation strategy and scattering of a letter on the example of Ewa Partum's selected performances, such as: *The Poetic License Area*, poem by ewa, or *Active Poetry. Ulysses J. Joyce*. In this analysis, I draw upon the following theoretical anchors: the great theory of literacy, functions of signs indicated by Derrida, which I applied to search for the potential of letters as signs, and the deepening of a feminist perspective with a postcolonial research spectrum. The research perspective presented in this article allowed me to extract new meanings hiding in a letter, which resulted in Ewa Partum's performances being reinterpreted. The text is divided according to the leading aspects related to the applied strategy of scattering: spreading (around), sowing (around), moving (around) and sending (around).

**Keywords:** Ewa Partum, Polish art, active poetry, performance, postcolonialism, feminism, the artistic strategy of dislocation and dispersal

Artistic actions with *a letter* are somewhat on the margin of researchers' interests, as they appear on the border of various disciplines: literature, concrete poetry, typography, performance and conceptual art. It is for this reason that they are an elusive phenomenon. My fascination with the areas of art that levitate or fluctuate as if "between" its different fields led me to consider *a letter* as an element of artistic expression. I tackled this subject for the first time in

the book *Tropami wielokrotności. Strategie powtórzenia w sztuce polskiej lat 60. i 70. XX wieku (On the Trail of Multiplicity. Repetition Strategies in Polish Art of the 1960s and 1970s)*, Gdańsk 2019, in the chapter *Litera a powtórzenie<sup>1</sup> (A Letter vs Repetition)*. Here, in this article, I would like to continue and elaborate on the threads which were omitted or not excessively discussed in the book. For this reason, I will focus on cases when the strategy of dislocating or scattering *a letter* was applied, based on Ewa Partum's performances. Before that, however, I would like to present three theoretical statements, or anchors, which I have drawn upon in my deliberations. The first one – the great theory of literacy – allowed me to free *a letter* from its subservient role towards content. The second one, which is based on the function of a sign pointed out by Derrida, let me see the potential of *a letter* as a sign, while the third one is a postcolonial perspective which is used as a tool to reinterpret the discussed performances.

The American, British and Canadian school defined as the great theory of literacy (Eric Havelock, Jack Goody, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong) drew my attention to cultural competences of literacy. The leading slogan of McLuhan's philosophy is the famous "the medium is the message".<sup>2</sup> This revolutionary message frees the medium (in this case – *a letter*) from an exclusively subservient role towards content. The Canadian theorist divided media into cold, leaving a gap for a receiver (viewer / listener or reader) to fill in with content, and hot, where the message is intensive. It has various effects on the receiver who, depending on the degree of intensity of information, activates themselves due to being provoked by insufficiency of the information or stays inactive when the message is sufficient.<sup>3</sup>

Jacques Derrida is also placed among historians and theorists of the cultural role of writing. He significantly influenced academics of different disciplines associated with writing. The introductory sentence of the paper *Différance* is noteworthy – "I will speak, therefore, of a letter" – opening the essay which had impact on so many disciplines of study. Within structural semiology, the understanding of a sign originates in its structure and assumes that "the sign, which defers presence, is conceivable only on the basis of the presence that it defers and moving toward the deferred presence that it aims to reappropriate."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M. Howorus-Czajka, *Tropami wielokrotności. Strategie powtórzenia w sztuce polskiej lat 60. i 70. XX wieku (On the Trail of Multiplicity. Repetition Strategies in Polish Art of the 1960s and 1970s)*, Wydawnictwo UG, Gdańsk 2019, pp. 43-107.

<sup>2</sup> M. McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* [in:] *idem, Wybór pism*, ed. J. Fuksiewicz, transl. K. Jakubowicz, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1975, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>4</sup> J. Derrida, *Różnica (Différance)*, transl. J. Skoczyła [in:] *Drogi współczesnej filozofii*, ed. M.J. Siemek, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1978, pp. 383-384.

Derrida crossed the semiological argument concerning the two-tiered system of the structure of a sign (*signifié* and *signifiant*), based on Ferdinand Saussure's findings.

The theoretical deliberations mentioned above constitute *a letter* as an outright element of an artistic action, taking into consideration its communicative (McLuhan) as well as symbolic and material value (Derrida).

My third theoretical anchor is the theory of postcolonialism. That is why I will first determine the interpretation used in this article. In this text, *colonialism* is a historic phenomenon of occupation and maintaining political and economic control by some countries over other countries with the aim of exploiting them,<sup>5</sup> and a *colony* is an estate (property) of some (usually overseas) country or state, dependent on that country; an area of political expansion and economic exploitation.<sup>6</sup> *Neocolonialism* economically subordinates decolonized countries as an economic facility of capitalistic formation. It was pointed out as early as in 1965 by Kwame Nkrumah.<sup>7</sup> The term *postcolonialism* was first used after World War II regarding political and sociological analyses of countries which ceased to be colonies. Since that moment, the research area has been considerably expanded. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak used the term *postcolonial* in an even wider meaning for the first time, in her collection of interviews and memoirs.<sup>8</sup> The authors of *The Post-colonial Studies* signal contemporary research issues in the following way:

Post-colonialism/postcolonialism is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre-and post-independence nations and communities. While its use has tended to focus on the cultural production of such communities, it is becoming widely used in historical, political, sociological and economic analyses, as these disciplines continue to engage with the impact of European imperialism upon world societies. The prefix 'post' in the term

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<sup>5</sup> *Encyklopedia PWN*: <https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo/kolonializm;3924014.html> [accessed: 30.01.2022]

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* source: <https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/szukaj/kolonia.html> [accessed: 30.01.2022]

<sup>7</sup> W. Mazurczak, *Kolonializm - Dekolonizacja - Postkolonializm. Rozważania o istocie i periodyzacji (Colonialism - Decolonization - Post-colonialism. Considerations on the essence and periodization)*, „Przegląd Politologiczny” 2016, no. 3, p. 139.

<sup>8</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. S. Harasym, Routledge, New York 1990.

also continues to be a source of vigorous debate amongst critics. The simpler sense of the 'post' as meaning 'after' colonialism has been contested by a more elaborate understanding of the working of post-colonial cultures which stresses the articulations between and across the politically defined historical periods, of precolonial, colonial and post-independence cultures. As a result, further questions have been asked about what limits, if any, should be set round the term.<sup>9</sup>

*Postcolonialism* should be comprehended widely, as "social and cultural, mental changes fixed in the mind of a colonized person", which are "one of equally important [economic and political – MHC] consequences of colonialism".<sup>10</sup> Earlier (in 2009), Marian Golka wrote about postcolonialism that "this theory is some kind of an intellectual objection against attempts to blur the after-colonialism landscape – including an objection against the political amnesia of the aftermath and against the conditions of leaving and recovering from colonialism. The theorists and researchers who take the postcolonial perspective into consideration especially emphasize the durability of the conjuncture created in colonial conditions and its long-lasting influence, despite official decolonization."<sup>11</sup> Golka also states that "there will be various oppressive compartments through generations in colonized communities which could be both copying the colonizers and contradicting them, there could be ways of fulfilling or avoiding punishment, even some discomforts which would emerge from the necessity of compliance."<sup>12</sup> The first papers attempting to compare the post-colonial theory to processes taking place in Poland surfaced at the very beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, e.g. Clare Cavanagh writes about "strategic forgetting" in his postcolonial research on the activities of the Russian Empire, later USSR, in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup> These statements legitimize the use of the postcolonial theory and will become the basis for my analysis of Partum's performances.

The experimental character of Partum's activities was noticed earlier by academics and shortly they found their way to canonical publications concern-

<sup>9</sup> B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *The post-colonial studies: the key concepts*, Routledge, London–New York 2007, p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> W. Mazureczak, *Kolonializm...*, p. 139.

<sup>11</sup> M. Golka, *Polska transformacja w perspektywie postkolonialnej (Polish Transformation from the Post-Colonial Perspective)*, „Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny” 2009, vol. LXXI, no. 2, p. 441.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 442-443.

<sup>13</sup> C. Cavanagh, *Postkolonialna Polska. Biała plama na mapie współczesnej teorii (Postcolonial Poland: An Empty Space on the Map of Current Theory)*, transl. T. Kunz, „Teksty Drugie” 2003, no. 2-3, p. 61.

ing Polish contemporary art. One of those is a book by Alicja Kępińska *Nowa sztuka - sztuka polska (New Art - Polish Art)* in which the author attributes "activity involving basically linguistic procedures"<sup>14</sup> to Ewa Partum. Ewa Partum's profile is still popular among researchers. The number of publications available is so great that discussing the state of research thoroughly would exceed the limits of this article. That is why in order to introduce you to the subject area and initially determine the stage of research, I will only feature the choice of statements strictly corresponding with the presented line of thought and the main topic.<sup>15</sup> In these analyses, the new value of a letter in relation to literature was highlighted. Andrzej Turowski drew attention to the deconstruction of text through the dislocation of letters by writing:

Letters scattered by Ewa Partum were sticking to visitors' shoes and wandering with them around the city, getting lost among rubbish on the streets. Maybe for a moment they formed a word, maybe for a moment they took shape, maybe somebody got interested or maybe got upset with their insistent presence. Finally, they disappeared somewhere, leaving only traces in the minds of those who carried them out.<sup>16</sup>

In her statement accompanying Partum's first exhibition in the Czech Republic, Karolina Majewska-Güde, discussing *Active Poetry*, emphasized the value of destabilizing literature as text and turning it into an object.<sup>17</sup> Another important observation, shared by Tomasz Załuski,<sup>18</sup> is pointing to reinterpretation

<sup>14</sup> A. Kępińska, *Nowa sztuka - sztuka polska*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1981, p. 222.

<sup>15</sup> Among others, the following authors have paid particular attention to the issue of a letter in Partum's works: D. Monkiewicz, *(Jej) ciało i tekst. Fragmenty - (Her) Body and Text. Excerpts* [in:] *Ewa Partum*, eds. A. Szyłak, B. Partum, E. M. Tatar, Gdańsk: Instytut Sztuki Wyspa & Fundacja Wyspa Progress 2012-2013; G. Nabakowski, *Nieprzyjemne poczucie maskarady. Droga „literowej milionerki” Ewy Partum do poezji konceptualnej i feministycznej tematyki gender (Letter Millionaire - Apprehension and Masquerade. Ewa Partum's Path to Conceptual Poetry and Feminist Gender Theory)* [in:] *Ewa Partum 1965-2001*, ed. D. Monkiewicz, Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa 2006 oraz A. Kałuża, *Materialność poezji: słowa i ciała / słowa i obrazy (Materiality of Poetry: Words and Bodies) (Ewa Partum, Andrzej Tobis, Adam Kaczanowski)*, „Praktyka Teoretyczna” 2019, no. 34(4), pp. 131-150.

<sup>16</sup> A. Turowski, *Wielkość pragnienia. O konceptualizmie feministycznym Ewy Partum w latach siedemdziesiątych (The Greatness of Desire: On the Feminist Conceptualism of Ewa Partum in the 1970s)*, [in:] *Ewa Partum*, op. cit., p. 51).

<sup>17</sup> K. Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum: poem by ewa* [pref.], 13.04.-01.06.2019, Hunt Kastner Gallery, Prague, Czech Republic, source: <http://huntkastner.com/exhibitions/past/ewa-partum-poem-by-ewa/> [accessed: 26.01.2022]

<sup>18</sup> T. Załuski, *Kobieta walcząca o pozycję w polu produkcji artystycznej. Samoidentyfikacja, samoorganizacja i samoemancypacja według Ewy Partum [A Woman Fighting for Her Position in the Field of Art Production. Self-identification, Self-organization and Self-emancipation According to Ewa Partum]*, „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich” 2018, vol. LXI, no. 2, p. 78.

tion in Partum's discussed actions, through the deterritorialization of text from the field of literature to the field of visual arts. Moreover, the researcher from Łódź emphasizes the significant relation between the artist's actions and landscape,<sup>19</sup> and accurately characterizes the field of Partum's artistic penetration:

The new avant-garde language of conceptual art, developed by Partum in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was closely related to the ideas and inspirations coming from the "expanded field" of avant-garde poetry and experimental literature. At that time, the artist dealt intensely with the issues of sign, notation, communication, semantics and semantic generativity. She considered material reality, on the one hand, and imagination, on the other, to be the proper medium in which poetic signs, events and meanings could make themselves present and develop.<sup>20</sup>

### Spreading (around)

In 1971, Ewa Partum organized a performance in Andrzej Partum's apartment, entitled **The Poetic License Area**. The action-exhibition began by scattering 24 letters of the Latin alphabet cut from paper on the floor and placing glue at the entrance. The guests who gathered spread (around) the letters glued to the soles of their shoes. The end of the exhibitions came with the disappearance of the last letter from the apartment.<sup>21</sup>

The scattering of letters deconstructed several stereotypes. Analyzing this performance through the lens of postcolonial studies, it can be regarded as one of the first heralds of this subject matter in Polish art. Letters of the Latin alphabet became one of the fundamental elements of European civilization and, through colonialism, they crossed the borders of the old continent. In this dimension, they become the evidence of oppression and a kind of cultural ballast. The letters spread on shoes escaped the symbolic borders of the "worlds",<sup>22</sup> but at the same time they were deprived of power and pushed to the bottom of the hierarchy. Of course, viewing the phenomenon of colonialism from the perspective of a country that was itself subject to quasi-colonial control<sup>23</sup> (the

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> This description is complemented by the abovementioned quote by A. Turowski, *Wielkość pragnienia...*, p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> G. Nabakowski wrote about the transfer of letters „between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ world”. (G. Nabakowski, *Nieprzyjemne poczucie...*, p. 16.)

<sup>23</sup> The wording taken from Jürgen Osterhammel: “«quasi-kolonialen Kontrolle», bei dem der schwächere Staat (...) als selbstständiges Gemeinwesen mit eigenem politischen System bestehen bleibt, aber nur «eingeschränkt souverän» ist.“ (J. Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus*, München: Beck, cop. 1995, p. 25.)

People's Republic of Poland as a satellite state of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics<sup>24</sup>) is different from that of colonising countries or those colonised by a European culture foreign to them. The colonial discourse that touches upon the Polish reality may also take place in relation to the socio-economic policy of the countries that divided Poland between themselves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>25</sup> or it may touch more contemporary aspects, as a narration that complements and supports feminist discourse, and as a way of speaking about Poland as a semi-periphery in relation to the so-called West.<sup>26</sup> However, Partum's action does not position the participants of the performance beyond the phenomenon but inside of it and does not treat it as past but as present. I do not know if the artist had an intention to emphasize the postcolonial thread in this performance, but analyzing this action from the current perspective, it is impossible not to look at it as a protest against all attempts of domination inherent in human nature. Although the so-called postcolonial turn is more than half a century old, it is still relevant as a field of research. After all, the threats have not disappeared, but have been reformulated, e.g. globalization has a dichotomous quality – on the one hand, it initiates a model of a post-national world, but, on the other hand, it brings westernization, Americanization and neo-colonialism. Seeking legitimacy for such an account of Partum's work, one should look at the entirety of the artist's oeuvre through the research priorities of postcolonialism which: "deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies. (...) The term has subsequently been widely used to signify the political, linguistic, and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies."<sup>27</sup> In macro-scale processes, the artist's sensitivity manifests itself in tracking down manifestations of discrimination by stigmatizing masculinism and mechanisms of power, while in micro-scale ones – by finding symptoms in the inconspicuous life of the so-called "ordinary citizen".<sup>28</sup> In the reality of the People's Re-

<sup>24</sup> M. Golka called these relations colonialism (M. Golka, *Polska transformacja...*, p. 446.).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> E. Majewska, *Postkolonializm w Polsce - propozycja feministyczna (Postcolonialism in Poland - a feminist proposition)*, "Przegląd Kulturoznawczy" 2012, no. 4, pp. 335-353, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337223607\\_Postkolonializm\\_w\\_Polsce\\_-\\_propozycja\\_feministyczna](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337223607_Postkolonializm_w_Polsce_-_propozycja_feministyczna) [accessed: 29.01.2022]; A. Jakubowska, *The Circulation of Feminist Ideas in Communist Poland*, in: *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present*, ed. Beata Hock, Anu Allas, Routledge, 2018, pp. 135-148.

<sup>27</sup> B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *The post-colonial studies...*, p. 168.

<sup>28</sup> E.g., *poems by ewa*, since the early 1970s, incl. *Mój dotyk jest dotykiem kobiety [My touch is a touch of a woman]*, 1971; *Legalność przestrzeni: The Legality of Space*, Łódź 1971; *Gimnastyka konceptualna; Conceptual Exercise*, Łódź 1972; *Film by Ewa. Kino tautologiczne*, 1973; *Zmiana: Change*, Łódź 1974; *Zmiana - Mój problem jest problemem kobiety: Change - My Problem is a Problem of a Woman*, Łódź 1978; *Samoidentyfikacja; Self-Identification*, Warszawa 1980; *Hommage á Solidarność*, Łódź 1982; *Wschodnio-zachodni cień: Eastern-Western Shadow*, Berlin 1984; *Strój ślubny: Wedding Attire*, 1980; *Kobiety, małżeństwo jest przeciwko wam!*, Poznań 1980; *Stupid Woman*, Świeszyn 1981.

public of Poland, where Partum was functioning at the time, there were classic colonial mechanisms known from countries whose economic advantage was built on the exploitation of colonies. The society undoubtedly suffered from the imposed political and economic hegemony of the Soviet Union. Many women also felt the lack of gender equality. The subversive act of objection to the communist regime was also observed in Partum's actions by other scholars. For example, Majewska-Güde raised the importance of the choice of paper as the material - "cardboard letters, a characteristic material used in communist Poland for propaganda slogans placed in schools, offices, factories, etc."<sup>29</sup>

Another, yet equally important aspect is Partum's entry into a discussion regarding the role and status of the author. The now legendary statement that the French thinker Roland Barthes made about the "death of the author"<sup>30</sup> has reverberated throughout the artistic world. He blurs the role of the author in a polyphony of inspirations. At the beginning of his significant text, *The Death of the Author* (1967), Barthes proclaimed that "writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing"<sup>31</sup> and "(...) the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter ones with others, in such a way as never to rest on anyone of them."<sup>32</sup> Partum deprived herself of the possibility of influencing the course of action by not being able to predict who and what letters would move beyond the threshold. I perceive this as her consciously incapacitating herself and joining the discussion at the same time. The author of the performance allows - agrees to - initiates Barthes's "mixing" of letters as a symbol of their content of blurred authorship. On the other hand, the dislocation of letters prevents the creation of harmful messages used to manipulate individuals and whole societies. In this respect, Partum's action acquires anarchic overtones and is also a voice of protest. Another aspect of rebellion has been noticed by Angelika Stepken, who comments on this action as a protest against stereotypes: authorities recognising a work as a work of art or not (an allusion contained in the word "license" used in the title) and recognising the author herself, deprived of a creative role in favour of visitors and chance.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> K. Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum...*

<sup>30</sup> R. Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, transl. Richard Howard, „Aspen” 1967, no. 5-6; French issue: *La mort de l'auteur*, „Manteia” 1968, no. 5.

<sup>31</sup> R. Barthes, *Śmierć autora (The Death of the Author)*, „Teksty Drugie” 1999, no. 1/2 (54/55), p. 247.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>33</sup> A. Stepken, *Monografia twórczości (Monograph of the Works)* [in:] *Ewa Partum*, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

### Sowing (around)

Other actions "with" or rather "on" a letter (*Active Poetry* underground passage, Marszałkowska Street in Warsaw, 1971; *poem by ewa*, Sopot, 1971; *Alphabet* (1973/74); *Metapoesis*, Łódź, 1972; *Active Poetry. Ulisses J. Joyce*, London, 2006) differed from each other, although what they had in common was the idea of transferring literature into the domain of visual arts and materialising poetry. Some consisted of scattering cut out letters in a non-artistic space (e.g., in an underground passage or on a beach), thus transferring conceptual poetry into a real environment. Some of them transposed an abstract shape of Latin letters into an audio-visual sign – Partum imprinted a trace of lips at the moment of articulation of sounds – and in this way accentuated the materiality of poetry / language. In both cases, the artist's gesture was based on deconstruction of language and attack on the rules that govern it, i.e., syntax and semantics. Hence, as the basis of the action, one should look for disagreement on the rules imposing a specific framework of artistic expression. Coincidence has become the tool. The strategy of dislocation in these actions reveals itself as anarchic undermining of the eternal ritual between the poet and the reader – Partum tears words into letters and randomly mixes them.

In the context of the philosophical standpoints presented at the beginning, Partum's practice seems to redefine the author herself/himself. The author appears to us as a causal, yet undefined (we do not hear what the author says, what they read), and thus enigmatic subject. The message is therefore vague – "cold", according to McLuhan's differentiation. This leads to increasing the attention of the viewer who, intrigued, begins to inquire about the meaning of the actions visible on the screen. The threefold repetition of the action of spreading the letters recorded on the film elevates this gesture to the rank of a ritual. The dictionary definition of the term *ritual* states that it is "a set form of symbolic activities that make up a religious rite, magical practice or solemn celebration".<sup>34</sup> Therefore, it can be concluded that Partum asks the viewer (or perhaps only the consumer) what art is for them and what place it has in their life. In order to show the timeless dimension of this artist's actions through the postcolonial perspective, we can use the statement of Marian Golka who believed that

(...) postcolonial theory suggests that the majority of people who are subordinated, disadvantaged in one way or another, 'cannot speak', or

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<sup>34</sup> entry: *rytuał* [in:] *Słownik PWN (Polish Dictionary)*, source: <https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/rytu-a%C5%82.html> [accessed: 25.01.2022].

their voice is silenced, ridiculed, belittled and discredited. (...) This theory, by focusing attention on the marginalised and the disadvantaged, attempts in some way to speak for them, to act in their interests, and even tries to recover various values for them (...) The postcolonial perspective is supposed to mentally (and presumably ideologically) help those who were previously discriminated against and whose discrimination often continues, even when the external, and usually apparent, attributes of the status quo change (e.g., official recognition of decolonisation).<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Active Poetry's silent films not only sharpen the audience's senses to receive the unspoken message but situate the viewed subject (Partum) in a new context of a person harmed by the external silencing and belittling imposed on her. Silence is thus very telling here.

Partum also builds a relationship with numerous examples of works of literature and art (such as Jean-François Millet's *The Sower*). This is done by emphasising the ritual of letter scattering, which refers to the archetype of the sower as a creator of new life. The motif of the sower has been transferred to the figure of the artist-soweress. This places the female artist on an equal footing with male artists – after all, it is Eve's action. The reference to the biblical Eve (a name of Hebrew origin, from the words *hajja* – 'to be' or *havvah* – 'taken from her husband' or 'giving life'<sup>36</sup>) resounds more strongly in the cycle *Poems by ewa* in which the artist engages in a dispute with the status given by the culture to the first Eve. The Polish Ewa achieves self-identification through the artist's self-definition, stressing her own consciousness as *a human being – a woman – an artist*. The opposition to patriarchal culture has been clearly voiced – it is the woman who is the giver (the *soweress* versus the *sower*). A kind of peculiar rivalry is quite often present in Partum's actions: sometimes concealed and veiled, sometimes provocatively overt. Striving for self-exposure as a discovery (of the body and personality) should also be emphasised. When analysing the trails generated around *Eve's Poem*, the resounding feminist aspect seems clear. In the work *poem by ewa* (1971) – the convergence of the titles is not accidental – the artist imprinted a trace of her lips on paper and added the comment: "My touch is a touch of a woman". Ewa Gorządek describes this aspect of Partum's work in the following manner:

Since the early 1970s, she has been creating *poems by ewa*, "conceptual poetry" in the form of poetic objects on which she imprints her lips in

<sup>35</sup> M. Golka, *Polska transformacja...*, p. 443.

<sup>36</sup> *Skarbiec imion polskich (A Thesaurus of Polish Names)*, ed. L. Lewoc, Wydawnictwo Europa Wrocław 2005, p. 80.

the moment of articulating sounds. These texts are a combination of mouth prints and individual letters, sometimes whole phrases. The first lip prints (red lipstick) were created in 1971, and one of them was signed with the sentence *My touch is a touch of a woman*. This conceptual statement on femininity is formulated on a linguistic level. In later *Poems* there is an explicitly feminist context, as well as a social one, which, however, never manifests itself in a clear and obvious way.<sup>37</sup>

In this process of a woman finding herself in society, in her struggle against the traditional patriarchal stereotype to change her status, Partum is close to feminist activists all over the world, including those in post-colonial countries.

Majewska-Güde writes that "In *poems by ewa*, Ewa Partum juxtaposes the tactile with the textual to create an accumulative form of notation."<sup>38</sup> The author aptly summarizes the strategies used by Partum in these performances:

There are three types of texts that accompany the imprints of Partum's lips in *poems by ewa*: appropriated, deconstructed and de-semantised fragments of literary texts; Partum's statements, such as "my touch is the touch of a woman"; and abstract concepts such as «love» or «art».<sup>39</sup>

### **Moving (around)**

Partum, as Jean-François Chevrier concludes, had been exploring the intermediate zone between visual concrete poetry and performance art in public space since the mid-1960s. The commentary of this French art historian proves appropriate for the aspect of Partum's work analysed here, as it is made from a different research perspective than the Polish commentary, and thus perhaps more objective:

According to Partum, it was mostly about transferring «the poem» into physical space, the space travelled and experienced by one's own body (body in the first person), recalling the performative dimension of the language. [...] Partum used *the poem's identity* as a model of connecting poetry to the body. The term «active poetry», Partum's working principle, confirms the correlation between the poem and the image of the body: body which is experienced, transformed and transmuted according to

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<sup>37</sup> E. Gorzadek, *Ewa Partum*, <http://culture.pl/pl/tworca/ewa-partum> [accessed: 30.03.2018].

<sup>38</sup> K. Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum...*

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

a double-subjective attitude towards oneself and towards others in the current environment. Active poetry permeates the poem-performance and the body-image. In the case of active poetry, it is the artist herself who *performs poetry* (as it is commonly used to describe a public display of a theatrical performance).<sup>40</sup>

Another aspect for consideration, provoked by Active Poetry, is the analysis of possibilities of a different life for a work of art, identified by Derrida, who emphasised the gift of a second /fuller life of a text (German *überleben* - 'overlife' or 'live over', not 'life/live further' - German *forleben*).<sup>41</sup> Such *überleben* is the translation of a literary work into another language.<sup>42</sup> Why, then, not extend this Derridean observation to Partum's work which transposed Joyce's Ulysses into the realm of the visual arts? One of Partum's early actions, *Alphabet* (1973/74), can be regarded as such a search for a second life for a *letter*, which takes place outside literature. What became important here was the aspect of disorder which consisted in confronting the articulation of letters with lip imprints and, consequently, the introduction of a misleading label.<sup>43</sup> The creation of an alternative alphabet and transfer of the existing (Latin) alphabet properties to it was, on the one hand, an anarchistic act in relation to the stereotype of communication. On the other hand, it was an emancipatory and feminist manifesto. *Poems by ewa* were, as Gisliind Nabakowski put it, "a classical commentary on the language of poetry", referring "to the abstractness of Latin letters liberated from the bonds of grammar and syntax".<sup>44</sup> The same author also writes that a "«conceptualisation of femininity» using the example of language" has taken place here.<sup>45</sup>

In *poems by ewa*, thanks to the postcolonial perspective and its observations on wronged man and their reception of the world, we can also find new

<sup>40</sup> J.F. Chevrier, *Wiersze Ewy nagiej i zwielokrotnionej = Poems by Ewa naked and multiple*, [in:] *Ewa Partum. Nic nie zatrzyma idei sztuki = Nothing stops the idea of art*, ed. M. Morzuch, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2015, p. 49.

<sup>41</sup> „A work does not simply live longer, it lives more and better, beyond the means of its author” (J. Derrida, *Psyché. Invention de l'autre*, Galilée, Paris 1987, p. 214) after: U. Idziak, *Dziełictwo śmierci – Ricoeur i Derrida*, „Argument” 2011, no. 2, p. 298.

<sup>42</sup> „Thus, triumphant translation is neither the life nor death of the text, but only or already its living on, its life after life, its life after death. The same thing will be said of what I call writing, a mark, a trace, and so on. It neither lives nor dies; it lives on. And it „starts” only with living on (a testament, iterability, remaining.” - J. Derrida, *Parages*, Galilée, Paris 1986, pp. 146-147.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.; M. Hussakowska, *Czy polska sztuka konceptualna ma pleć?*, „Sztuka i Dokumentacja” 2012, no. 6, p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> G. Nabakowski, *Nieprzyjemne poczucie...*, p. 16.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

interpretative clues. I see such a possibility in the analysis of the lowercase spelling of the title. Referring to the hierarchy of importance present in language, words written with a capital letter gain a specific value. Partum writes the title of her performance in lowercase letters, as if she was aware of critical authorities surrounding her, aiming to ridicule or disregard her actions and value as an artist. However, she does not accept the position of a victim, but responds with a sophisticated strategy of subversion. She seemingly submits to external evaluation, but, in reality, she rejects and belittles it. In our culture, woman lips associated with providing sexual satisfaction are a symbol of what is defined as *sex appeal*. It is here that Partum subversively uses her appearance to strengthen the power of her message. She balances between seduction and rejection of the male recipient, playing a game with him – and it is he who must lose. She transforms herself from a victim who is "unable to speak" into a winner who consciously constructs her own message and goals ("love", "peace"). Years later, Partum summed up this kind of activity using the example: "*my touch is a touch of a woman/mój dotyk jest dotykiem kobiety*" (1971). "It is a typically tautological statement – a lip print – and one could say that this strictly conceptual work already has feminist overtones. It relates to a feminine language. This lip print is my mark on the language of art."<sup>46</sup>

### **Sending (around)**

The last variant of dispersion in Ewa Partum's work that I would like to touch upon in the present analysis is Partum's artistic and promotional activity in the Adres Gallery. The artist established it in 1972.<sup>47</sup> Partum used postal letters and parcels as a formula of contact and, as in the case of performances with a *letter*, she used the same tool – i.e. writing / letter / paper. The idea of correspondence as an exchange of thoughts and information was equated with freedom that transcended borders. The very establishment of the gallery in a four-square-meter space under the stairs was a provocation and a polemic against the stereotypical status of the gallery and its function. Physically locating it under the stairs of the headquarters of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers, thus 'attaching' itself to the address of the branch office, was not only an expression of criticism against the status of appointing an artist (only a member of the association was recognised as an artist), but also criticism of mental attachment to the physical-institutional formula of the gallery as an ele-

<sup>46</sup> K. Majewska, *O uhistorycznieniu konceptualizmu i interpretacji feminizmu. Rozmowa z Ewą Partum*, "Obieg" 2014, <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/teksty/31875> [accessed: 10.10.2017].

<sup>47</sup> Ewa Zając, Kader Lacta, Rolland Paret and Marek Żychski cooperated with the artist.

ment of artistic life.<sup>48</sup> Subversive criticism of the censorship of art is also visible here. The flow of information not controlled by any fossilised and oppressive external entity (the Association of Polish Artists and Designers or the Main Office of Press, Publication and Performance Control) was a priority for the Adres Gallery. One manifestation of this was a map on the wall of the Łódź gallery, where places with which contact was maintained were pinned.<sup>49</sup>

### Conclusions

Finally, I would like to highlight the importance of the sign in Partum's work. I will use the observation of Tomasz Załuski who drew attention to:

(...) the artist's interest in what she herself describes as the "tautological sign" (E. Partum, quoted in Majewska 2014), that is, one exemplifying and embodying its meaning. On the one hand, Partum considered signs as elements of material reality; on the other, she treated elements of this reality, including her own body, as tautological signs that are self-referential (referring to themselves), but also capable of generating meanings through mutual relations and configurations.<sup>50</sup>

The researcher from Łódź signals the existence of new research perspectives, such as the aesthetics of sublimity indicated by Załuski, which may, and even should, become tools for the reinterpretation of Partum's art.<sup>51</sup> The postcolonial perspective I applied in the analysis of "letter" performances is a kind of continuation and extension of the feminist perspective. Leela Gandhi believed that postcolonialism, under the influence of feminism, directed itself towards "creating a more critical and self-reflexive account of cultural nationalism". The encounter between feminism and postcolonialism has allowed for the rejection of universalism around the gendered experiences of both men and women. While there are many differences in the two approaches, there is undoubtedly a common ground which includes the conviction that universalism is discursive violence that records history and silences voices.<sup>52</sup>

In this article, I have presented the use of the strategy of dislocation and dispersal of *a letter* using the example of Ewa Partum's performances making

<sup>48</sup> More on the topic by D. Monkiewicz, *On the international artistic exchange network in Poland as illustrated by the example of Łódź's Adres Gallery*, in: *Ewa Partum. Nothing stops...*, pp. 56-58.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>50</sup> T. Załuski, *Kobieta walcząca...*, p. 76. (A reference is being made to: K. Majewska, op. cit.)

<sup>51</sup> T. Załuski, *Kobieta walcząca...*, p. 79.

<sup>52</sup> S. Parashar, *Feminism and Postcolonialism*, „(En)gendering Encounters, Postcolonial Studies”, 2016, vol. 19, Issue 4: *Feminism Meets Postcolonialism: Rethinking Gender, State and Political Violence*.

use of a letter in four variants: *spreading (around)*, *sowing (around)*, *moving (around)* and *sending (around)*. I analyse the first one through border crossings in two basic senses: as going beyond artistically modified space and through symbolic breaking of the borders of countries and cultures, which I used in the reinterpretation. I also used "sowing (around)" as the title of the second thread in a symbolic sense, starting from the gesture of sowing letters, thus comparing the artist to the figure of the sower – nourisher of humanity. This created the possibility of deconstructing this figure as attributed exclusively to the male subject. The third topic refers to the transfer to an alternative language (lip prints as sounds), moving text to the verbal sphere as well as a change of the medium (literature to visual arts). The last part of my deliberations was focused on the potential of mail which Partum used to communicate with other artistic centers. At the same time, it is symbolic dissemination of information as if it were a thread mobilizing and uniting the public. In the reality of the People's Republic of Poland, it was also symbolic breaking of national borders, censorship and the 'iron curtain' still dividing Europe at the time. The greatest achievement, however, has been the breaking down of invisible mental boundaries which can – as the postcolonial theory indicates – last longer, be more limiting and more deeply wounding than those real boundaries. Including the spectrum of postcolonial studies in the analysis has, I believe, resulted in the deepening of theoretical reflection and interpretation of these works, whose meaning, despite the passage of years, still remains relevant.

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## STRATEGIE ROZPROSZENIA I DYSLOKACJI LITERY W PERFORMENSACH EWY PARTUM (streszczenie)

Niniejszy artykuł skoncentruje się na przypadkach zastosowania strategii dyslokacji i rozproszenia litery na przykładzie performansów Ewy Partum. Rama teoretyczna oparta została o trzy umocowania. Pierwsze z nich to wielka teoria piśmienności, która pozwoliła uwolnić literę od służebnej roli wobec treści. Drugie umocowanie opiera się o wskazane przez Derridę funkcje znaku, co wskazało na potencjał litery jako znaku. Trzecie to perspektywa postkolonialna, która została użyta jako narzędzie do reinterpretacji omawianych performansów. Rozważania zostały zgrupowane względem zastosowanych strategii, które wyznaczają kolejne podrozdziały: *(Roz)niesienie*, *(Roz)śnianie*, *(Prze)niesienie* i *(Roz)ślanie*.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Ewa Partum, sztuka polska, active poetry, performance, postkolonializm, feminizm, strategie artystyczne dyslokacji i rozpraszania

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