



# Gender and the Countryside

**Ewa Tatar talking to Michał Łagowski and Daniel Rycharski**

*The interview took place at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw on 7 June 2014, as part of the programme accompanying the "As You Can See" exhibition.*

**Ewa Tatar: The title of our meeting includes two words that refer to identity. Let's begin with the countryside. What is it actually? In contemporary terms and for you personally.**

Daniel Rycharski: It's a community, a group of people related to themselves on a certain area; people with a common past and a common future. Countryside, as my art's theme, manifested itself only after I'd left it and started to miss the values I knew from there. When I began to revisit Kurówek it turned out that these values were more of a sentimental than an actual issue. That's why I started to focus on rebuilding them.

**"From now on, only clear and specific identities" – this is an inscription under Michał Łagowski's Facebook photo defining rural aspects as a combination of sexuality and scatology.**

Michał Łagowski: This photo fantastically depicts the area I'm trying to explore. What can we see there? Swelling ox testicles are a quintessence of power, lewdness, masculinity, a certain sort of animalization that some people would like to associate with the true masculinity. Another work, my first mobile phone recording, was physically difficult to carry out. I went behind the cow-shed and I recorded myself defecating. Something that might seem trivial and, with regard to aesthetics, dirty, liquid, pushed out, stinky and non-meliorated by cultural conditions, has become the area of my art. I began to wonder what rules had the countryside been founded upon, whose rules had they been and who had been entitled to establish them plus hadn't certain things been agreed upon too soon, too quickly and without my consent. It is here that I found the area for deconstructing such constructs as grit, behaviour submissive to nature – is it human nature or somebody else's? Daniel tries to bind the community together and I tend to destroy it somehow.

**First films Daniel recorded in Kurówek also deal with disappointment, for example “The Bride”, created together with Sławek Shuty in 2007. You reach out for folk rites but you also show the pointlessness of rites reproduced for the sake of this film in the face of a certain nothingness. You also display what sexual roles are in a traditional community. Further, pig-slaughtering – a ritualized human animalization – becomes a pretence for the main character to mull over romantic love and sexuality.**

D.R.: This was supposed to be the middle of a trilogy and the non-existent bridegroom was supposed to emerge as a “wereboar”, a monster from a legend. The film was a consequence of my rebellion against the predictability of country life, it mocked it. Pig-slaughtering was there to show, in a drastic way, the sort of fate shared by numerous residents of the countryside.

M.Ł.: The countryside cultivates the celebration of important periods in males and females’ lives – lives that are more intensified, plain, brutal, hard or even boorish and thus the visual poetics of my works. From my point of view, being a visual artist is to crave for the opportunity to choose. The country turns the lack of this choice into aesthetics, whereas a person detached from this aesthetics begins to miss its oppression. “Transparents” deal with this very aesthetics and tradition.

**“Rear the Family in Line with Tradition” – so does the inscription on one of your photos say. In the “King of Rural Housewives Club of Potrzebów” you demonstrate how women selected a man as their leader in democratic elections.**

M.Ł.: And he keeps the reins so naturally and is a well-known persona: for example, media turn to him for opinions in various cases... When it comes to this recording, I was interested in everything that a village – my village – fears the most: loss of innocence or the feeling of security, manifested in such words as gender, queer, feminism, equality, let alone participation. What’s more, I wanted to show how these phenomena had become embedded within the criticized system. Of course I couldn’t spark off a rebellion in the Rural Housewives Club and say: “Sorry, but you so easily let go of what had taken years for you to work out in the society.” Obviously, they had the right to do so, but I was interested in a situation where patriarchy doesn’t have to do anything anymore because women do it all for itself. It’s amazing how wonderfully we are capable of reproducing the tradition. I simply look at it and ask questions.

**Not only do you show women relinquishing their power, but also a man relinquishing his privileged generic status in order to accept the power.**

M.Ł.: I was surprised that he either couldn’t sense it, or couldn’t see my deconstructive trick.

D.R.: These “horrible words” the countryside so much fears are important, though maybe we tend to generalize here. Rural communities often accept their household oddities. In Kurówek there are two homosexuals who run an agricultural holding together. A family of one of them, former nobility, were the greatest landowners. The other partner stems from an old state-owned agricultural holding and people from these holdings have been regarded as worse. The whole thing’s been going on for 2-3 years now and they haven’t lost respect. My sexual orientation is not a problem, either.

M.Ł.: But can they feel free, can they enjoy full openness, the one they construct themselves, or are they only tolerated due to the social status of one of them? The 2009 movie “Invisible (for) Communities” deals with similar aspects. It is a report elaborated by the Women’s Space Foundation that focuses on the situation of lesbians, bisexual or queer women in rural and small-town communities. Girls, in relationships or single, feel great as lesbians in their towns. But does it mean that the Polish province is gay-friendly? No, they had to sweat blood for their peace of mind. I’m interested in persons without a cultural background to have freedom of choice as well as the act of standing out for its own sake and its critical potential.

D.R.: Not that I’m idealizing – there are studies about suicides of homosexuals in rural communities. It’s a real plague and it also happened in Kurówek.

### **If homosexuality is tolerated, then what is taboo? What mustn’t be said in relation to sexuality?**

D.R.: Sexuality isn’t taboo at all. I’d say that sometimes it’s a top subject, especially among elderly people, although jokes are often cruel, like the one saying that you can put both hands into up a woman’s cunt and start clapping them. Or a man after sixty, single for 30 years, showing photographs of pussies of girls from orphanages, arousing approval or even excitement of viewers. It all depends on a community.

### **Why don’t you raise such abusive themes in your art?**

D.R.: I’m intending to in my new film in which I’m going to involve residents as well.

M.Ł.: Daniel, I just cannot agree with the suggestion that a conversation about putting your hands up a girl’s vagina is a proof of emancipation and freedom to take sexuality on board.

### **It is a manifestation of misogyny and a proof of prevalence of roles imposed by patriarchy. In “Jagna in memoriam” you are talking about the need to get through them.**

M.Ł.: My interest in queer theories began with it. After one screening a complete silence filled the room. Then my friend accosted me and told me about illegal sexual practices like sexual abuse of teenage girls by their fathers or their families in her village taking place and about the fact that it is more traumatic for a girl to break the silence, to betray her community than being a victim itself. She told me about her grandmother who’d broken the chain and although she hadn’t ended up like Jagna on a pile of manure outside the village, she had been cursed. Such stories need a different form than the one present in the media. “Jagna in memoriam” photography provided foundations for my interests. I was wondering why in Reymont’s “Peasants” there is no scene where Jagna stands up, brushes herself off and returns to the village. On the other hand, living in a village and reading texts on equality and emancipation matters written from the urban perspective felt like bell hooks reading “The Feminine Mystique” to me. The most important place is the one I speak from. I appreciate Daniel for the fact that he can gather a group of people around certain problems he finds interesting, but how am I supposed to do it? Maybe I don’t have such personal background, although I still practice standing out in a micro-scale.

## **How is your art perceived in the town you came back to after studies?**

M.Ł.: Suchy Dąb itself has got about a thousand residents. About municipality I'm not sure. Residents cultivate aesthetic traditions, for example in the neighbouring Wróblewo they composed a portrait of John Paul II from tulips, without a curator or a museum. But when they saw a documented performance "Which Way to Manifa" on the Internet they were terrified because they saw a boy – their neighbour they work with in the fields or listen to a sermon – almost naked, in a women's scarf on his head and with a wheelbarrow full of manure. It's got a lot to do with performativity of church – it all took place during the reading of the "Bishops' Letter On Gender." For my neighbours my behaviour expressed the lack of respect for them, whereas for my family it was a moral scandal.

## **Why?**

M.Ł.: I have violated the dignity of a male body. A young man is supposed to start a family, settle down. Nobody wants to see their son dressed as a woman. Once when I was selling milk to a neighbour, a sixty-year-old woman, she asked me about "Jagna in memoriam" and advised to be careful with this poetics because countryside is characterized to some extent by modesty and purity. Apparently, countryside is an emanation of feminine nature.

## **Not only were you attacked post factum by the residents of your village, but also by passersby at the Long Market in Gdańsk. I remember Angelika Fojtuch standing in the street with a sheet of paper with "God bless, I'm a woman" written on it. Passersby were trying to take care of her.**

M.Ł.: In fact I experienced a spectrum of emotions: from care, interest, solidarity to overt aversion. In visual terms, the society is more prepared for a female body in extreme situations. It is not accustomed to a male body. I intended to project longing, fears, desires of women excluded from emancipating narratives, for example women from villages where state-owned agricultural holdings had prevailed in the former system. Actually, it was women who talked to me about it later on. Maybe they felt some mutual understanding. The reception by my father (did the work of art point at the father-son relationship?) was in fact the same as of the entire community: "we know you're one of us, but there's something wrong with you." The fact that I was googled provoked fierce reactions. Each one of us had to cope with it on their own. Talking was most important, for you cannot hide anything, everything needs to be talked over. Time is important too, since everything here goes on slow. Plus you need to accompany people during such changes. Apart from that, I always take an active part in all seasonal work and such contact during physical labour can offer very much to you. For me, conversation and provocation stand for a point of departure. I should have recorded a conversation with my mother about Julita Wójcik's "Peeling Potatoes." This was a conversation-performance, a perspective of a woman who does it every day, but is denied access to this.

**Conclusion number one: only in intimate relationships is the shift in the already constituted morality possible. Conclusion number two: raising a subject is related to provocation. For example, women from the Rural Housewives' Group were not asked about knitting but about feminism, a category from outside their existential order, even if they put some of its elements into practice.**

M.Ł.: This category is already ingrained there, for example owing to the media, discussed by the church, for a village is not sound-proof. That's why I raise the subject as well. We cannot build a community as residents, neighbours, a family, until the voice of at least one person will have to wait for the community elders to set a perspective for expressing it or not expressing it at all.

**I can see a difference in attitudes between you: Michał's intimate perspective and Daniel's rule of people's hearts and minds.**

D.R.: What began in Kurówek was an opening of a process that is going to last very long. It needs to be stimulated by appropriate means. I have to constantly re-adapt myself so that the effects weren't contrary to the assumptions.

**Are residents of Kurówek familiar with the film "Insemination?"**

D.R.: Unfortunately, yes. It didn't face any criticism but I was ashamed that my aunties had to watch me paddling in mud naked, although it was an expression of my longing for the countryside after two years in Krakow. It was something that often finds its way to my rural poetry, expression of love towards the earth, my attachment to the fields of my uncles and grandfathers.

**Were you ashamed because you were seen naked during sexually referenced activities. So the borderlines of a female body (a joke about handclapping) are violable and their bodies appropriated for the purpose of certain narratives? What about men's bodies? And the shame itself...**

M.Ł.: The question of shame, getting over it and showing things that are hidden was an opening experience to me. Shame is related to marginality. If you enter its territory and knowingly make it a strategic space, then you accept it and start acting within. You enter something that is dense, something you'd like to escape from. Roman Dziadkiewicz's "Study of Mud" presented on "Lucim is Alive" exhibition in 2009 was very important to me. He combined tradition, its dirt and aesthetics, but he also introduced his own vision in between images of rural sexuality. What is also important, he was censored for desecrating a historic political gesture with eroticism and body. It was an act of ejection, melioration on the art world's part. It is true that the Lucim group knowingly evaded "these" themes (because of a historical time in which they were coping with negative consequences of collectivization, etc.), but it doesn't mean that we are to shut our eyes to it today. Life cannot be separated from politics, for this is a space which governs the body and its visibility. We need attempts to break the mass image of rural sexuality, represented for instance by "We, the Slavs" clip: incredible, overblown, brutal... These are the elements of folklore that can be perceived in various ways. My attitude towards popular proposals is suspicious, but on the other hand, I'm most convinced that these ditches, hay stacks and barns are most suitable for wild polyamorous trysts. However, in order to get there, one should first

cease using a misogynous idiom or a visual rusticity of Donatan and Cleo or such expressions as “put both hands up a cunt and clap them.” It could change the awareness. I was also wondering if there was anything like public space in the countryside. To what extent is every expression personal, to what extent is it general. Sowing the seeds of unrest, confronting yourself with a monster. Ranciere would say that the policy of aesthetics should not operate by radical breakthroughs, as it rather encompasses a multitude of small narratives, small breakthroughs. This is my perspective.

**In your opinion, is there any chance for a broader perspective or a wave of changes in rural morality and its reception outside rural areas?**

M.Ł.: It’s been established that dealing with emancipation and equality is the task for whimsical urban elites, while politics is something more important. This is a basic mistake. In March we celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of abolishing serfdom, which was almost completely ignored by the media. But what is there to celebrate when I see an eighteen-year-old girl unwillingly pregnant with a fifty-year-old bloke, when the most significant issue for a village is not that she has to quit school right now but whether a priest would christen the kid. Has mental serfdom actually been abolished?

D.R.: I was talking about it in Kurówek and this 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary is no topic at all. It doesn’t result from the lack of historical knowledge, yet the country people don’t treat it as their own special day.

**Maybe it’s related to shame.**

M.Ł.: Repression and related injustice are still present in the society. We need to recall them, like for example the songs of rebellion and misery rearranged by the R.U.T.A. collective. We need to conclude new alliances, include peasant culture in the circulation space, breathe new life into it. We need to use the potential of peripheries and margins, translate the inferiority complex connected with rural origins into value, at the same time remaining a slightly mistrustful and demanding peasant. If the communist regime perceived the countryside as an antithesis of bourgeois lifestyle, if Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński saw this simple rural spirituality as something that would save Polish Catholicism then modern times could find something there too. So far it’s been hard to trace any thorough process of coming to terms with serfdom and collectivization traumas, while these traumas have left their mark in mentality articulated at a behavioural level. Such performativity needs to be analysed and told. Some things are changing, though. For example, the Congress of Women in Warsaw and its regional agendas are becoming more and more open to non-urban problems. The Congress of Women of the Podlasie Region began with a discussion panel entitled “Why is it worth introducing gender into the development strategy”. When the President of Białystok learned about it, he withdrew his patronage. This is a certain signal of the lack of readiness, perhaps due to the vocabulary used. Maybe it would be otherwise if we talked about justice or the reasons why we need to be careful with squandering discourses. Beata Maciejewska from the Green Institute is running a project called “Women in Rural Poland and Green Modernisation,” in which she introduces ecologically-aware jobs for rural women, in such sense that they can start enjoying self-determination. These are the attempts to boost the capital among rural women and, perhaps, the beginning of a broader transformation.