

Joanne Morra

Her Time

In *About Her: Teresa Gierzynska*, ed. Joanna Kordjak, Zacheta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2021.



Y. Senī "Oviņ" - rāmkuģa - TG 81

She is seated.

At a table.

In solitude.

Her head bent slightly forward; sunlight illuminating her crown.

Her dark brown hair — a perfect bob — flowing downwards,
spreading gently across her shoulders.

Her torso, lean and slender.

She wears a soft, black, short-sleeved jumper.

Delicately folding into a crease, revealing her pale, right shoulder.

Her left elbow rests firmly on the table.

A white tablecloth spills off its edge.

A spoon placed to the left of her points towards her, cup and saucer sit close by.

Beyond it, a black notebook, an ambiguous object.

Further on, a novel and some paper, perhaps.

Cropped tightly. She is contained. Nearby.

Emotionally charged.

Her body remains still.

This black and white photograph by artist Teresa Gierzyńska, from 1981 is entitled *Zamknięta*.

Zamknięta is a Polish word with multiple meanings. Translations of it reveal the following definitions: closed, locked up, shut; dissolved, decommissioned; sealed off, hidden away, self-contained, private; enclosed, nestled, out of bounds; withdrawn. Certainly, these definitions speak of an ending, a termination and dissolution; a closing down of something that was once open; a form of self-containment, confinement; a moment of privacy, a withdrawal. A pause.

What has this woman withdrawn from? What is now closed? Why this self-containment, this confinement? What is the temporality of this state of affairs? When will she become available once more?

Sitting there, alone, in a seemingly domestic setting — or is it her studio, her study? — with her head slightly bent, a coffee and notebook nearby, surely a space has already opened up for her. An intimate space. A private time for thinking, reflecting and self-reflecting. A space of reverie. A moment for pondering the past, the present, the future. A space of her own.

What is this time and space of both shutting down and opening up? How does a woman get here? This now time of active self-containment. This private world of the imagination. This time and space made available for her interior life. And what does she do with it once she arrives here?

Zamknięta [Self-contained] is pivotal to the stories I would like to tell. Conversations amongst women. Stories of women's experiences; embodied articulations of our diverse internal, emotional lives; dialogues activated by the times and spaces within which we/she/I/they think and imagine; speak and create.

Stories About Her

What do we want from each other
after we have told our stories
do we want
to be healed do we want
mossy quiet stealing over our scars
do we want
the all-powerful unfrightening sister
who will make the pain go away
mother's voice in the hallway
you've done it right
the first time darling
you will never need
to do it again.

Thunder grumbles on the horizon
I buy time with another story
A pale blister of air
cadences of dead flesh
obscure the vowels.

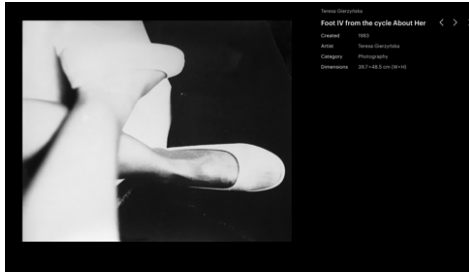
Audre Lorde, 'There Are No Honest Poems About Dead Women'¹



Teresa Gierzyńska began taking photographs in 1967. Working in multiple series — each one taking at least one year to develop and complete — Gierzyńska's practice is dedicated to the personal, embodied, and political lives of women. Whether working with the idealised and static representations of women in contemporary media and advertising as in *The Essence of Things*; or photographing the intimate and prickly nature of caressing and being touched by a lover in *Caresses* and *The Touch*; or re-framing the controlling social directives that surround motherhood via *Instructions*; or re-imaging found and family photographs in order to untangle the complex nature of memory and the re-visioning that takes place in remembering as in *Forgotten Moments* and *Memories*; or ruminating on travel through finely crafted affective landscapes in *Black, White and Green*, Gierzyńska's practice offers us an extensive and significant body of work that investigates women's intimate, emotional, psychic,

¹ Audre Lorde, 'There Are No Honest Poems About Dead Women', in *Our Dead Behind Us: Poems*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1996, p. 61.

imaginative, embodied and thus political lives. Cutting across all of her work is the series *About Her*. Begun in 1979², and ongoing to this day, *About Her* is noteworthy in many ways, most apparent are the facts of its longevity, and that the artist employs herself almost exclusively in the images. I consider *About Her* to be key.



Taking time to look at, think about and feel what there is in *About Her*, I find myself aspiring to know something ‘about her’. I immediately develop a relationship with ‘her’, the woman from *Zamknięta*; the woman who inhabits many of the photographs in this series. I feel attuned to her body, her face, her expressions: her torso, hands, knees and feet. I note the changes that aging brings, the lines that denote living. I become familiar with the alterations in her personal style, haircuts, jewellery and clothing. Although my purview of the spatial settings in which she resides is restrictive, I recognise them as mainly domestic interiors within which she lives, moves, grows and changes. Together, these details provide me with clues for what I am most drawn to — her interior life: a private, intimate and embodied landscape of the feelings evinced in and by the photographs.



Tightly cropped, and sparse, the details of each photograph become extremely important. I find myself looking carefully, reading and listening to them sensitively, to her.

² However, the idea for the series was born much earlier, and the first photographs included in it date from 1967.

Can I see her face? What is her expression? What does it reveal of her state of being? Where is she located? A bedroom, a bathroom, a living room, or a space that is too bare to be named? Is she standing near a window, by a wall or a sideboard; sitting on a chair, a sofa, or the wooden floor; prostrate on a bed or lying down on a simple white sheet? Is she dressed, undressed or partially dressed? What is she wearing? What objects are near her, if any? Each element in the image tells me something about her, the mood surrounding this woman, and the emotional current within which she finds herself. To listen to her, and hear what she is saying, these scant features are vital: as vital as the title of each image. Each title is a provocation: it calls me into this woman's world, her emotional life, and it is here that I spend the most time with her. She speaks to me; and I converse with her.

*Abandoned, Alone, Lonely, **Crying**, Unhappy, Still Depressed*

***In Love**, Hopeful, Ready, Sensual*

Calculating, Greedy, Vulgar

Certain, Careless, Concerned, Useless, Unsure, Indifferent

Independent, Determined, Proud

Petrified, Angry, Cold-hearted, Dangerous, Tricked

Quiet, Embarrassed, Ashamed

Self-contained

***Sleeping**, Lethargic, Silent*

*Under Pressure, **Unapproachable***

*Waiting, Waiting for Nothing, **Waiting to Be Free***

Being with her, seeing her, listening to her, reflecting on her, communicating with her, deliberating with her, agreeing and disagreeing with her, I engage with her. What has happened to her? Where has she been? Where is she going? Who is she? I am drawn into her world and am compelled to consider the experiences that elicited these emotional responses. I begin to tell a story about her: to begin a conversation with her. She is this, she is that; I too am this and that; I am not this or that; she is not this or that. The images of her offer a space within which to project the emotional and psychic mapping of my own life experiences and those of women I know. The narratives I construct, and re-construct find their way onto her but also bounce off her. Nothing truly sticks. As I aspire to sameness, differences rise up; as I recognise those differences, a multitude of alternative experiences, contexts, nuances emerge. Where do I meet her? Do I indeed meet her at all? What are the stories I wish to tell, with these conversations amongst women? What would I like to say to, about and with her? Why?

We tell stories. We tell ourselves stories, we tell stories to one another. It matters what stories we tell, how we tell them and to what effect.³ And it matters, as writer and activist Audre Lorde says, what ‘we want from each other after we have told our stories’.



The stories told and elicited by *About Her* are not master narratives — the historical and political dramas that constitute ‘History’ — what speculative fiction writer and feminist Ursula Le Guin calls the ‘heroic narrative’: ‘The story the mammoth hunters told about

³ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, Ignota, 2019.

bashing, thrusting, raping, killing, about the Hero. The wonderful, poisonous story of Botulism. The killer story.’⁴

No, the stories that *About Her* tell, are different. They are closer to the ‘other’ stories; the ‘other’ stories that Le Guin asserts are necessary to move on from this Hero story. Le Guin proclaims that ‘with a certain feeling of urgency [...] I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story’.⁵ Stories that, ‘instead of heroes [...] have people in them’.⁶ Stories that are ‘full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, [...] and people who don’t understand.’⁷ For Le Guin, it is these stories that inform us of ‘what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story.’⁸ As Le Guin concludes: ‘It is the story that makes the difference.’⁹ It certainly is.

About Her is one of these ‘unending’ stories. What story, or better yet, what stories does it tell? Which one(s) am I telling?

On Pronouns

In 2013 playwright and novelist Deborah Levy published the first volume of a trilogy. Entitled *Things I Don’t Want to Know*, the book is a response to George Orwell’s 1946 essay ‘Why I Write’. Speaking from the position of a woman ‘in her 40s’, Levy’s text tackles and scrutinises each of Orwell’s privileged, male concerns about what it means to be an author — ‘political purpose’, ‘historical impulse’, ‘sheer egoism’, and ‘aesthetic enthusiasm’ — with razor-sharp feminist precision.

In volume 2, *The Cost of Living* (2018), Levy confronts her 50s. With her marriage having recently dissolved, she finds herself in a state of radical flux. Composing an entirely new life for herself, and her two daughters, Levy shares her search for a different way to live, and the cost of living itself.

⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 35-6.

⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

Real Estate (2021), the recently published third volume of the series, focusses on Levy's 60s and her search for 'home'. A rejoinder to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Levy deftly considers and opens up the spaces within which she lives, works and imagines her home to be and become.

Levy named this trilogy a 'living autobiography'. She reveals to us her initial thoughts on wanting to write the series when she says,

Those decades — the 40s, 50s and 60s — were really undocumented years in terms of female experience. I thought it would be exciting to see what they were about and what they reveal. It seemed to me that autobiographies are usually written in retrospect, right at the end of one's life: what would it be like to write one while you were living?¹⁰

What would it be like, for women, to represent their lives while living them?

In order to dance with this question, Levy, in this trilogy, begins to write in the first-person pronoun: she employs the 'I'. This shift in pronouns opens up the trilogy. Levy begins *Things I Don't Want to Know* with: 'That spring when life was very hard and I was at war with my lot and simply couldn't see where there was to get to, I seemed to cry most on escalators at train stations'.¹¹ In her book *The Cost of Living*, Levy returns to the question of pronouns and recognises that the use of 'I' is entangled in more than simply her writing: it reverberates with the present moment in her life when she found herself, after her divorce, composing a new life for herself as a single mother and author. Being so attuned to the 'I', she notices that 'For some reason, the letter *I* on the screen [of her computer] was blinking and jumping and trembling. That's how I felt too.'¹²

This 'I' is not static, nor is it singular, nor fully knowable. Rather, Levy muses on her state of affairs and notes that: 'I would begin to write in the first person, using an *I* that is close to myself and yet is not myself.'¹³ Both near and far, approaching and yet not 'myself' the 'I' haunts Levy. The 'I' is never still, solid, fathomable. But then again, neither is any pronoun, including 'she' or 'her' or 'they' or 'we'.

¹⁰ Deborah Levy in conversation with Lisa Allardice, 'Deborah Levy: "The new generation of young women can change the world"', *The Guardian*, 7 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/07/deborah-levy-memoir-interview-cost-of-living> (accessed 15 September 2021).

¹¹ Deborah Levy, *Things I Don't Want to Know: A Response to George Orwell's Essay 'Why I Write'*, London, Penguin, 2013, p. 1.

¹² Deborah Levy, *The Cost of Living*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018, p. 76.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Gabrielle Roth, a dancer and musician who dedicated her life and art to the healing power of dance, considers our capacity for self-reflection and personal understanding in her memoir *Connections*. Roth refers to Virginia Woolf's 'idea about "moments of being" — memories that are emblazoned on our minds when everything is perfectly clear'.¹⁴ Roth takes up Woolf's gesture as a means of opening up a space for the function of the third person pronoun, and Roth uses it to suggest a way in which one can come to know oneself. Roth ponders how one may make sense of and connect these 'moments of being' in amongst the 'contradictions', 'conflicts', 'resistances', 'disillusions' and 'grandiose illusions' that constitute one's life.¹⁵ She proposes that it may be helpful to 'write in the third person, [she/her/they] and you'll find yourself looking at your life as a witness. From that vantage point, you'll be able to see what you could not see immersed in it. As a witness, you are outside your story looking in.'¹⁶

Between Levy's shifting and trembling 'I', Woolf's 'moments of being' and Roth's third person witness, I begin to find Teresa Gierzyńska's 'her'.¹⁷ The artist is aware of these interplays between the 'I' and 'her' and their entanglement.

In 1981, Gierzyńska had an exhibition of her work at Galeria KMPiK Ściana Wschodnia in Warsaw. The show was entitled *IT HER ME* and displayed a host of photographs including a selection from *About Her*. The artist wrote a text to accompany the exhibition. Dated September 1981, a portion of it reads as follows:

I wouldn't want the works that I've dedicated to children to be considered patronising. That wasn't my intention. All I wanted to share were my impressions and experiences as a mother would with

¹⁴ Gabrielle Roth, *Connections*, Los Angeles: Tarcherperigree, 2004, Kindle edition, loc. 1692.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, loc. 1687.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, loc. 1702.

¹⁷ The debates around pronouns, particularly in the literature on trans identity and culture is massive. For a politically astute text on the current state of affairs, and where we can possibly go next, see, for instance, Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.

her child. All I was trying to convey was the difficulty in the drudgery and the complexity that is required from the mental health of parents in their daily work with their children, or, in other words, how that difficulty shouldn't go to waste.

The title of the exhibition *IT HER ME* suggests three types of works:

- works about CHILDREN
- works about WOMEN
- works about ME

Viewers may notice a lack of consistency in this division, but, after all, 'about ME' means works about a thirty-year-old woman, hence, in other words, it's about a woman, which also means it's 'about ME' and at the same time it's also 'about CHILDREN'. These divisions were invented so that the whole composition would have more clarity and have a greater attractiveness in its presentation.¹⁸

Attuned to the role of the personal pronouns in her work — she/it/I/her/me — Teresa Gierzyńska is at pains to make clear their connections and differences. She tells us that she would like to clarify the 3 divisions in her show — between the it, she and me. But this is not an easy thing to do. The artist notes that '[v]iewers may notice a lack of consistency in this division' and attempts to explain this through a series of (unnecessary) justifications and regrets: 'I wouldn't want', 'All I wanted', 'All I was trying to convey', 'or, in other words', 'but, after all', 'hence, in other words', 'which also means', and 'and at the same time'. The fact of the matter is that pronouns themselves and the relationship between various pronouns are irreducibly ambivalent. Gierzyńska's explanations demonstrate the difficulty in locating the exact relationship between what Levy names the 'I' that is myself, and the 'I' that is not myself, and Roth's reflection on the I/she/her/they. These women, in their own way, recognise that all pronouns and their embodiment blink, jump and tremble.

Gierzyńska and Roth broaden the discourse of the first-person pronoun onto third-person pronouns. As the first-person pronouns bring us close to TG the woman and artist, they simultaneously move us towards the diversity of women who live in our patriarchal

¹⁸ Teresa Gierzyńska, 'IT HER ME — Text to the Exhibition', in *By the River That Isn't*, ed. Ewa Tatar, exh. cat., Nowy Sącz: BWA Sokół Gallery of Contemporary Art, 2014, p. 159.

society, and there they touch upon the she/her/they who is also a me/I — a writer/viewer spending time with this artwork.

But I do not wish to move too hastily to a conclusion. I would like to pause and turn briefly to the referential dimension of these pronouns. To the fact that the pronoun — whether first or third person — is always followed by a verb — I am (not), she is (not), they did (not), it has (not), I want, they want, we don't want . . . what this verb and its negation introduces is the question of experience.

Teresa Gierzyńska states clearly that she would like to 'share my impressions and experiences', Levy's living autobiography makes this move as well — to write while one is living one's life, as does Roth's encouragement for us to become witnesses to what Woolf calls 'moments of being', to the conflicts, contradictions, resistances, illusion and disillusion of personal experience.

Experience as literary theorist Joan Scott has taught me, is just as jumpy and contradictory as its affiliated pronouns. For Scott, experience 'is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political.'¹⁹ Scott is keen for us to recognise that it is not individuals who have experiences but subjects who are constituted by them. Experiences form us, in their making, as we form experience. Scott demonstrates how experience is a means of 'identity production', and like any form of identity making, it is embodied, discursive and political — it is always 'contextual, contested, and contingent'.²⁰ Ultimately, 'Experience [and its affiliated pronouns] is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted.'²¹

Taking up Space

It's 1928, and Virginia Woolf is wandering around the University of Cambridge. She is pondering a lecture she has been invited to give there, the talk that will be known as 'A Room of One's Own'. Woolf begins with this thought: 'But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction — what has that got to do with a room of one's own?'²² This classic

¹⁹ Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1991, p. 797.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 796.

²¹ Ibid., p. 797.

²² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Anna Snaith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 3.

essay remains a vibrant political manifesto. As Woolf moves through the University grounds, she puts into place the disadvantages that women have experienced, or better yet, the advantages that men have been granted throughout history: she turns to for instance, economics, politics, historical narratives, knowledge, education as well as aspects of everyday life (food at mealtimes, outdoor space, architecture). Woolf reveals systemic inequalities that are at the heart of gender politics and the history of feminism. Woolf's still indispensable and critical proposition is that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'.²³ She is calling forth, nothing less than a social, political and economic order in which women have the economic means and space within which they can think, read, imagine, create, and speak their truth.

While writing her lecture, Woolf reflects upon one of the experiences she had while at Cambridge pondering what she would say:

Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please — it is not a matter of importance) sitting on the banks of a river [at University of Cambridge] a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought. That collar I have spoken of, women and fiction, the need of coming to some conclusion on a subject that raises all sorts of prejudices and passions, bowed my head to the ground. To the right and left bushes of some sort, golden and crimson, glowed with the colour, even it seemed burnt with the heat, of fire. On the further bank the willows wept in perpetual lamentation, their hair about their shoulders. The river reflected whatever it chose of sky and bridge and burning tree, and when the undergraduate had oared his boat through the reflections they closed again, completely, as if he had never been. There one might have sat the clock round lost in thought. Thought — to call it by a prouder name than it deserved — had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it until — you know the little tug — the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a

²³ Ibid., p. 3.

good fisherman puts back into the water so that I may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating. I will not trouble you with that thought now, though if you look carefully, you may find it for yourselves in the course of what I am going to say.

But however small it was, it had, nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind — put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still. It was thus that I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot. Instantly a man's figure rose to intercept me. Nor did I at first understand that the gesticulations of a curious-looking object, in a cut-away coat and evening shirt, were aimed at me. His face expressed horror and indignation. Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me. The only charge I could bring against the Fellows and Scholars of whatever the college might happen to be was that in protection of their turf, which has been rolled for 300 years in succession, they had sent my little fish into hiding.²⁴



²⁴ Ibid., pp. 4–5.

Moment I from 1976 is a bright red photograph of a space. A single room, this space constitutes at minimum a domestic setting — with tables, chairs, blankets, a television set — and a studio — replete with artworks and artistic implements on the tables. A series of large paintings hang upon its walls — the works of Teresa Gierzyńska's husband, the artist Edward Dwurnik. Is it fair to say: his paintings, his studio, his space? Perhaps. But there is also a woman in the space, a young Gierzyńska. Standing there, her arms folded behind her back, her eyes cast downwards. She reminds me of Woolf — her head bowed to the ground — and the woman in *Zamknięta*, and I hope this woman in red is also thinking of passions and prejudices and searching for a room of her own.

When I picked up a camera with a group of other women, I'm not going to say it was a radical act, but we were certainly doing it in some sort of defiance of, or reaction to, a male-dominated world of painting.

Laurie Simmons²⁵



I learn from Levy, Woolf and Gierzyńska that a room of one's own can come in various forms.

In 1980, only four years after the red studio image, Gierzyńska made a series of photographs of herself as an artist — I like to think of them as portraits of the artist as a young woman. In each photograph, standing in front of a mirror, the woman peers into her camera and represents reflections of herself — she is an artist at work. Entitled *Left-handed*

²⁵ Laurie Simmons quoted in Sheila Heiti, 'Laurie Simmons', *Interview Magazine*, 4 March 2014, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/laurie-simmons> (accessed 15 September 2021).

this series exemplifies how the space of the camera can be a room of one's own. The camera operates as a space within which the artist works, thinks, reflects, creates; a space within which she can control the gaze upon her at the same time as she becomes the I/her/it/they of the photograph.



Determined from 1980 reverberates with the spatial constitution of *Zamknięta*. Closely cropped, with objects surrounding her, the artist has formed a space for her/self. A room of one's own, as photograph.

Literal space that is her own, seems harder to come by. But this too she manages. In 1984, Gierzyńska creates a series of photographs taken in the bathroom. Entitled, for instance, *A While of Freedom*, *Uncertain*, *I Have My Period Again*, these photographs grant 'her' a space within which to flee from domestic responsibilities, and other duties, and instead, to think, feel, be, and to make work.

As Virginia Woolf reminds us in 'A Room of One's Own', women, have and must continue to agitate and repudiate inequity in order to claim space:

One must have been something of a firebrand to say to oneself [...] I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom on the mind.²⁶

²⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 57.



Voicing Feelings

Audre Lorde:

Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge. They are chaotic, sometimes painful, sometimes contradictory, but they come from deep within us. And we must key into those feelings . . . this is how new visions begin.²⁷



„O māj” mēpotrēbna – foto 1/2 1980,



„O māj” – pēma mādzer – T. Spengēle 83

²⁷ Audre Lorde, ‘Audre Lorde interview with Claudia Tate’, in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004, p. 91.

Deborah Levy:

To become a writer, I had to learn to interrupt, to speak up, to speak a little louder, and then louder, and then to just speak in my own voice which is not loud at all.²⁸

Deborah Levy:

What is a woman for? What should a woman be?²⁹

Teresa Gierzyńska, Wednesday, 7 February [1972]:

Until late at night we discussed why even though I work so fast and well, and am on equal footing with the best of graphic artists, I can't have my name attached to the work that I do — but rather always be considered a second rate helper, in contrast to Edward. Whenever I received payment for some normal work that I did, I would always receive 30% less than a guy who did the same amount of work. . . . Why have they trained me to such an extent, since I'm now completely unemployable — no one will give me work at the PSP studio — reason being I'm a girl and I look tiny. Constant grief in front of the officials begging them for work, the secretaries at the coop are nasty to me because I'm young: they think we're doing very well for ourselves. Aside from that, it's because I'm a girl, because I don't wear normal clothing, I don't gossip, I'm 'leftist'. That's the price to pay for having an individualistic behaviour, for being a free person.³⁰

Deborah Levy:

What do we do with knowledge that we cannot bear to live with? What do we do with the things we do not want to know?

I did not know how to get the work, my writing into the world. I did not know how to open the window like an orange. If anything, the window had closed like an axe on my tongue. If this was to be my reality, I did not know what to do with it.³¹

. . .

²⁸ Levy, *Things I Don't Want to Know* . . . , p. 107.

²⁹ Eadem, *The Cost of Living*, p. 65.

³⁰ Teresa Gierzyńska-Dwurnik, 'The "One Month of My Life" Contest', in *By the River That Isn't*, p. 149.

³¹ Levy, *The Cost of Living*, p. 137.

I asked myself another question. Should I accept my lot? If I was to buy a ticket and travel all the way to acceptance, if I was to greet it and shake its hand, if I was to entwine my fingers with acceptance and walk hand in hand with acceptance every day, what would that feel like? After a while I realised I could not accept my question. A female writer cannot afford to feel her life too clearly. If she does, she will write in a rage when she should write calmly. 'She will write in a rage when she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot.' (Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*)³²



Sex
Selfishness
Ache
Anger
Loneliness
Jealousy
Attachment
Trust

Deborah Levy:

Where are we now? Where were we before?³³

³² Ibid., pp. 106–107.

³³ Ibid., p. 152.

...

Actually, I had no idea what serenity felt like. Serenity is supposed to be one of the main characters in old-fashioned femininity's cultural personality. She is serene and she endures. Yes, she is so talented at enduring and suffering they might even be the main characters in her story.

It was possible that femininity, as I had been taught it, had come to an end. Femininity, as a cultural personality, was no longer expressive for me. It was obvious that femininity, as written by men and performed by women, was the exhausted phantom that still haunted the early twenty-first century. What would it cost to step out of character and stop the story?³⁴

...

No, there were not that many women I knew who wanted to put the phantom of femininity together again. What is a phantom anyway? The phantom of femininity is an illusion, a delusion, a societal hallucination. She is a very tricky character to play and it is a role (sacrifice, endurance, cheerful suffering) that has made some women go mad. This is not a story I wanted to hear all over again.

It was time to find new main characters with other talents.³⁵

Soraya Chemaly:

As yourself, why would a society deny girls and women, from cradle to grave, the right to feel, express, and leverage anger and be respected when we do? Anger has a bad rap, but it is actually one of the most hopeful and forward thinking of all our emotions. It begets transformation, manifesting our passion and keeping us invested in the world. It is a rational and emotional response to trespass, violation, and moral disorder. It bridges the divide between what 'is' and what 'ought' to be, between a difficult past and an improved possibility. Anger warns us viscerally of violation, threat, and insult.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 87.

³⁶ Soraya Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger*, London: Simon and Schuster, 2018, p. xx.



Ann Cvetkovich:

I'd like to be able to write about depression in a way that simultaneously captures how it feels and provides an analysis of why and how its feelings are produced by social forces. I'm interested in how, for many of us (an 'us' that includes a range of social positions and identities in need of specification), everyday life produces feelings of despair and anxiety, sometimes extreme, sometimes throbbing along at a low level, and hence barely discernible from *just the way things are*, feelings that get internalised and named, for better or for worse, as depression.³⁷

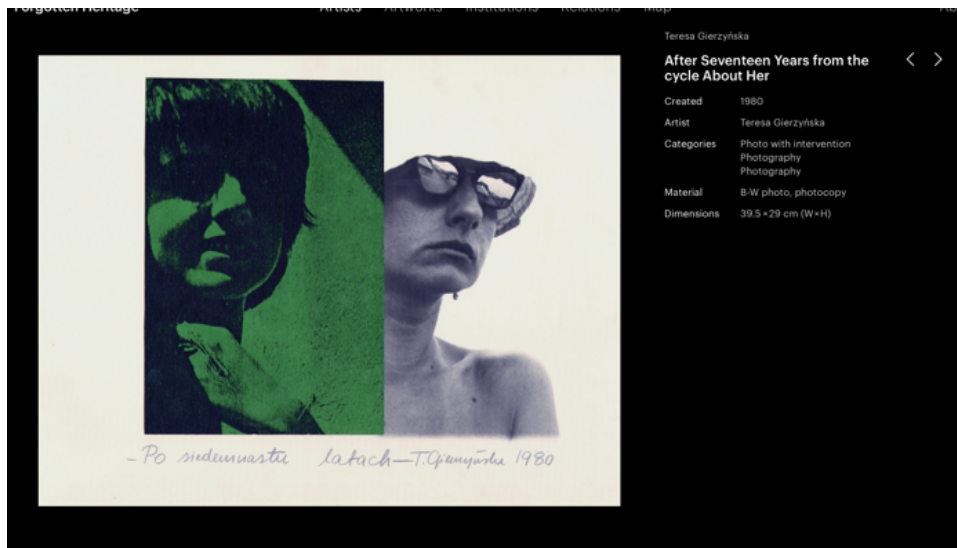


Ann Cvetkovich:

Cumulatively the book envisions depression as a form of being stuck, both literal and metaphorical, that requires new ways of living or, more concretely, moving.³⁸

³⁷ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012, p. 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.



Deborah Levy:

She is nine years old and she is crossing the tarmac of the Holloway Road.

Her mother, who is now dead, has cut her fringe crooked with nail scissors. She is myself and she is walking in the rain towards my family house, towards my old life. My married life.

...

When she knocks on the door of the Victorian semi, a woman shouts, *Who are you?* Her accent is English, her voice is deep.

I am you, the girl shouts back in a thick South African accent.

The rain continues to fall on the child stranded outside the door of her assimilated more or less English older self, who is cowering on the other side of the door. What will happen if she invites this nine-year-old into the house with its Victorian plumbing and her English daughters, one age twelve, the other six

...

The foreign girl is stubborn and won't go away. . . . she was practically mute for a year of her life, but now she is boldly hammering at the door. When it eventually opens, she steps in. Her wet, bare feet make a trail in the corridor. She turns left into the living room and

jumps on to the sofa with the English children. These are the daughters she will give birth to in her thirties.³⁹



Deborah Levy:

There is a photograph I have kept of my mother in her late twenties. She is sitting on a rock at a picnic with friends. Her hair is wet because she's just had a swim. There is a kind of introspection in her expression that I now relate to the very best of her. I can see that she is close to herself in this random moment. I'm not sure that I thought introspection was the best of her when I was a child and teenager. What do we need dreamy mothers for? We do not want mothers who gaze beyond us, longing to be elsewhere. We need her to be of this world, lively, capable, entirely present to our needs.

Did I mock the dreamer in my mother and then insult her for having no dreams?⁴⁰

Teresa Gierzyńska, Saturday, 24 February [1972]:

... 'I didn't sleep well, all the time revising the previous evening's discussion with the three girls [Gierzyńska's younger sister and her two friends]. They complained about not having

³⁹ Levy, *The Cost of Living*, pp. 162–164.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–119.

any idea of what to do with their lives. They had no sense of self-worth and authority, they had no idea what they wanted to be. Their family homes meant nothing to them, utter emptiness and frustration, lack of daily stimulus, of systematic work. They didn't see any sense in anything. They were 19–20 years old, all three beautiful, very talented, however with poor academic results (they are graduating this year from architecture school for girls). They were very well read, on 'good terms' with art, they don't have any boyfriends. I was sad that I was unable to convince them of anything. I myself remember this period of lack of self-value — how tiring it was for me, and no one was able to help me. Eventually it clarified itself though.⁴¹

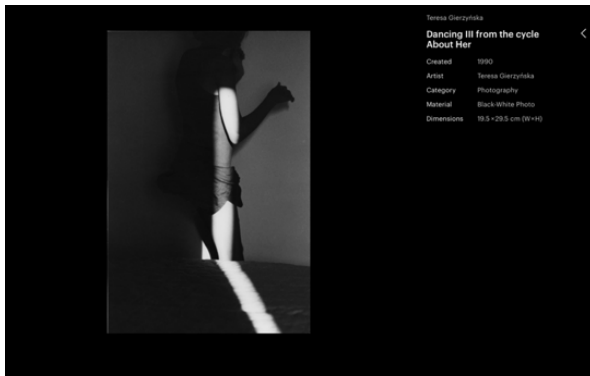


Deborah Levy:

My daughter and her teenage friends laid the table. They wore big hoop earrings and lip gloss. They were crazed by life and crazed for life. Their conversation was interesting, astute and hilarious. I thought they could save the world. Everything else fell away . . .⁴²

⁴¹ Gierzyńska-Dwurnik, 'The "One Month of My Life" Contest', p. 155.

⁴² Levy, *The Cost of Living*, p. 93.



Deborah Levy:

That spring when life was very hard and I was at war with my lot and simply couldn't see where there was to get to, I seemed to cry most on escalators at train stations.

...

Three days later, I zipped up my brand new laptop and found myself sitting in aisle seat 22C heading for Palma, Majorca.

...

The notebook I had brought with me was labelled 'POLAND, 1988'. It would probably be more romantic to describe it as 'my journal', or 'my diary', but I thought of it as a note book, . . . because I was always gathering evidence for something I could not fathom.

In 1988 I was taking notes in Poland, but what for? I found myself flicking through its pages to remind myself.

In October 1988 I had been invited to write about a performance directed by the renowned Polish actress, Zofia Kalińska

...

I am in Krakow. Zofia Kalińska wears two (shamanistic) necklaces to the rehearsal of her play: one made from cloudy turquoise and one from wormwood. . . . I remind myself to ask Zofia about her necklaces. She is in her early sixties and has performed some of the most famous avante-garde theatre productions in Europe

...

Today, Zofia has a few notes to give to her Western European actors.

'The form must never be bigger than the content, especially in Poland. This is to do with our history: suppression, the Germans, the Russians, we feel ashamed because we have

so much emotion. We must use emotion carefully in the theatre, we must not imitate emotion. In my productions, which have been described as “surreal”, there is no such thinking as a surreal emotion. At the same time, we are not making psychological theatre, we are not imitating reality.

She tells a young actress to speak up.

‘To speak up is not about speaking louder, it is about feeling entitled to voice a wish. We always hesitate when we wish for something. In my theatre, I like to show the hesitation and not to conceal it. A hesitation is not the same as a pause. It is an attempt to defeat the wish. But when you are ready to catch this wish and put it into language, then you can whisper but the audience will always hear you.’⁴³

Teresa Gierzyńska’s work whispers in a quiet yet firm manner.

Eliciting conversations
that speak in harmony and discord.
Softly asserting,
it’s now her time.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 1–10.