

The article showcases the performances of artists associated with the Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin, Poland, in the 1970s, who used in their actions relationships with “beyond-human” entities, such as living and non-living nature, plants, animals, and machines. I present the famous performances of Teresa Murak, Krzysztof Zarebski, Tomek Kawiak, and Józef Robakowski, in which the performers’ bodies were presented in a hybrid relationship, intertwined with biological, technological, economic, social, political, and other

systems, processes, and events of various scales. I analyze these performances using the concept of “trans-corporeality” coined by the posthumanist feminist scholar Stacy Alaimo, which emphasizes creative connections and transgressive encounters between what is human and what is not and points to the fluidity and the lack of fixed boundaries in material reality. This theory requires rethinking about the body and presents it in relation to other non-human entities, as well as the surrounding matter, which is not read as a context but as part

of the action. I reflect on how the concept of “trans-corporeality” could be useful for analyzing art production, especially body art and performance art that places the artist’s body at the center.

Keywords:
trans-corporeality – performance art – posthumanism – art of the 1970s – Poland – reconstruction

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Hybrids. Trans-corporeal Performances at the Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin in the 1970s

Michalina Sablik

*Dead fish from Zbigniew
Warpechowski in the face of
posthumanist criticism*

In 1973, during the Lublin Theatre Spring (Lubelska Wiosna Teatralna), Zbigniew Warpechowski performed his renowned piece *A Dialogue with a Fish* (*Dialog z rybą*). This significant artist and curator of the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin based his entire action⁽¹⁾ on speaking to a carp taken out of the water. In front of the audience at the student theater festival, the fish struggled for breath while he engaged in a philosophical dialogue with it. As the fish approached death, the artist's words became increasingly poignant. The suffocation of the carp was a crucial element of the performance.⁽²⁾ Meanwhile, in *Dialogue with Death* (*Dialog ze śmiercią*) from 1976, Warpechowski prepared various props, including a table covered with white paper with a drawing, spotlights, three glasses, one with a live swimming fish, and a skull. In front of the audience lay a corpse – a dead fish purchased before the performance. The performance had a complex structure and addressed transcendental issues. The artist performed numerous gestures with the skull. The final act of the performance involved drinking water from one of the glasses and swallowing the fish inside.⁽³⁾

Hybrids. Trans-corporeal
Performances at the Labyrinth
Gallery in Lublin in the 1970s

- 1 In this article, I interchangeably use the terms "action art" and "performance" due to the tradition of using these notions in Polish art history, as well as more broadly in East European contexts. This was also noted by Pavlína Morganová in the introduction to her publication, where she indicated that the concept of action art encompasses conceptual activities from the 1960s and 1970s, including performance art, body art, happenings, and land art, comprising a variety of nomenclatures for ephemeral and process-based artworks. Pavlína MORGANOVÁ, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art behind the Iron Curtain*, Prague: Karolinum 2014, pp. 17–19.
- 2 Zbigniew WARPECHOWSKI, *A Dialogue with a Fish*, <https://warpechowski.com/en/performances/a-dialogue-with-a-fish> (accessed on 9 January 2023).
- 3 Zbigniew WARPECHOWSKI, *Dialogue with Death*, <https://warpechowski.com/en/performances/dialogue-with-death> (accessed on 9 January 2023).

Warpechowski did not limit his use of live animals to violent performances only in Lublin. In *Autopsy* (*Autopsja*) (1974), he submerged his head in an aquarium and kept it there until he could no longer breathe. At the same time next to the aquarium, he placed a live, suffocating fish.⁽⁴⁾ In the iconic performance *March* (*Marsz*) (1984) in Stuttgart, the artist tied a ribbon to his leg, attaching a small canary that, frightened, tried to fly away but was continuously tormented by the maneuvers performed by Warpechowski.⁽⁵⁾

Contemporary use of live animals in the name of art is becoming increasingly less acceptable. In 2020, Piotr Policht wrote about the ethical aspect of Warpechowski's performances, highlighting the exploitation, abuse, and killing of live animals in front of the audience for the purpose of conducting a "conceptual wordplay."⁽⁶⁾ In his performances, animals were treated unequivocally as objects. The central figure was the artist focused on conceptual or moral messages, where the animal became merely a symbol, such as the enslavement of the individual in a communist regime. The use of live animals was also a means of introducing transgression, shocking the viewer, and eliciting an emotional response to the performance. Warpechowski's *A Dialogue with a Fish* was more akin to a monologue. The fate of the small, living actor was considered by very few.

Criticism of classical performances and pointing out their violence aligns with a new sensitivity and morality that Ewa Domańska refers to as ecological humanism.⁽⁷⁾

- 4 Ewa GORZADEK, "Zbigniew Warpechowski," *Culture.pl*, http://www.culture.pl/baza-sztuki-pelna-trecz/-/eo_event_asset_publisher/eAN5/content/zbigniew-warpechowski (accessed on 9 January 2023).
- 5 Documentation of the performance Zbigniew Warpechowski's *March* in the Performance Archive at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw <https://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/warpechowski-zbigniew-marsz-2> (accessed on 9 January 2023).
- 6 Piotr POLICHT, "Widok zwierzęcego cierpienia," *Culture.pl*, 20 September 2020, <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/widok-zwierzecego-cierpienia> (accessed on 9 January 2023).
- 7 Ewa DOMAŃSKA, "Humanistyka ekologiczna," *Teksty Drugie*, 2013, issue 1–2.

Also known as non-anthropocentric humanism, posthumanism, or biohumanism, it represents a new paradigm shaping artistic and scientific theory and practice. As the researcher notes, since 1996–1998, there has been a shift from the constructivist-interpretive paradigm to an ecological or environmental paradigm. However, the true flourishing of this thinking began in the late 1990s, with the departure from postmodern philosophy towards tendencies functioning under various banners: relational, post-secular, affective, towards the non-human, towards animals, or a return to things. Ecological humanism is also associated with the growing popularity of traditional ecological knowledge. “It focuses on relational thinking, emphasizing mutual connections, interdependencies, coexistence, and cohabitation of nature-culture, human and environment, beings, and human and non-human entities.”⁽⁸⁾ Within this theory, the central concept is the interspecies metacommunity observed from a planetary perspective. The human takes a back seat, and their body is perceived in the terms of a specific ecosystem. The human itself functions as a hybrid, a community of human and non-human elements.

Trans-corporeality in 1970s performances

The body constitutes the most significant medium in classical performance and body art. It serves as material, instrument, and the result of artistic action.⁽⁹⁾ Issues of bodily integrity, resilience, its instrumentalization, and representation are crucial to the discourse of performance art. However, contemporary post- and transhumanist theories prompt us to view the body in a new light. It ceases

8 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

9 Agnieszka BANDURA, “Czym jest ciało w Body Art?,” *DYSKURS: Pismo Naukowo-Artystyczne ASP we Wrocławiu*, 2011, issue 12, pp. 78–96.

to be a centralized, closed entity representing specific identities and becomes more fluid, open to other forms of coexistence in the world. The first signs of this new thinking about the human body can be found in the actions of Warpechowski’s colleagues, Polish performers from the 1970s. In this article, I will examine the performances of Tomek Kawiak, Teresa Murak, Krzysztof Zarębski, and Józef Robakowski, which, in my view, were co-created with “non-human” actors, becoming trans-corporeal hybrids. The examples below will contribute to a reconsideration of the art of the 1970s through the prism of the category of trans-corporeality.

A key theorist addressing the concept of “trans-corporeality” is Stacy Alaimo, a philosopher whose reflections encompass environmental sciences, new materialism, and feminist theory. Alaimo proposes a new ontology based on posthumanist thought, wherein all beings, as embodied entities, are entangled with a dynamic, material world. Humans cease to hold a unique status and, in a way, dissolve into the cultural-natural environment. The Western, transcendent, disembodied subject, speaking about the world in a rational and discursive manner, as well as all kinds of dualisms, are thus questioned. The trans-corporeal subject intertwines with biological, technological, economic, social, political, and other systems, processes, and events on various scales.⁽¹⁰⁾ Trans-corporeality reveals the inevitable entanglement of humans with a world that is simultaneously non-human and super-human. Alaimo emphasizes creative connections and transgressive encounters between what is human and what is not. The philosophical project proposed by Alaimo firmly rejects anthropocentrism, intertwining various material planes to show that closed subjects, objects, individuals, species, or bodies are modernist and Enlightenment phantasms. Trans-corporeality points

10 Stacy ALAIMO, “Trans-Corporeality,” in: Rosa BRAIDOTTI – Maria HLAVAJOVA (eds.), *The Posthuman Glossary*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2018, pp. 435–437.

to the fluidity and lack of fixed boundaries in material reality.⁽¹¹⁾

In this article, I attempt to apply the concept of trans-corporeality to describe performances from the 1970s in socialist Poland that deal with human relationships with technology, machines, animals, and nature. My aim is to comprehend the evolution of the perception of the human body in 1970s art and the influence of emerging ecological concepts on artists' interactions with non-human entities. Additionally, I am seeking sources on contemporary ecological performance evident in the works of their predecessors from the 1970s. This period in Polish art, as well as globally, marks a departure from the still-vibrant modernist tradition of thinking about art and the role of the individual artist. What I put under observation is a pivotal moment – a transformative juncture where voices advocating a departure from the autonomy of art are becoming increasingly prominent. Art enters the realm of ephemerality and processuality. It becomes part of a specific context, often beyond the artistic sphere, dissolving into the world, and artists are increasingly inclined to relinquish authorship and agency to other beings or processes.

To narrow down the scope of research to some local examples I focus on performance art at the Labirynt Gallery and the BWA (Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych/ Bureau of Art Exhibitions) in Lublin; I primarily present actions that took place in this meta-institution⁽¹²⁾ in the 1970s. The

Hybrids. Trans-corporeal
Performances at the Labyrinth
Gallery in Lublin in the 1970s

11 Michał KISIEL, "Stacy Alaimo 'Exposed. Environmental Politics & Pleasures in Posthuman Times,'" *ER(R)GO*, 2019, issue 39, pp. 233–236.

12 The concept of "meta-institution" in the context of Lublin galleries was first introduced by Jakub Banasiak, who attempted to systematize the history of galleries that had previously been more narrated than documented. He termed it a "meta-institution" because throughout its history, it changed names and locations while maintaining historical continuity. It comprised various establishments such as the Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Labirynt Gallery, Labirynt 2 Gallery, Stara Gallery, as well as smaller satellite organizations such as the Performance Art Center (Ośrodek Sztuki Performance) and the Performance Art Foundation (Fundacja Sztuki Performance). Jakub BANASIAK, "Arka. W stronę społecznej historii Galerii Labirynt i BWA Lublin (1969–1993)," *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, 2022, issue 27, pp. 257–283.

reconstructions of performances are based on archival materials found in the gallery, descriptions provided by the artists, catalogs, press, and critical texts. The BWA Gallery in Lublin was established in 1956 and was part of a network of local Art Exhibition Bureaus that emerged from 1950 in provincial cities in Poland. Meanwhile, the Labirynt Gallery during this period operated within the Municipal House of Culture (Miejski Dom Kultury) in Lublin, initially located in a three-story historical building at Rynek 8. A pivotal moment in the gallery's history occurred in May 1974 when Andrzej Mroczek assumed its leadership. As a young curator, he had numerous connections among neo-avant-garde Polish artists from various cities, representing the grassroots movement of independent galleries. He invited them to actively co-create the gallery's program as exhibition commissioners. Mroczek's role also connected the two aforementioned institutions when, in 1981, he took over the leadership of the BWA Gallery, effectively transferring the program from the Labirynt Gallery to a gallery of higher prestige. The central points of the program were conceptual and contextual art, video art, photography, mail art, and performance art.⁽¹³⁾

In the second half of the 1970s, the Labirynt Gallery became one of the most important centers showcasing the young environment of Polish and foreign performers. A culmination point was the organization of the *International Artists' Meetings "Performance and Body"* in 1978, during which more than twenty artists from eight European countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain presented their works to the Lublin audience.⁽¹⁴⁾ Among them were significant figures such as Tibor Hajas and Raša Todosijević. In the second half of the 1970s, the Labirynt Gallery became a hub for artistic experimentation, testing new forms of art presentation based on ephemeral actions, documentation,

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 257–283.

14 Michalina SABLİK, *Rekonstrukcja Międzynarodowych Spotkań Artystów "Performance and Body" w Galerii Labirynt w Lublinie* [Master thesis], Warsaw: University of Warsaw 2020.

or the use of new media. Despite its seemingly peripheral location, and perhaps because of it, as it aligned with the logic of the decentralized culture of the Polish People's Republic, Lublin gained the status of an important artistic center for young neo-avant-garde creators. The performances that took place in this gallery thus reflect the most significant trends in 1970s performance art, including transmedial and transgressive actions, performances in public spaces, feminist performances, and trans-corporeal performances, which are the subject of this article.

*Branches of trees and a dress
made of cress, or the "non-human"
actors of performances*

One of the first performances in Lublin's public space was the 1970 action by Tomek Kawiak, a performer and sculptor born in Lublin and from the 1970s residing in France. The event, co-organized by the BWA and then-curator Mroczek, is often referred to as the first happening with an explicitly ecological theme presented in the city.⁽¹⁵⁾ It aligns with a series of environmentally-themed actions that took place in various outdoor locations, festivals, and symposiums in Poland in the early 1970s.⁽¹⁶⁾ These events reflected heightened environmental awareness not only in Poland but also across Eastern Europe, constituting artists' critical response to manifestations of environmental degradation termed by Maja and Reuben Fowkes as the "Socialist Anthropocene."⁽¹⁷⁾

- 15 Andrzej MOLIŁ, *Ból Tomka Kawiaka*, Archiwum Programu Historia Mówiona, Ośrodek Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN in Lublin https://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/Content/84543/HM_Molik_Andrzej_2008_08_07_Bol_Tomka_Kawiaka.pdf (accessed on 11 April 2024).
- 16 Julia Ewa CIUNOWICZ, *Początki sztuki ekologicznie zaangażowanej w Polsce w czasie plenerów, sympozjów i zjazdów artystycznych w latach 60. i 70. XX w.* [Bachelor thesis], Wrocław: Academy of Fine Arts 2020.
- 17 Maja FOWKES – Ruben FOWKES, "Green Critique in a Red Environment: East European Art and Ecology Under Socialism," *ARTMargins*, Vol. 2, 2014, No. 3, pp. 60–83.

The action titled *The Pain of Tomek Kawiak* (*Ból Tomka Kawiaka*) was a response to the decision of the Municipal Greenery Enterprise to trim trees along Narutowicza Street to a height of three meters. The destruction of the trees left a profound impression on the artist, prompting him to organize a protest action aimed at drawing the city's residents' attention to the issue of human-induced destruction of nature. Together with his friends, the artist tore up old bed sheets, which he then used to "bandage" the tree branches. Overnight, from April 19 to April 20, he treated a total of forty-five trees. The action took place under the cover of darkness, as the Office of Censorship was nearby, raising concerns that a critique against the authorities could lead to arrest. However, the action was positively received by the residents and the local press.⁽¹⁸⁾ Years later, Jolanta Brach-Czaina wrote:

By choosing this particular object, Kawiak embodies the characteristic ecological awareness of our times. Trees in the city are a vestige of the former independent forces of nature. [...] Culture has penetrated real existence so deeply that these two realities can no longer be separated. Therefore, Kawiak does not paint a picture of the material reality around him. There are no two realities. There is one reality in which the artist lives and from its elements constructs cultural communication. Thus, he expresses a unique vision of the humanized world.⁽¹⁹⁾

- 18 Maks WIECZORSKI, "Pod budynkiem urzędu cenzury obandażowali 45 drzew. To była pierwsza akcja ekologiczna w historii Polski," *Gazeta Wyborcza, Lublin*, 16 April 2023, <https://lublin.wyborcza.pl/lublin/7,48724,29663181,bol-tomka-kawiak-pierwszy-happenig-ekologiczny-w-obronie-drzew.html> (accessed on 9 January 2023).
- 19 Jolanta BRACH-CZAINA, *Etos nowej sztuki*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PWN 1984, p. 24.

The feminist phenomenologist observed that Kawiak's performance depicted an inseparable and tragic connection between the human world and nature, along with the negative impact of humans on the surrounding environment. Czajna's thought aligns with Alaimo's reflection, who, in the context of the climate crisis, emphasizes the inseparable connection between humans and the non-human entities surrounding them, pointing to a series of fluid relationships and a lack of clear boundaries.

In Kawiak's performance, tree branches become an extension of the artist's body, which empathizes with the pain of the nature surrounding him. Within the performance, the artist identifies with the trees, even the entire tree-lined avenue, and shares in the pain of the severed branches. The artist also rejects the established paradigm that assumes plants do not experience physical pain and lack feelings. Through his artistic act, he ascribes subjectivity to them and symbolically embraces them with care. Kawiak highlights the inseparability of the natural world and humanity, refuting this dualism. His gesture carries a political dimension – the artist opposes authority, even if it is minor administrative authority – and also a societal one, as he expresses opposition to accepted norms of treating non-human entities.

Another artist illustrating the coexistence of humans with nature and its cycles is Teresa Murak, associated with Lublin, a creator of installations, actions, photographs, sculptures, and drawings, whose work is often linked to land art. The artist engaged in both intimate, ephemeral actions and grand interventions in urban and natural spaces. In her art, she emphasized the importance of plants and inanimate entities such as water, river mud, dirt, or mud, which became the material of her works, acting as their primary actors. She exhibited her performances and shows in the Labirynt Gallery and BWA in Lublin multiple times, from the discussed actions in the 1970s, through the *WE* performance in 1985, the *Rags of the Visitation Nuns* (*Ścierki Wizytek*) performance in 1988, to the early 2000s,

Hybrids. Trans-corporeal
Performances at the Labyrinth
Gallery in Lublin in the 1970s

when she performed *Sage, Hollyhocks, Hyssop* (*Szałwia, Malwy, Hyzop*), sowing plants in the city space. The first performance titled *Lady's Smock* was performed by Murak in 1975. A brochure with photos from the performance has been preserved, in which the artist included a handwritten, poetic description of the action: "I place the cress seed on my damp shirt, cover my entire body with it, and water it. I wait for the seed to crack, the sprout to move, and for it to grow. From June 3 to June 8, 1975."⁽²⁰⁾

Murak created an object consisting of a linen, simple dress adorned with seeds. After a period of five days of germination, there was a public presentation of the piece of clothing. The artist put it on her naked body and walked barefoot through the streets of Lublin in the sunshine. Cress was a recurring material in the artist's work. Her body, its temperature, and humidity entered into an intimate relationship with the costume covered in tiny plants. Murak deliberately translated the name of her performance into English and used the term *Lady's Smock*. It referred to the historical name of a variety of the so-called meadow cress, which was literally called "woman's shirt" in medieval England.⁽²¹⁾ In 1976, the artist presented another performance involving cress, titled *Sowing 31 – Women's Calendar* (*Zasiew 31 – Kalendarz Kobiety*).⁽²²⁾ This time, she invited a model to participate in the performance, whom she arranged naked on a platform covered with cress. She then symmetrically covered her body by arranging triangles from fabric, sown with blooming seeds, which she previously cut from the lying material. The entire action, illuminated by spotlights, was observed by the audience positioned around the artist and her "altar." Murak created

20 Teresa Murak, *Rzeźucha. Lady's smock*, Lublin: Galeria Sztuki MDK Labirynt 1975.

21 Iwo ZMYŚLONY, "Zasiew. Wywiad z Teresą Murak, *Dwutygodnik*," 2016, issue 186, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/6582-zasiew.html> (accessed on 9 January 2023).

22 Performance reconstruction based on photographic documentation taken by Andrzej Polakowski, which is located in the archive of the Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin.

a “living sculpture” from the model and tiny plants in front of the audience.

Murak’s work has been interpreted through the prism of posthumanism and feminist new realism by Anka Kempkes and Karolina Majewska-Güde.⁽²³⁾ Kempkes describes Murak as an archetypal persistent gardener. The researcher believes that Murak’s aesthetic program foreshadows and corresponds to Donna Haraway’s concept outlined in the book *When Species Meet*, pointing to the notion of “biocultural companioning” and the hybrid intertwining of the world of plants, animals, and humans.⁽²⁴⁾ Kempkes contends that, by walking in her overgrown attire, Murak becomes a timeless cosmic-spiritual figure. The artist turns towards the earth, posing metaphysical questions about life. Murak works holistically, combining various materials in which she sees life, such as plants or earth, water, and mud.⁽²⁵⁾

On the other hand, Majewska-Güde emphasizes that Murak initiates the process of creating works that either form themselves or are shaped by natural vegetative processes. The artist combines the human body with organic and inorganic materials. The meaning of her works is situated in the interdependence of the artist’s corporeality and the artifacts she creates. The researcher places Murak’s performance in the context of new feminist materialism, particularly hydrofeminism and the vegetal turn. Hydrofeminism emphasizes embodied existence in a world where everything undergoes fluid exchange and circulation. Interpreting Murak’s work through the lens of hydrofeminism prompts a reflection on the issue of relations and transformations between the human and non-human

23 Łukasz MOJSK – Łukasz RONDUDA (eds.), *Teresa Murak – Nowe Spojrzenia*, Warszawa: Zachęta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki 2002.

24 Donna HARAWAY, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2007.

25 Anka KEMPKE, “Demonstracja roślin,” in: MOJSK – RONDUDA, *Teresa Murak*, pp. 52–75.

in the artist’s works. The role of water as the primordial force activating seeds, acting as an agent in the initiation of the *Sowing* performance, is highlighted by Majewska-Güde. In the context of Murak, she speaks not of the artist wielding control over matter but of “patient collaboration,” coexistence, and mutual permeation. The author terms this approach “empathetic materialism.” Following Boyan Manchev, she refers to Murak’s actions as “transformances,” where the performer’s body is open to relations, transformations, and exchanges, rather than confined within the boundaries of its own representation. Furthermore, Murak employs a plant-centered perspective, and her works transcend the duality of material-object, existing in a continuous process of growth or decay.⁽²⁶⁾

However, one can debate the extent to which Murak granted autonomy to natural processes and how much control she exerted over them to create a singular performance. Murak’s performances in Lublin were self-contained entities, adhering to the dramaturgy of performances presented to gallery audiences. This stands in stark contrast to her subsequent endeavors in guerrilla gardening across various cities, where she initiated the process of vegetation, which has persisted for years, remaining wholly devoted to natural processes.

Questions may also arise regarding the inclusion of another nude woman (a young blonde fitting the stereotypical canon of female beauty) in her performance within the context of feminist critique. This action could be criticized as objectifying or sexualizing the model. Unlike her contemporary Ewa Partum, Murak did not choose to undress herself before the audience in an emancipatory gesture. Consequently, the unnamed model was devoid of agency, executing choreographed movements. The situation evoked a pagan ritual, reminiscent of clandestine underground

26 Karolina MAJEWSKA-GÜDE, *Pomiędzy strumieniem a świętynią. Transfiguracyjny materializm Teresy Murak*, in: MOJSK – RONDUDA, *Teresa Murak*, pp. 82–120.

ceremonies shielded from daylight (and unwanted accidental spectators). The model became a kinetic sculpture, her body reduced to its biological essence, thus equating it with vegetative processes. The performance inscribed the female body into the cyclical nature, imbuing it with earth-like characteristics – a fertile ground giving life. Murak was sensitive to the relationships between humans and matter, such as soil, dust, river mud, sourdough, or dirt – materials where, according to the artist, non-human life thrives, comprised of millions of bacteria, mites, and microorganisms constituting living matter. Her performances were imbued with relational thinking about the world and humanity's place within a complex ecosystem. Her actions defied the dichotomy between culture and nature, depicting them as an inseparable, dynamically interwoven fabric of matter and energy. In this sense, the model's body and the living plants placed upon it were meant to indicate their origin from a single symbolic order.

A surprising aspect of Murak's work is the fusion of ecofeminist themes with Christianity, which held significant importance for the artist, crafting altars and Easter decorations for Catholic churches alongside land art and processual projects. The artist sought mysticism, spirituality, and transcendence in her art. Cress became emblematic of life and rebirth, as well as a symbol of Christ.⁽²⁷⁾ The emerging plant from the seed, female fertility, and the figure of the resurrected Jesus formed a cohesive narrative about the cyclical and immortal nature of life. Her stance can be associated with postsecularism, rejecting the Enlightenment's division between science, modern philosophy and religion and turning towards religion as a collection of beliefs and values that continue to influence social, political, and cultural life, even in societies predominantly seen as secular. In this sense, Murak's performances

Hybrids. Trans-corporeal
Performances at the Labyrinth
Gallery in Lublin in the 1970s



27 Iwo ZMYŚLONY, "Feminizm ziemi. Powrót Teresy Murak," *Obieg.pl*, 26 June 2013, <https://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/rozmowy/29069> (accessed on 9 January 2023).

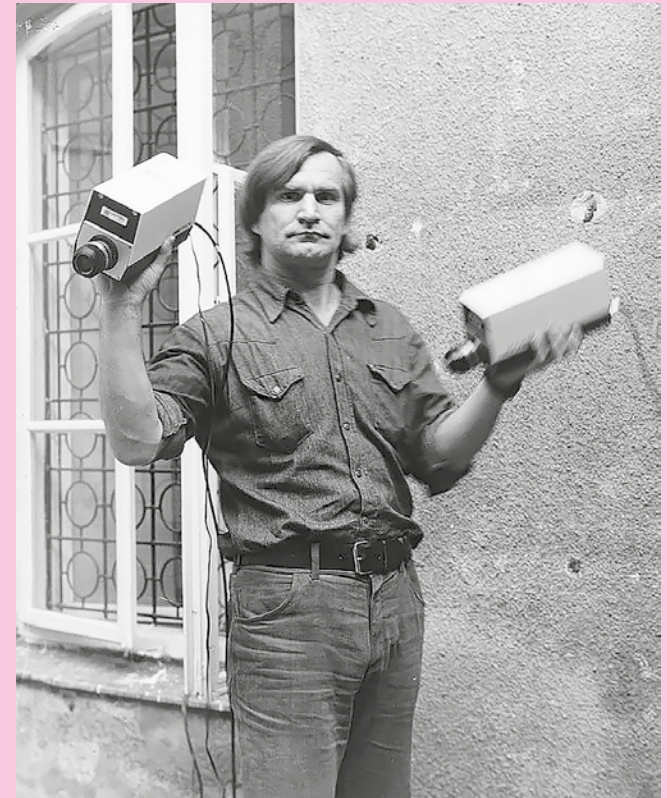
↪
01 Zbigniew Warpechowski, *Dialogue with
a Fish (Dialog z rybą)*, 1973, the collection
of Zachęta National Gallery in Warsaw.



02 Teresa Murak, *Lady's smock*, 1975, Labyrinth
Gallery Archives, photo: Andrzej Polakowski.



↶
03 Teresa Murak, *Sowing 31 – Women's Calendar*
(*Zasiew 31 – Kalendarz Kobiety*), 1976, Labyrinth
Gallery Archives, photo: Andrzej Polakowski.



04 Józef Robakowski, *Mechanical-Biological Records*
 – *Television Performance* (*Zapisy mechaniczno-
 biologiczne – performance telewizyjny*), 1976, Labyrinth
 Gallery Archives, photo: Andrzej Polakowski.

Tomasz Załuski



↶
05 Krzysztof Zarębski, *Autohemo*, 1976, Labyrinth
Gallery Archives, photo: Leszek Fidusiewicz, courtesy
of the artist and Galeria Monopol, Warsaw.





06 Krzysztof Zarębski, *Transmission*
(*Transmisja*), 1978, the Remont Gallery in
Warsaw, photo: Leszek Fidusiewicz, courtesy
of the artist and Galeria Monopol, Warsaw.

acquired a political dimension in the 1970s, not only through a return to nature and a paradigm shift concerning humanity's place in the natural world but also as religious manifestos in officially secular communist Poland, where the authorities opposed the Catholic Church and manifestations of religiosity in state institutions and public space.

*Camera and cables as extensions
of the performer's body*

In posthumanist theory, humans are understood as a part of nature and its processes, as well as creators of their own matter and technologies, including machines. In her famous text *Cyborg Manifesto*,⁽²⁸⁾ Donna Haraway introduces the concept of the cyborg as a symbolic figure capable of transcending traditional divisions between nature and culture, body and technology, human and animal, and other binary oppositions. Cyborgs represent the flexibility of contemporary identities that transgressively flow beyond categories, eluding any forms of essentialization. Although Haraway's work dates back to 1985, and the wave of mediated performance utilizing new technologies, including computers, can be primarily traced to the 1990s,⁽²⁹⁾ examples of "extending" the artist's body and new forms of collaboration with technology can already be found much earlier in action art.

One such example is the work of Józef Robakowski, a pioneer of video art in Poland and co-founder of the Workshop of Film Form (Warsztat Formy Filmowej) in Łódź.⁽³⁰⁾ Robakowski closely collaborated with the Labirynt Gallery in the 1970s. He was often invited as a curator for exhibitions and as an individual artist. In 1978, he held

28 Donna HARAWAY, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Socialist Review*, 1985, issue 80, pp. 65–108.

29 Wojciech KOWALCZYK, "Performans zmediatyzowany – hot or not?," *Kultura Popularna*, Vol. 44, 2015, issue 2, pp. 186–195.

30 Marika KUŹMICZ – Łukasz RONDUDA (eds.), *Warsztat Formy Filmowej*, Warszawa – London: Sternberg Press – Arton Foundation 2017.

an exhibition-performance titled *Mechanical-Biological Records – Television Performance* (*Zapisy mechaniczno-biologiczne – performance telewizyjny*). Photographs by Andrzej Polakowski located in the gallery archive depict the artist standing in front of the gallery building with two 16mm cameras in his hands, and the audience sitting in the gallery, watching films that were simultaneously broadcast on two screens. Transmitting images from a location other than the gallery, the so-called “closed circuit” or “picture in a picture,” were recurring actions among artists associated with the photo-media trend in Poland. However, Robakowski did not record the environment in a conventional way. He moved his hands holding recording equipment, as if performing physical exercises, and the cameras acted as weights. Iconic photos of the artist lifting his hands triumphantly with two cameras emerged from this action. The exhibition also included documentation of the artist’s actions from the *Mechanical-Biological Records* series presented on two white walls set at an angle to each other. Additionally, there were televisions in the gallery displaying a video performance titled *Along the Line* (*I walk, run, jump, ride...*) (*Po linii [Idę, skaczę, biegnę]*), in which the artist executed those movements with a camera recording the image.⁽³¹⁾

Robakowski referred to the action at the Labirynt Gallery as a “television performance,” even though it contradicted the conventional operation of this medium. The artist created his own television based on live transmission, which could be watched in real-time, without editing, by viewers in the gallery. However, it significantly differed from any television production. It lacked a script, narrative, or a defined form. It was abstract and presented random, unscripted elements of daily reality. It was also devoid of moral messages or propaganda elements. Robakowski

Hybrids. Trans-corporeal
Performances at the Labyrinth
Gallery in Lublin in the 1970s

created this work during the decade of Edward Gierek, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party from 1970 to 1980 when television became firmly established in Polish homes and became part of modern life.⁽³²⁾ Robakowski critically commented on this medium, drawing attention to its persuasive-propagandistic mechanisms, allowing the use of television receivers as tools of power and citizen manipulation.⁽³³⁾

Robakowski’s experiments often involved deconstructing the film medium, drawing attention to its materiality, non-objectivity and conventionality. The performance in Lublin was a repetition and expansion of the action *Exercises for Two Hands* (*Ćwiczenia na dwie ręce*), which originated in Łódź in 1976.⁽³⁴⁾ In both actions, the artist aimed to “detach the camera from the eye,” emphasize the corporeality of the film recording, and reveal the functioning of the medium, namely the camera and its dependence on the movements of the human body. He wrote about it in the following way:

For many years, I have been studying the relationship between the psycho-physical states of my organism and the devices I use for mechanical recordings (film camera, camera, TV camera, tape recorder). The result of these studies is the conviction of the fundamental importance of technical inventions because they allow me to transfer my psycho-physical states, temperament, and

31 Tomasz ZAŁUSKI, “Najbardziej efemeryczna ze sztuk, Wczesne realizacje z użyciem wideo w lubelskich galeriach Labirynt i BWA w latach 1976–1984,” *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, 2022, issue 27, p. 204.

32 On the role of the media in Poland in 1970s see: Katarzyna POKORNA-IGNATOWICZ, “Między misją a polityką. O politycznym uwikłaniu TYP w przeszłości i współcześnie”, in: Danuta WANIEK – Janusz W. ADAMOWSKI (eds.), *Media masowe w praktyce społecznej*, Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR 2007, pp. 222–223.

33 Tomasz ZAŁUSKI, “Najbardziej efemeryczna ze sztuk,” p. 214.

34 Józef Robakowski’s *Exercises for Two Hands* available in the Performance Archive at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw: <https://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/robakowski-jozef-cwiczenia-na-dwie-rece-2> (accessed on 3 April 2024).

consciousness onto tape. [...] At present, I am interested in the problem of taking away the functions from the tools I use.⁽³⁵⁾

Furthermore, for Robakowski, wrapped in cables, grappling with the weight of machines, the important concept was one that could now be called, in Haraway's terms, cyborgic extension of the possibilities of the human body. Researchers of Robakowski's work had already noted this aspect earlier. Załuski wrote about it as an extension of biological body movements and new receptors that allowed a different experience of reality.⁽³⁶⁾ Bożena Czubak referred to it as the logic of technology as a prosthesis for the human body.⁽³⁷⁾ Meanwhile, Ronduda analyzed *Mechanical-Biological Records* in terms of the transgression of authorship categories, which were partly given over to chance and partly to the movements and automation of the machine. Robakowski's performance went beyond anthropocentric limitations, incorporating the "creativity of the machine" into the artwork, which gained autonomy. Moreover, works from this series, especially *I Walk... (Idę)*, were iconoclastic representations of the human body, with all its materiality and physicality, rendered through the machine and the image.⁽³⁸⁾

Robakowski merged technology with the organic energy of the human body, articulating it in the following manner: "I am most interested in these two attitudes: the constructive attitude, necessary for precisely articulating what I mean, and the biological energy that exists in humans and intertwines perfectly into one."⁽³⁹⁾ His idea aligns with the theory of trans-corporeality. The artist-performer sees himself and

35 Józef ROBAKOWSKI, "Oderwanie kamery od oka (1977)," <http://www.robakowski.eu/p17.html> (accessed on 13 March 2024).

36 ZAŁUSKI, "Najbardziej efemeryczna ze sztuk," p. 214.

37 Bożena CZUBAK, "Kino własne," in: *Józef Robakowski. Moje własne kino*, Warszawa: CSW Zamek Ujazdowski 2012, p. 109.

38 Łukasz RONDUDA, "J. Robakowski i Warsztat Formy Filmowej w latach siedemdziesiątych," in: *Józef Robakowski*, p. 77.

39 *Józef Robakowski*, p. 23.

his body as a part of a larger system, an organism in which various energies are interwoven. Despite discursively applying a division into organic (nature) and constructive (culture or, broadly, science and machines), he emphasizes that in his creative work, these forces merge into one. In his actions, machines gain subjectivity and gradual independence, freeing themselves from the operator's gaze. The recording ceases to be controlled by the author, and agency is relinquished to chance and the internal machine processes. Tools become extensions of the human body, almost emerging from its tissues, creating a prototype of a cyborgic hybrid.

Robakowski, by utilizing technologies, surpasses the cognitive capabilities of his body. He depicts the body in relation to the machine, with the machine taking control over the image and representation of the world. In doing so, he aligns closely with Haraway's idea, who considered the cyborg as an entity that transcends the dualism of the body and its technological support, and negates the division between what is natural and what is cultural. However, the artist takes a step further in a radical, destructive gesture towards his own body. In later stages of the artist's work, he becomes one body with a machine he uses, connecting his tissues to electricity. During the WRO Festival in 1996, he performed *I Am Electric*, in which his body became a conduit through which electric current flowed, its voltage increased by the audience.⁽⁴⁰⁾ It was a radical gesture of merging the body with the machine.

40 Documentation of the performance *I Am Electric* by Józef Robakowski is available in the video archive of the WRO Art Center: http://video.wrocenter.pl/wideo/dca_europeana/jestemelektryczny/ (accessed on 9 January 2024).

*Leeches, Blood and Sound
Amplifiers in Krzysztof
Zarębski's performances*

A similar intertwining of organic and technological energy is present in the work of Krzysztof Zarębski, a performer, sculptor, installation and set designer, as well as an experimental musician. In the 1970s, he was a significant figure in Polish performance art. Despite permanently residing in Warsaw, Zarębski frequently participated in events at the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin. After the onset of martial law, he moved to New York, where he continued his career. Throughout his artistic career, he pioneered the integration of various disciplines and media such as performance, theater, film, action, movement, and music.⁽⁴¹⁾ In his Fluxus-inspired actions, he often utilized new technologies and sound equipment, as well as non-human entities such as leeches or various substances.

During the opening of a major group exhibition *Offer of the Labirynt Gallery (Oferta Galerii Labirynt)* in December 1976, the artist performed a groundbreaking event called *Autohemo*.⁽⁴²⁾ The participating model was Alicja Żebrowska, who later became a well-known artist in the realm of critical art. Colorful photographs taken by Leszek Fidusiewicz captured a crucial moment of the performance, which involved pouring blood over the model's eyes.⁽⁴³⁾ The artist arranged the model in a low, almost ground-level position, covering her body with a sheet to resemble a patient. Additionally, he covered her eyes with a white bandage. He tied a tourniquet on his left arm and pierced a vein in the elbow's bend with a needle. He then applied a catheter, causing

Hybrids. Trans-corporeal
Performances at the Labyrinth
Gallery in Lublin in the 1970s

41 Łukasz RONDUDA, *Polska sztuka lat 70 Awangarda*, p. 62.

42 In the archival materials, there is a description of the performance *Points and Lines*, which was likely planned by the artist and announced by the materials sent to the gallery.

43 See photos from the performance *Autohemo* by Krzysztof Zarębski in the Performance Archive of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw: <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/performans/archiwum/2769> (accessed on 9 January 2023).

blood to drip down his forearm onto the model's eyes. The artist allowed the blood to flow over her eyes.⁽⁴⁴⁾ According to the account of Zygmunt Korus, a Lublin art critic, another person, a professional nurse, assisted in the action. He wrote about him in the following way:

The artist confessed that the starting point for him was a personal experience that he now sought to give a more universal character. *Autohemo*, such as treating eyesight with one's own blood, procedures performed on stage by the author and the assisting professional nurse, self-mutilation, theatrically emphasized gestures of actions, gave a specific dramaturgy to this performance, creating an atmosphere of reflective contemplation on this life-giving self-destruction performed in front of the audience. Zarębski's constant attributes – greenery, the decorative use of natural shapes of plants, such as lace-like arrangements of ferns during the *The Offer* [exhibition] – underscore both the physical aspect of the artist's actions and the inseparability of humans and nature, even during gallery events.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Autohemo was the first transgressive performance in Poland to incorporate the motif of self-mutilation and blood shock. It introduced an element of health risk for both the artist and the participant in the performance. The intention was to evoke shock and, possibly, feelings of disgust or repulsion among the gallery audience. The use of blood is also not without significance. According to Julia Kristeva's theory,

44 Kazimierz PIOTROWSKI, *Krzysztof Zarębski. Erotematy słabnącego Erosa. Przyczynę do dziejów sztuki performance w Polsce i Stanach Zjednoczonych po 1968 roku*, Radom: Mazowieckie Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej "Elektrownia" 2009, pp. 107–111.

45 Zygmunt KORUS, "Oferta awangardy," *Razem*, No. 15, 10 April 1977, pp. 23–25.

blood is a specific substance that can be called an abject.⁽⁴⁶⁾ The writer often relates it to the so-called “borders of the body,” referring to physiological fluids (blood, sweat, feces, tears) associated with the liminal moments of human life. The abject, in this sense, is something between an object and a subject. It is destructive, disrupts the order of the world, and quickly needs to be disposed of or set aside because it induces feelings of nausea. However, in the understanding of trans-corporeality theory, it remains a component of the world to which humans are dynamically connected.

The action involving blood recalls other performances by Zarębski, in which he used living creatures, namely leeches. This took place at the Remont Gallery in Warsaw during the *IAM International Meeting of Artists – Performance Workshops* festival in 1978. The artist performed *Transmission (Transmisja)* with the participation of Krystyna Jachniewicz and Michał Jędrzak. It unfolded within an elaborate scenography typical of the artist’s performances, including two chairs, a transistor radio on a tray with soil, colorful whistles sticking out of the ground with their mouthpieces up, chairs with a tray, white canvas and scissors, an alto flute in a horizontal position with a vinyl tube, a metal basin with live grass, and another piece of white canvas. Human actors entered this setting. Jędrzak played the role of a patient or recipient of sounds produced on strange instruments by Zarębski. The artist bandaged his head and attached a tube to his ear through which he transmitted sounds from the radio buried underground or played the flute. In the final act of the performance, Jachniewicz attached a medical leech to the model’s leg, and Zarębski attached a microphone to it in such a way that the sucking sound produced by the animal was transmitted through speakers and audible to the audience of the performance.⁽⁴⁷⁾

46 Julia KRISTEVA, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (1980), New York: Columbia University Press 1982.

47 Krzysztof ZARĘBSKI, *Transmisja*, <https://krzysztofzarebski.pl/performance-i-wystawy/transmisja> (accessed on 9 January 2023).

Zarębski repeatedly collaborated with plants, living animals, and abject materials in his actions. Michael Carter, a New York-based writer, performance artist, critic, and curator of Zarębski’s exhibitions, emphasized that Zarębski’s actions are a meditation on the flow of energy between the inanimate and animate worlds. He placed them within the tradition of “organic” conceptualism (alongside Marcel Duchamp, Fluxus, Kiki Smith, or *arte povera*). Carter underscored the significance of biological materials in Zarębski’s art, as well as other objects used in performances and installations: poetry, newspaper clippings, tape recordings, nails, sperm, the human voice, wind, hair, ice, and moss.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Zarębski’s work can be interpreted through a posthumanist lens, focusing on the relationships between the artist’s body and technology, living animals, and plants. The artist treated the inanimate world (objects, “object-fetishes,” technology), natural props (plants, soil, biological waste), and the human body (with its physiological fluids) equally. His performances unfold in a fluid, hybrid, trans-medial, and trans-corporeal space, co-created by “other” entities. However, these relationships remain complex and ambiguous.

Zarębski’s actions had a surrealistic-dadaistic character, and the combination of unexpected elements and shocking the viewer was part of the artistic language designed to evoke an emotional response. One might question to what extent the inclusion of leeches in the performance amounted to violence towards animals. The fate of these leeches after the performance, as well as their experiences during the event, remain unknown. They were used by the artist as a musical instrument and a means of introducing transgression, as well as integrating into the tissues of another person and working with the substance of blood. Although

48 Michael CARTER, “Krzysztof Zarębski: morfologia czasu i alchemia pożądania,” in: *Krzysztof Zarębski, Instalacja (z dźwiękiem i pijawkami)*, Lublin: Galeria Labirynt 2 1992.

they were becoming props, animals or abject substances symbolically and declaratively depicted the entirety of humanity in an inseparable intertwining of the biological and technological realms that is coherent with trans-corporeal ideas. The sense of incomprehension, complexity of relationships, ambiguity of boundaries, and irrationality evoked by Zarębski's performances is at the core of Stacy Alaimo's thinking.

Conclusion

In summary, in the opening of the article, I presented Warpechowski's performances, which serve as an example of the objectification of animals, or more broadly, non-human entities, in performance. However, subsequent examples from the 1970s demonstrate a different sensitivity among artists who incorporate plants, animals, and mechanical elements into their actions, attributing partial agency to them, caring for them and paying attention to the coexistence of the human body with them. The 1970s marked a pivotal period in the development of process art and performance, witnessing a gradual departure from modernist notions of art centralized around a rational, all-knowing, closed individual. New initiatives emerged, introducing non-human actors into the artistic realm. As evidenced by the performances held at the Labirynt Gallery and BWA in Lublin, a nascent ecological and posthumanist awareness began to take shape among young neo-avant-garde artists.

The relationships between human performers and non-human entities in the performances of the featured artists remain intricate. Often, it is not possible to definitively ascertain whether animals and plants were included or utilized by them in their actions. However, it is worth noting that in the 1970s, a new trend emerged related to ecology, nature conservation, and attention to the fate of animals and the treatment of nature by humans. The actions of Tomek Kawiak and Teresa Murak indicate a paradigm shift in thinking about the human's place in the ecosystem,

Hybrids. Trans-corporeal
Performances at the Labyrinth
Gallery in Lublin in the 1970s

where on a symbolic level, trees become extensions of the artist's hands, and the model's body and the artist's costume become fertile soil from which plants emerge. Meanwhile, the performances of Robakowski and Zarębski depict humans entangled in complex and ambiguous relationships with biological-technological elements. They raise questions about the boundaries of the human body, its agency, relationships with abject substances, and evolving technology. These performances can be interpretively linked with Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, which abolishes all binaries and rational divisions, showing humans entwined in processes of varying scales and in dynamic and ambiguous relationships with non-human entities and surrounding matter.