



SEMINARIUM IN PLACE

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Katy Bentall and Pracownia

When news broke that Pracownia (The Studio) as we knew it could well cease to exist, many expressed sorrow. What was it that they (we) were sorry about? It couldn't only be about Karol Tchorek's sculptures, or the artefacts he collected, or about Karol and Mariusz Tchorek's archives; collections and archives can be transferred. It couldn't be about the architecture either; the building could well go on existing, possibly to house another new and fashionable restaurant.

I visited the place for the first time not that long ago. It was in March this year, thanks to Kamil Julian's efforts. I went accompanied by Kamil and Agnieszka Tarasiuk. Two things in particular attracted my immediate attention: firstly, the subtlety of Katy's works arranged in the rooms. A poem on a small piece of white fabric, white and flimsy. An old photograph of a white dress hanging. A bundle of black cloth hung from the ceiling, wrapped in black tulle. Despite the mood of mourning which seemed to be enveloping the place, it was not the colour black but the tulle itself that I found distinctly important. I purposely emphasised that it was the delicateness of work which drew my attention rather than the works themselves – I was moved and touched by that specific feature of theirs.

A bath on the mezzanine next to the bed was the other object. A classic bath supported on legs, slightly old-fashioned and yet an obvious relatively new addition as part of The Studio's comfort furnishings. At once I imagined it filled with warm water one could immerse oneself in (the day I visited Pracownia was freezing, with heavy snowfall). Having this in mind, the corporeal object in the space came strongly into presence.

I am under the impression that whenever The Studio is discussed, too much attention is paid to the location, with the experience thereof and resulting emotions neglected. Not enough attention is paid to how the place is experienced by visitors and by the occasional resident; or, primarily, by Katy – the one who shapes and forms it.

I realise that Katy finds it important to contrast Pracownia with Edward Krasiński's Studio, most probably for reasons of the story behind the Galeria Foksal [Foksal Gallery], a location close to her heart through her husband Mariusz Tchorek. While I have no wish to dwell on that particular story, it will reappear in this intervention for a little while. I shall, however, focus on the contrast, as the two beings are indeed similar. A comparison of how they function on the art scene will allow us to see Pracownia in a light somewhat different from how it is usually shown in. They are known as Edward Krasiński's Studio and Karol Tchorek's Pracownia, respectively. What does that mean, exactly: that a studio "belongs to" Krasiński or Tchorek? Two different things, in these two different cases. Just for the sake of information, let us recall that the atelier-and-living quarters on the top floor of a residential block of flats with an Aleja Świerczewskiego address was given in 1962 to Henryk Stażewski, who moved in with Maria Ewa Łunkiewicz-Rogoyska and her husband. After the married couple died, Edward Krasiński moved in; the place began taking on its contemporary shape in the wake of Henryk Stażewski's death, once Krasiński embarked on a series of his own interventions.

Pracownia had been originally formed by Karol Tchorek, who moved his entire collection to this ruined annexe in 1951 after the tenement house he operated his *Nike* salon in was demolished. When

Karol died, his son Mariusz fought for several years to keep the place; in the early 1990s, he managed to have it proclaimed a historical monument. This is also when he met Katy and their life together began. Pracownia became their Warsaw home and acted as her studio when she was there. This is where they stayed when visiting Warsaw. Katy began her interventions immediately (on her first visit), and has never stopped. Notably, the way her artistic path has developed is largely space-oriented. Her *curriculum vitae* is a diagram mapping out all her “places of art”, but without a single exhibition date. The CV shows a garden shed next to her parents’ home, and a seaside house in Felixstowe where she lived during her Norwich university years. Pracownia is there too, next on the timeline – this is where Katy continued the practice she set in motion at the two aforementioned locations, and would continue developing as part of the *DOMUS* project.

Obviously, each place has been imprinted with a different story and the different emotions of the people who lived and worked there; each location varies in its architectural style and furnishings. Pracownia has been and is filled with what Karol Tchorek and Mariusz Tchorek left behind in material and emotional terms, respectively. Katy works the material dimension, using an emotional filter.

It would be noteworthy to take a look at Katy Bentall’s and Mariusz Tchorek’s work as if contemplating a dialogue between a pair of artists, in which feelings and senses, and artistic and intellectual activities remain inseparable. This is a dialogue which could well be followed by analysing his texts and her work, all created simultaneously. I am not after a perception of influence or inspiration. It would be much more attractive to take a Kristeva-inspired position, with any thought of stable objects preserving their identity and position rejected.

In a letter to Katy penned in the early days of their relationship, Mariusz Tchorek wrote of her place of art in Felixstowe as a semiotic space which might be contrasted with the symbolic space of Norwich (the art college she attended). More importantly, he admitted that having encountered both of these places and experienced the bond between them, he realised that it was the semiotic properties which had been

crucial to his concept of Galeria Foksal, in his imaginings of what it should be. He couldn't implement the concept or bring those semiotic properties to life because of "Wiesio's [Borowski's] need of symbolising". His letter proves beyond doubt that Kristeva's writings had been of vital importance to them both in conceptualising their own artistic practises. I firmly believe that Kristeva's works – and Mariusz Tchorek's commentary thereto – could also help us in debating The Studio. It seems that the place had become yet another semiotic, carnal, emotional, impulsive, and dynamic space for tem both. And this is how it remained in the wake of Mariusz Tchorek's death in 2004; Katy working here alone.

In Katy's artistic practice, certain elements whose recurring presence ties the different "places of art" together, have been appearing since her early works. Furthermore, their presence highlights the continuity of her artistic inclinations. The white dress is an excellent example. Katy has described its entrance into the world of art objects: *"I remember standing in front of the mirror in my London flat in 1990. I was wearing a white cotton summer dress - a coffee stain ran down the front. As I looked, I knew that I would never wash this dress again, so I took it off and hung it on the wall. I wanted to re-think it as my canvas or perhaps just a small piece of watercolour paper, covered with a first wash of raw sienna"*. A white dress – I wasn't sure if it was the white dress – later appeared in Pracownia and in the *DOMUS*. The piece of cotton fabric used as a sheet of paper returned as well. I see Katy's poems typed on cloth on a typewriter once owned by Karol Tchorek as full of meaning. They are meaningful to the perception of the said space as semiotic; a space where rational text on a clean sheet is replaced with script where tactility, rhythm, and sound prevail over meaning.

I was intrigued why – as an English speaker – Katy insists on using the Polish word Pracownia (and has me using and reusing it). When asked, she gave a number of responses: that Pracownia is like a

given name to her; that it carries a direct connection to the word *prace*¹; that this is what Mariusz Tchorek called the place, and – most importantly to me – that it sounds good. This was also how she justified her use of the name of another previously mentioned “place of art”: *DOM* turned into *DOMUS*, in a sonorous blend of the words “DOM”² and “HOUSE”.

We have reached a moment in the history of the place when it can actually alter its nature, because of our “need of symbolising”. In the words of Michał Krasucki, Chairman of the local chapter of the Society for the Conservation of Warsaw Historical Monuments, “*these places form part our history. They are part of our memory, a heritage we should be preserving*”³. Krasucki offered the comment expressing his sadness at the loss of places of art, during a virtual tour of Warsaw studio locations formerly owned by late artists. One cannot help but agree with the comment, and yet a focus on the past seems to have utterly obliterated the present. This was Karol Tchorek’s studio (and still is, to a certain extent), but it is Katy Bentall’s Pracownia as well. Katy is the one responsible for the place’s current shape and form. She handled its restoration, co-operating with architect Małgorzata Wagner. She made fundamental decisions concerning the placement of different objects and elements, going well beyond the purpose of storage – what I have in mind here is e.g. placing the father’s and son’s archives in cabinets facing each other, as if in dialogue, in a space which had been the bathroom, and which today only holds a bedclothes washing machine. She is responsible for the ever-changing arrangement of objects filling The Studio’s space, not to mention her own works, short- or longer-term residents of the place.

Here is where Katy practices her art, in a simile to Krasiński and his work in the Świerczewskiego (later renamed Solidarności) flat, to return to that particular comparison. By no means do I wish to claim that

¹ *Prace* (Polish) – “works”. *Pracownia* (Polish) – “work studio” or “workshop” (*translator’s comment* – A.S.-K.).

² *Dom* (Polish) – “home” or “house” (*translator’s comment* – A.S.).

³ Małgorzata Piwowar, *Art in Hidden Places (Sztuka w ukrytych miejscach)*, <http://www.rp.pl/artykul/1038543.html> [October 10th 2013].

their work is identical. I am far from ready for an extensive comparison, and yet several similarities and differences are worth mentioning. The former indubitably include working without witnesses – visitors only get to see the result. They actually have to want to notice. Another similarity is that of continuous work over time. The latter consist in the following: Krasiński preferred his artistic work results and interventions to overlap, to appropriate the space they inhabited; her works appear and disappear. To quote Ella Chmielewska, Katy's works are “*carefully positioned and arranged but not fixed*”⁴.

The current form and shape of the place (in case of Pracownia – constantly changing) has been created by Katy Bentall; exactly as in case of Krasiński's Studio – it is a result of Krasiński's work. In the world of art, however, they operate differently: he is the creator; she remains a guardian of her husband's and father-in-law's heritage (in writing the above, I am fully aware that all that was left of Henryk Stażewski and his work were mere traces of what had been there and been removed, while Karol Tchorek left material assets behind, complete with caretaking issues). That, however, does not really impact my line of argumentation. On second thoughts, it actually might: Katy blends both functions, being a heritage guardian as well as an artist; Krasiński had never been burdened with a caretaker position.

Katy tends to be erased from Pracownia as an artist. The art history discourse (one would be hard-pressed to quote a name, which is why such Foucault-style phrasing seems appropriate) has selected her father-in-law, a person strong in position, as the entity “owning” the place. In the article I quoted from when recalling a comment by Michał Krasucki, Katy Bentall has not been mentioned once; neither was she featured in a photograph chosen to illustrate the text, which photograph (coincidentally) works very well with another snapshot showing Pracownia in a very similar way. The latter, however, does show Katy, and was used in a postcard printed by the Tchorek-Bentall Foundation. I

⁴ Ella Chmielewska, *Introduction*, [in:] *A Warsaw address: a Dossier on 36, Smolna Street*, *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 8-9.

see it as Katy's regrettably failed attempt to make herself part of the space in discourse. Obviously, not the photograph was a failure – but the effort to make it and its meaning generally known.

Art history often describes female artists' studios – albeit usually those of the olden days only. Owning a studio is typically described as a symptom of women's art becoming “professional”. Such approach might prove justified in Katy's case as well, although the situation of contemporary female artists obviously greatly varies from their circumstances in the late 19th and early 20th century. And yet Katy is not that self-confident as a professional artist, something that became apparent to me as we talked.

In a paper describing her work (the *DOMUS* project), I found her saying, “*My interventions are very light. It's easy to wipe me away as an artist. I'm not blowing things up. I'm like a spider, weaving a web*”⁵. I believe that the way she described her own position is very apt. The concept of linking women's work to weaving reappears in numerous writings. Let me recall an essay by Nancy Miller. In a debate with Roland Barthes and his concept of text as a fabric, she refused to accept the author's death. She demanded that a weaver be introduced, suggesting that arachnology replace hyphology⁶. And yet, Penelope rather than Arachne seems to be a more adequate simile for Katy's work. One could well refer to a home guarded when the husband is gone, albeit the heroine's act of weaving triggers more interest, not to mention the continuous unweaving of her own work – let me remind the audience that unweaving at night what she wove during daytime was vital. In her 1990 essay *What was Penelope Unweaving*, Carolyn Heilbrun explains that what she did stemmed from the lack of her own history⁷. Heilbrun claims that women are forced to live a script they had not penned themselves.

⁵ Meaghan Thurston, *The Art of 'Placing': Visualising Home and Memory*, a thesis, University of Edinburgh.

⁶ Nancy K. Miller, *The Arachnologies: the Woman, the Text, and the Critic*, [in:] *ibidem*, *The Poetics of Gender*, Columbia University Press, 1987.

⁷ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *What was Penelope Unweaving*, [in:] *ibidem*, *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women*, Women's Press, 1990.

They do not create anything of their own – they begin, and yet they unweave. I see Katy as Penelope, written by the art community into a script narrating the story of Mariusz Tchorek’s widow, a living guardian of her late husband’s and Karol Tchorek’s heritage. “Everyone asks about them, nobody asks about me”, she said during our most recent conversation. Her work in this place resembles Penelope’s. Heilbrun described Penelope as a narrative-less narration. This does bring Katy’s work to mind: her art is ephemeral; it appears and rapidly disappears, without having been identified as narration, or having been made part of her place’s history. And yet – wielding tools handed to us by researchers such as the aforementioned Kristeva – we are not helpless when faced with such reality. Though obviously we have to want to make good use of the tools we have been given.

Translation: Aleksandra Sobczak-Kovesi