

Joanna Wowrzeczka

## **Summary of personal achievements**

Description of my academic achievements for the first grade procedure

I was graduated from the Silesian University in 1995 in major: Master of Fine Arts in Painting. My final work was consist of several large sized paintings with a reference to the landscape paintings. This work was a result of the enjoyable dedication to the painting issues I was committed to in that time. The desire of creating a specific environment for my art and reflecting on my paintings work lead me to leave my paintbrushes and colors. Following this desire I founded Atelier for Observation the Artistic Facts POFA 112 (Pracowni Obserwacji Faktów Artystycznych – POFA 112). Our academic coordinator became Dr. Adam Molenda. I began to travel all around Poland to get known the artists involved in developing the art field. We also began to read books and discuss them for the library of the modern art that we were about to create as a major point of the POFA activity. We had organized two state conferences and collected above 6 thousands books on the modern art. Until now I take care of this collection.

Since 2000 I had run the academic and artistic group „Off the Atelier”, where students could freely challenge the artistic forms of expression not included in the regular syllabus of any Art Department. With my students we had organized five workshop editions in Cieszyn called “Explorations”. We had hosted the main artists from Poland. In the meantime I had tried to open a new art institution that would promote modern art beyond the university. That was my first attempt to go out of the space of my university, that I found too “safe” place for my explorations.

In 2002 its work began gallery *Szara* that I had founded and coordinated for the next 5 years. To be in charge of this place made me define an artistic field in which the gallery could exist. In this process helped me my sociological carrier that let me enter the world of empiricism. I did research of the field of art in Poland watching the work of 39 galleries. I did interview with all leading artists in Poland at that time. This work was resulted of my PhD dissertation that I defended the July 13<sup>th</sup> in 2004 at the Faculty of Social Science (University of Silesia). The title of my thesis was “Negotiators of art. Sociological study on the art galleries in Poland” (my doctoral advisor: prof. W.Świątkiewicz, reviewers: prof. M.Szczepański, prof. B.Sułkowski). Dealing with this issue made the Gallery *Szara* become the recognized one among the art galleries in Poland, just through this new specific approach. My work as a curator I finished in 2005 by organizing two significant exhibitions: the first one - “I am carrying a mirror

in front of me”<sup>1</sup> (a group exhibition in memory of Andrzej Szewczyk with chief curator Roman Lewandowski) and the second one – “I saw my death”<sup>2</sup> by Zazanna Janin (I gave a birth to my son six days after the vernissage). Two of my students Joanna Rzepka and Łukasz Dzedzic have inherited this gallery when it was already known among the artists.

The following four years I had intensively worked as an artist and scholar and mom. At that time I was dealing with issues of postmodernism or as the others call modern era of the late modernity. My work took shifts. There were fascinating topics for me like body, death, tradition. The paintings had been organized by making plans, playing with the brushwork, color and density (what sometimes was a harmful discovery for me).

In 2008 I got my second PhD degree, this time in Art, that I defended at the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice ( my doctoral advisor: prof.Elżbieta Kuraj, reviewers: : prof. Stanisław Tabisz, dr hab.Andrzej Tobis).

## **TITLE**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.galeriaszara.pl/?p=932> [2015.09.19]

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.galeriaszara.pl/?p=920> [2015.09.19]

## „If it goes, I am strong”

The title of this collection comes from one of the pictured women in her daily life. The picture is as strong as the woman on it. The whole situation truly shows how ordinary people struggle in the conditions, often not caused by their actions. The researchers of the poverty issues agree that the situation of people suffered from poverty, is a result of many different factors and creates kind of historical continuity<sup>3</sup>.

During 12 long conversations, sometimes confessions I asked the participants to tell me their dreams. One of them was: “if it goes, I am strong.”

This is a part of my own experience. At the beginning I try to understand a problem, so I could face it. As an artist I believe that we live in the time, when we need to leave the gallery. When I leave my gallery I cannot stand situations in that I used to live and had shaped my life and now make a part of our society in Poland. I am convinced as a scholar and an artist to think about people’s problems<sup>4</sup>.

## FOREPLAY

The Atelier of the Art Socially Involved *Rewiry* was primarily founded “to acknowledge that culture and art can be part of the social change and influence on the life people living in the city (...) and it implies the presence of the artists in the disadvantage areas of the cities<sup>5</sup>. *Rewiry* had invited me into cooperation in 2012. My first task was to choose an area where and with it I could work. I picked the one that because of being stigmatized I found very close to my own history. The container homes at the A. Grygowa Street (*Grygowa*) in Lublin. *Grygowa* is made of several rows of the one-floor container structure (it used to be the hotel for the construction workers). Officially there are 800 inhabitants, but in reality above 1000. The whole neighborhood lacks the infrastructure to go shopping, get to work, to the hospital or to the church. The only thing available is the animal shelter nearby and the airport (now finished but when I was there still in construction).

When I chose this place for my artistic exploration I returned home. I had a few of weeks to collect all the materials on *Grygowa*, to plan the agenda of my activity and decide which method I should use in my work and finally rethink my real reason why I want to return there. I do not do the paintings just for the paintings, I cannot enjoy the paintings only because of their artistic worth. As in any other area of

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<sup>3</sup> See: T.Rakowski, *Praktycy niemocy. Etnografia człowieka zdegradowanego*, Słowo/obraz/terytoria, Gdańsk 2009, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> M.Gdula, *Władza krytyczna i siła wyobraźni*, [in:] *Uniwersytet zaangażowany. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, (ed.) Zespół KP, Warszawa 2010, p. 218.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.rewiry.lublin.pl/#pg=3097879966252853590&ver=2013> [2015.09.19]

my life I need to know if there is “active participation in something uncertain that leads into increasing the doubts, multiplying the alternatives, showing the dangers and spotting the foreclosures, unmasking the appearances”.<sup>6</sup>

## **STAGE I**

### **WORK/JOB**

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<sup>6</sup> A.Turowski, *Sztuka, która wznieca niepokój. Manifest artystyczno-polityczny sztuki szczególnej*, Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa, Warszawa 2012, p.19.

August 2012. Back in Lublin. I knew that I was dealing with a stigmatized place and that the people there are consider “social leftover”. In Lublin everybody call “the slums” an area around the former iron foundry and the schools are afraid of the kids from *Grygowa*. In the former hotels for workers the authorities of Lublin founded social housing.<sup>7</sup>

Into *Grygowa* I was introduced by the women working for the Social Welfare Local Office in Lublin that was established in the first building. They helped me to get known with some of the inhabitants. The first day in *Grygowa* was the crucial one for the whole project. The news of who I am, what for I came here and what business brought me here was quickly spread around the neighborhood. In the long breaks between the interviews I had enough time to watch the pathological relations<sup>8</sup> between the social workers and their “clients”.<sup>9</sup>

Apparently I gained trust among the women that I had met first day, and the following ones were arriving by themselves or used somebody to send a message that they would be interested to be in.

Every conversation of those 12 was the different one and touched me deeply. I neither take notes nor register it. I would like to engrave everything in me and not to do any sociological research. What was important for me was that they trust me and I would not betray them. I wish they had believed and trusted me so we could work to increase the doubts, multiply the alternatives, show the dangers and spot the foreclosures, unmask the appearances. At the end of every meeting I asked them to bring any document, any bureaucratic trace that would be a proof of their difficult situations, just to show that they were stigmatized by *Grygowa*. Everyone got something to proof it: a medical prescription, the tickets from a pawnshop that something was sold, a writ from court, a bill etc. I put all this documents on something what made part of their own esthetics (sheet, tablecloth, and carpet) and took photos of it and of the women.

It took me a week to analyze the *Grygowa* social landscape. Between my meetings with the people I was watching the environment in which people here had to live in. The whole terrain of *Grygowa* was precisely marked (somebody told me that at the beginning there was a high fence around, built by the city authorities which the inhabitants torn down. The staircases of the barracks were in a bad shape, but

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<sup>7</sup> <http://lublin-hajdow-zadebie.mojeosiedle.pl/viewtopic.php?t=29257> [2015.09.19]

<sup>8</sup> I noticed a visible hierarchical relation between women working for the Social Welfare office and my interlocutors. The latter would have conversations like this: let us make a deal: I tell you about my neighbor's behavior and you will sign me up for the driving school, instead of the ikebana workshop.

<sup>9</sup> Social contract defines an applicant for support as a client.

in 11 out of 12 apartments I went in there were a specific fragrance of the laundry or dinner. On the tables were fresh tablecloth, the walls decorated with pictures and no dust on the shelves around. It was a very moving experience for me to see this kind of cleanliness in these poor and simple conditions. Some apartments were so packed up that to sit down we had to move a furniture or somebody had to leave the room (14m<sup>2</sup> for 2 adults and 2 children, bathroom and kitchen). Even more moving experience was the sense of esthetics of the women, everything has its specific place here.

This kind of landscape is a quite different than the one we see outdoor. First of all to sketch the most important components we need to abandon everything we know of it. We need to behave as an alien from distant planet, who does not have categories to order things but picks up and values all what is within hand's reach. "It is needed to see the society with its own eyes"<sup>10</sup> as the experts of *favelas* say. In the case of poor people, locked in a social ghetto, to get a whole and true picture of all is hard to imagine. I presume that Vincent van Gogh working on "The Potato Eaters" saw the family with a great compassion but it did not help him reveal the truth of this depicted situation. The artists choosing this kind of art enter "quite new areas, not safe places where the art is not guarded by the artistically elevated galleries and institutions but immersed in a direct work for people with all the risks this action can bring. Perhaps just in this case the art stripped off its bourgeois position can be used as a strong *language*".<sup>11</sup>

## STAGE II

These 12 stories I brought back home to Cieszyn where I had founded *Świetlica* in 2009 (still I am in charge of it) a day-room for children like those from *Grygowa*. So, when I was collecting all these stories

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<sup>10</sup> J.McGuirk, *Radykalne miasta. Przez Amerykę Łacińską w poszukiwaniu nowej architektury*, Publisher: bęc zmiana, ResPublica, Warszawa 2015, p.128.

<sup>11</sup> T.Rakowski, *Wprowadzenie*, [in:] *Etnografia/Animacja/Sztuka.Nierozpoznane wymiary rozwoju kulturalnego*, (ed.:) T.Rakowski, NCK, Warszawa 2013, p. 38.

people are ashamed of but really the heroic ones, I felt that they are a continuation of the experience I have every day with my children in *Świetlica*.

I began my interviews with Ann of the first barrack. Our conversation realized me that the more far away from the office of the Social Welfare the container home is located the more complicated is the social situation of my respondents. So, my first interlocutor who lived in the first row of the container homes had a different story from somebody from the last one. Ann moved in *Grygowa* when she was fired and had troubles with the payments of her bills. To avoid increasing mortgage she moved in here. Many times she was on TV that had visited her because she participated in many courses and programs organized by the Social Welfare Local Office. Mostly the programs they offer are useless ones (e.g. Ikebana course). Her apartment is neat, smell of ironing. In my entire work I did only 2 horizontal portraits. One of them with Ann. I did it because the wall of furniture in the background was so appealing to me and connecting many historical narrations of Poland that I had to picture it. A pink, quilted design made a fragment covering the couch.

Zofia was the second person I would like to paint. During our conversation I cried. She was a real victim of violence and poverty. How to portray somebody whose story touches you so hard? How to concentrate on anything? A document I had received from her was a document from the court that cancelled her debt. By the way this debt was illegal and a result of a mistake. Beside the simple justice the most important issue was a human dignity. When I was working with Zofia and the others my main aim was to recover their lost dignity with my artistic tools. Zofia has everything counted ... how much tea she can drink, how much food per day and it works. There is no leftovers here. It takes a lot of strength for an orphan to smile when there is only a cup of tea for dinner. The perfect management of the household we cannot see and appreciate!

Iwona. Her sense of order and esthetics stroke me hard. If as all the puppies lined in her apartment should be the guardians of everything what Iwona had battle for. Another orphan, who struggles but the results are predictable. Similarly as Magda my favorite young and tough woman with who I talked, Iwona has a baby. Iwona tried to leave *Grygowa*, but this is the only place she can live in. Her partner works illegally because there is no job for a schizophrenic.

In a quite opposite case in terms of poverty background from which my interlocutors come was my oldest woman who came to me with her adult daughter. She had been teaching Polish literature for the whole life. She ended up in *Grygowa* because her husband committed a suicide after he learned from

the court that he would not get any money of his father's inheritance. He expected that this amount of money would help him save their family budget. He could not imagine himself his further life in poverty. In his body there was no code with any strategy how to handle poverty on a daily basis.

Danusia was watched by her dog, because her husband was worried about her depression. Her curled up silhouette made me think of a fearful child. She was raised in an orphanage like most of my respondents. The presence of a dog (by the way a half of my women have dogs – just here, based on their number you can easily see the correlation between somebody's social origin and his attitude toward animals) helps me realize how important these animals are. What makes these social groups coexist together is much more a power of a gift than power of a calculation. A dog of *Grygowa* homes is for people a gift of joy, faithfulness, friendship, loyalty rather than a subject of training. "The connection by a gift confirms individuality and dignity people creating the relations."<sup>12</sup>

The greatest impact on me made Agnieszka who I admire. Her mother immediately fled when she saw me. She spent 5 years in a jail for drugs that she never had. I thought that there is a kind of sacrifice or family loyalty going on among them. Agnieszka has a job. One of few living here, but it costs. Every single day she had to check in in the local office of the Social Welfare and give a report on her life and – what was significant – on the lives of people she was obliged to watch. Agnieszka works 12 hours a day washing buses. After work she looks after her kid and very sick child of her sister. When she holds the baby in her arms everything seems to be alright, now she is calm and kind. Her sister, according to the documents, who she provides for, is irresponsible, addicted to drugs and neglects her baby. Agnieszka has a muscular body, seems to carry on her shoulder the whole *Grygowa*. For a second I see her throwing the buses. Her apartment is a typical example of the coloristic arrangement you can see in this social class. A dark, mahogany furniture segment, the claret red curtains and some green (the best is a pea green) on the walls.

I felt the Lidia was proud that her apartment was located in the first row of the barracks, a sign of a little better world. The things in her apartment showed a little luxury, even they were bought for practical reasons. A very sophisticated design of the armchair, fresh starched tablecloth, bowls with flowers, religious pictures on the walls and the pillows with the embroidered fairies. The fairytale world as our conversation was. No dramatic stories this time. I guess the first row of the container homes were only for people who got in the temporary financial troubles but they not cause constant unemployment,

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<sup>12</sup> M.Gdula, P.Sadura, *Style życia jako rywalizujące uniwersalności*, [in:] *Style życia i porządek klasowy w Polsce*, (ed.:) M.Gdula, P.Sadura, Wyd.Nauk.Scholar, Warszawa 2012, p.60.



poverty or any social pathology. This is a good row for them, cheap but providing all is necessary for living. I can imagine how many shadows from the further rows hit this first one.

Maria. She seems a person with no characteristic, but there are no people like that. She was supposed to stay in *Grygowa* just for a while but it did not work out. There were a lot of fungus in her former apartment (every day the new infected areas). Now she moved into the third row and even it is not the first one, Maria is glad. They are planning to move into the empty apartment next door. That how it works here, they explained me. This strategy of occupying uninhabited apartments and renovating them seems to be one of the ways to gain ownership. I do not know whether it is true or not. I do not judge what they are telling me. My job was to listen to them. But all they told me I took as a sign of their creativity. I am dealing with even much bigger density (persons per room) in Elzbieta's daughter apartment. Ela - Mother/Grandmother, her daughter and two children. One of the youngest, the second grader does her homework on the chair. To have me sit down my hosts have to move furniture. Lack of any intimacy make me scared.

I take a picture of Agnieszka by the kitchen range. She is skillful and smart. Taking care of her older kid with some mental and physical disability does not allow her to get a regular job. A year after our conversation Ela will found a community committee for people here. She also will write petitions to the authorities urging them to get rid of the worms and stench.

I met Edyta, a girl of Artur, in the office of Social Welfare when I was waiting for the next interview. Talking with one of the social workers I did not know that in two days I would be in the Edyta's apartment listen to her. It stroke me her petite figure and the uncertainty emanating from her. The body and person. The person sometimes does not remember what story the body carries. Body is an irreducible witness, an incorporated memory.<sup>13</sup> She was so afraid of losing a chance to do a driving license that uncontrollably her body was shaking, eyes running and fingers pulling out the threads of her sweater. Her body showed everything she had to face every night. The woman working in the office registered her story but she did not realize how much Edyta pays for it. A lot. Her apartment is the only one in which I met a man. You can smell his cigar, you can see furniture with broken doors. In many places around there are soft toys sitting all around the room, like the guards. Every now and again a kid, the 7 years old boy gets in the room, out of under the table comes a dog, much older than its owners.

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<sup>13</sup> T.Rakowski, *Praktycy niemocy...*, pp.142 i 173.

The whole picture of *Grygowa* that has emerged from my conversations and the earlier observation on *Grygowa*<sup>14</sup> was similar to what comes from the anthropological analyze made in a town Wałbrzych by Tomasz Rakowski.<sup>15</sup> I also wanted to show that “the victims of the economic transformation do not need our compassion or help, but much more our recognition and affirmation that they are rightful participants in our social life, that they are human like us. This approach of the transformation results rebuilds significantly our self-knowledge, but also made us rethink our relation with the marginalized people. Moreover this relevantly shakes the ideological foundations on which there are based the activity of various social institutions that provide help, education and guidance for the socially degraded people.<sup>16</sup>

*Grygowa* socially and in the artistic way grew up in me. In this case both activities is hard to have separated. During preparing the canvas, working on the composition, adding color layers and painting I intensively think of what I heard from the people (first of all I try to reach the hidden structure of every story). This intellectual process of mind either encourages me to continue to search for the objectivity and language (known both for people of *Grygowa* and for all others) or discourages me showing the space of something impossible.

### STAGE III

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<sup>14</sup> Nomen omen Anna Grygowa was a social activist, see: <http://www.grygowa.pl/node/10> [25.09.2015]

<sup>15</sup> T.Rakowski, *Łowcy, zbieracze...*

<sup>16</sup> M.Krajewski, *Narzędzie wielofunkcyjne*, <http://www.stanrzeczy.edu.pl/recenzja-rakowski-lowcy-zbieracze-praktycy-niemocy/>, [25.09.2015]

I began with setting the size format for my canvas. I decided that it should be close to a typical form, I mean the A4 format, but the legible one for the spectators. The pictures with no digital improvements was printed on the canvas. I prepared the canvas, stretched them and put the gesso.

On my canvas there were the printed documents that were personalized by the personal data and pieces of the fabrics from my respondents' homes. As I was leaving my women I took of each some pictures to work on them in my studio. I threw off these photographs everything what could diminish their dignity for which they struggle hard. The whole process of sketching and painting was like to meet them again, and it convinced me that it was my duty. I am to tell about them and want to do that. I must like an amateur express something what is hidden or neglected about my women situation. I am not to be an expert who gives advices.<sup>17</sup>

When my pictures were done I made of them a calendar for 2013 (exactly from February 2013 until January 2014). Each of my interlocutors received several copies of the calendar, as well all the social workers of *Grygowa* and the local authorities.

#### **STAGE IV**

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<sup>17</sup> M.Miessen, *Koszmar partycypacji*, Publisher: bęc zmiana, Warszawa 2013, p.201.

On the last page of my calendar I put a commentary related to the real life:

The dictatorship of the bureaucracy is something that moves us between the words: past and future, real and unreal, human and inhuman. For some people it ends with a standard account in the bank or an ID card or a bill, for others it is a container.

One of the examples of this can be a woman from my former research. Bogumiła had not a lucky life. Her father was a cop and mother an accountant. In her family she was considered worse than her younger brother. All her affection she transferred to the men from outside the home. When she was 18 she gave a birth to her first baby, when 19 to the second. Each attempt to go to work was failed, because her younger daughter was always sick. Her husband, who did not finish studies, was doing what every man was supposed to do – he was going to work and that is it. **Tossed by fate she had quit her job, left her daughters and drunk husband to begin a new life with no violence. Her new home did not want to be a rich home. She took a loan in a fraud company and lost her money. She had to learn how to reduce her high blood pressure (above 170-180/105-110) with no pills,** prepare a dinner for 3 zlotys for 4 persons, and deal with her menstruation with no sanitary (to make them she cut the old sheet, hand washed them and dried so nobody saw her). One day her daughter convinced her to ask for help in the local Social Welfare. To get there she borrowed 3.5zł to buy a ticket. The local Social Welfare offered her a social contract. The rights and obligations have been written down by the competent social worker. Allegedly the conditions for any social support relied on the fulfillment of the agreement made together with the office. Unfortunately Bogumiła would not meet these expectations. She is a “social waste”, her household money management does not match the column “tasks” in the form to be filled out. Even her fear deeply indwelt in her body (what was apparently seen when she went to a doctor) was not helping to get this contract. To keep clean house with no bathroom, no hot water and no regular kitchen within is not a proof for the social care that the person could be really a responsible partner. Bogumiła going home on foot dreams about who she would be as if not were a client of the Social Welfare. All this only strengthens her belief to be a waste. These are the real life stories that put shadow on the simple human desire to live a good life with dignity, what is a basic right for every human being.

When I was paging through the legal documents brought by my friends of *Grygowa* in Lublin I looked for any change of their complicated lives. Unfortunately, the location of *Grygowa* itself, far away from schools, libraries, shops, communication centers, churches etc. determined them in a way that they would repeat their parents’ lives, their lost chances and poverty. Let these stories be a warning for others that wealth has its own left side that nobody can hide.

**Continuation and method**

My calendar was to increase among the authorities of Lublin the interest for the people of *Grygowa*, to make this place better and the people feel their own value<sup>18</sup>, what was underlined by my women. Their stories of the difficult childhood, full of violence were exactly what our kids from *Świetlica* in Cieszyn tell us. Making a ghetto for people suffered from poverty leads them into various pathology, and even worse, we naturalized this process when we claim that these people were born like this and that they are lazy, use violence and drink etc. From what I learned in Lublin I began to trace other places and forms of social inefficiency in the programs supporting the victims of the home violence. Besides working on my paintings I talk with all participants of so called Blue Card and organize the panel discussions on this issue. The art itself is not effective, and I care about her autonomy, beyond the expected results (what is well defined in the art departments), but my job is to increase the doubts, show the dangers and unmask the appearances. I cannot get rid of my sociological approach, which is like the principles of optics for the impressionists or the rules of perspective for Masaccio or Vermeer. I share this perspective with other modern artists involved in the areas from between anthropology and sociology.<sup>19</sup> I cannot either deny my social technique that help me make in the more effective way what I bring to my gallery as the simple set of landscapes and questions.

Painting on the documents and documents allows me to confront the real and tough world provided by different institutions with the safe one, locked in my canvas (being only a presentation). Placing them in one painting opens next layers of the symbolic codes that are used in our world and even those with no extensive cultural capital<sup>20</sup> could understand it.

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<sup>19</sup> Tomasz Rakowski (a medical doctor and anthropologist) did an extended research on the connections as a part of the project by *Kolektyw Terenowy* – informal group of ethnographers and culture animators – that invites artists, “who in two villages of South Mazovia: Broniów and Ostałówek run interdisciplinary projects. (...) they were to catch attention to the unknown and marginalized cultural resources of the local people” (*Etnografia/Animacja/Sztuka.Nierozpoznane wymiary rozwoju kulturalnego*, (ed.:) T.Rakowski, NCK, Warszawa 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Cultural capital – skills, habits, customs, language, types of school, taste and way of life all what could be colloquially called sensitivity in the art. However we do not realize that this sensitivity is only a construct. For instance if there is a kid raised home where there are a lot of books, paintings on the walls and music around, it would not surprise that its (already for a 7 year old kid) “sensitivity” differs from someone who grew up in a home with no books and classic music. The same thing is with the spelling, writing and speaking skills, which we cumulate from the very beginning of our lives. We all cumulate cultural capital what determines our social status. See.: P.Bourdieu, *Dystynkacja. Społeczna krytyka władzy sądzona*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2005; A.Matuchniak – Krasuska, *Zarys socjologii sztuki Pierre’a Bourdieu*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2010, pp.35-39, J.H.Turner, *Struktura teorii socjologicznej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2004, pp.597 – 603.

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