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Polish Dominoes, Polish Clock

Slips of paper – like the ones you tear off a pad to jot down a number from an advert– are scattered across my entire house. They're on the desk, in my purse and in numerous folders with mysterious tags, such as “Youth”, “Workshop”, or “Poland.”

Recently, I've realized that I use them in my workshops at least several times a month. The “Post-it” method was invented by Maria Parczewska¹ and I modify it a little depending on the class. Sometimes I work on Poland, and other times, I focus on its individual parts – a city or a voivodeship.

In a workshop, when we read the content of the paper slips, I imagine Poland in 10 to 20 years. Although we discuss it in the context of literature, it's soon obvious that the conversation has moved us to another plane.

Since the discussion takes place through various literary games, which I typically invent after reading some book, during the workshop we can examine situations from multiple angles.

What things will we leave behind? – I ask, having read the book by Marcin Wicha, whose mother had completely different generational experiences compared to the parents of today's teenagers. “How would you describe a kebab in your city?” I wonder, after the description of Jędrzejów in *Siódemka* by Ziemowit Szczerek, but I'm also inquiring about the openness to refugees and the mythical Polish hospitality.²

Before I get to the specific parts of the workshop, during which we deal with things like that, I warm up the participants with questions about the map of Poland. It's made up of smaller parts and associations. We do it to see what comes to mind and to what extent it's a performative vision. I also ask in which direction the map can shift and what it's missing.

I like these Post-it notes and their randomness. At times, we make rhymes about Poland, collective compositions or audio dramas based on observations about Poland, but the following exercises are the closest to me. I'd like to share them with you.

Polish Dominoes

In the first exercise, which I also borrowed from Maria Parczewska, each participant writes down eight words on eight Post-it notes about Poland or their town

¹ A psychologist, precursor of creative education and author of social projects.

² A town south of Poland, in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship. – trans. note.

(depending on the variant). They can write anything that is part of their reality filter.

What comes up? Typically, the eight words start with adjectives that aren't flattering and end with associations from childhood or descriptions of nature. I have a theory that if I asked for only three words, all three would be insults. I never tried that because apparently, to describe Poland, you first have to pour out your grievances. By the way, this exercise is a good way to talk about Gombrowicz's fatherland and sonland, as well as Weronika Gogola's daughterland.

In the next step, each participant forms their own composition of Poland – an image or a trophy. Sometimes the shameful notes are arranged in one symbolic group and tagged only as a stereotype. Other times, the notes are made into a frame, which comes with an explanation that it's merely an unfair surface, in the center of which there is actual meaning. But sometimes they say: "That's how it is, let them stay where they are." There is no shame. Instead, there is awareness of defects.

Another task is creating a common map. The notes are put in a sequence of meanings, resembling dominoes. One person puts the word "heroism", another puts "victims" next to it. Someone opposes it and says that it's a different matter, that "victims" should be placed by "messianism", and not "heroism."

Only after you see long sequences of words, made up of common associations, can you discuss them and move the parts around. They no longer appear coincidental but instead form a certain signifying pool.

I believe that nothing new can be said about Poland until such a map is created and moved around in various directions.

Polish Clock

This exercise is inspired by Nick Montfort's book *World Clock*. The book was a response to a fictitious review written by Stanisław Lem, entitled *One Human Minute*. Montfort's book includes 1,440 micro-stories, which take place over one minute in different locations around the globe. *World Clock* is an experimental book (translating the code and generating the Polish version in Python, which Piotr Marecki took on, turned out to be similarly experimental).

In the workshop, we look at the whole day in the city where I'm holding the class.

The participants write sketches of their fellow citizens – people of various ages and from a range of social groups. The descriptions are rather general. Based on them, they come up with what these people are doing at that given moment. They have to dive into their psychology, their problems, daily concerns, or working conditions.

When we read chronologically (clockwise) what is going on in Ruda Śląska, Olsztyn or Puławy, it reveals what notions people have about each other. This typically moves us to the next stage of our work, for example, building dialogues or creating alternative stories featuring individual protagonists. What does an Uber driver not speaking Polish think when cab drivers at the Central Station in Warsaw toss "kurwas" ["Fucks"] at him? What does a shop assistant at a Żabka³ in Olsztyn

³ A chain of convenience stores in Poland – trans. note.

do after 11 pm? It also gives a glimpse of the multitude of interesting stories that people have in store, even those who we don't know too well or who we view in a fragmented way.

Recently, due to a ban on selling alcohol after 10 pm in Olsztyn's Żabkas, , at the entrance to the store you get a "party ticket." Since selling alcohol at parties is allowed, at the register you exchange the ticket for money and then you can buy what you want.

Sometimes I feel that many things happening here in terms of details come down to one universal feature.

We pretend like we're having fun but the fact remains that we're in a Żabka. Poland is also about that.

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These exercises are just an element of a language workshop, but they also provide a space to reflect on the issues considered as unworthy of attention, such as approaching various perspectives in the culture of individualism.

For this reason, I often ask about Poland more often than I talk about it. It is more often that I try to rearrange it rather than specify where and how it should be laid out. It applies both to real and fictitious people, literary protagonists whom we bring to life during workshops, and fellow citizens. Even if we're circling around a dystopia or fantasy, the specter of Poland hovers above us.

I encourage you to engage in such a game in a small town bar, at the beach in Sopot, or if you go camping, to keep your children busy when it's raining.

If at some point, you happen to be asked about Poland, take out a pad of blank Post-it notes and ask to have them filled. Lay them out and start arguing.

PS You can also make a compilation with the titles of the projects included in the competition "Niepodległa" [Independent]. It is held by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, and the word "freedom" is bunched together with the words of a completely different signifying sequence. Suddenly it's clear that it has very little to do with actual freedom.