

The Great Boredom of Contemplation: Franciszka Themerson's Experimental Records of Illness*

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Illness, suffering, loss are not the most obvious topics for the avant-garde art – in fact, at face value, they seem to be its very contradiction. Yet, publications like Roland Barthes' *Roland Barthes* or Han Kang's *The White Book* are proof that experimental techniques are successfully used, not only by the artists of the avant-garde, to present a whole range of issues related to the problem of crisis. The purpose of this article is to discuss the conventions featuring in Franciszka Themerson's illness-related life records (her letters, drawings and paintings). The goal of the analysis is to arrive at an active, interpretative reading of the visual artist's illness-time life-writing records and develop a definition of these experimental materials.

Franciszka Themerson's archival materials – a short introduction

Before we turn to detailed analyses it is worth outlining the context for the life-writing records under discussion. Importantly, there is an imbalance between the extant number of archival records of Franciszka and Stefan Themerson respectively (the Themerson Archive is stored in the National Library of Poland in Warsaw). The sheer count of copies and versions of traces left behind by Franciszka's husband, Stefan stands in stark contrast to the relatively scant number of records left by Franciszka herself. The avant-garde artist rarely copied her letters, and she clearly did not write any draft versions. What we do find in the collection are the remains of her life and work, sketches for her illustrations or party photos, rather than an intentionally structured archive. Stefan Themerson's correspondence archive includes both the letters he received as well as traces of his letters to individual addressees, as he would often create draft versions of or rewrite already existing letters. In Franciszka's case, we can only access traces of the received correspondence: she clearly did not intentionally prepare anything for the archive.

There are, however, two notable exceptions to this pattern. The first one is her correspondence with Stefan Themerson, including the post Second World War correspondence and the letters, as well as telegrams, from the 1940's. Both corpora maintain similar proportions of materials preserved by the addressees, which I am able to conclude from the frequency and coherence of the records. The other exception – which will be the focus of this article – is the avant-garde artist's correspondence with Irena Grosz – the Editor-in-Chief of the Polish magazine entitled: "Gromada. Rolnik Polski" [The Cluster. Polish Farmer]. As already mentioned, Franciszka did not produce any copies of her records, which is why the Themerson Archive only contains Irena's answers. The artists' letters and postcards are deposited – likewise without any copies thereof – in the Museum of Art in Łódź¹. These documents were handed over more than a decade after the death of the Themersons' friend as "a donation from Bronisława Siedlecka". Besides the correspondence², they also contain copies of books signed by the two avant-garde artists³ and three works by Franciszka⁴.

It was impossible to establish beyond reasonable doubt the nature of the relationship connecting Irena Grosz with Bronisława Siedlecka, who inherited the collection after the former's

¹ Archiwum Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, sygn. DS/1013. The Archive of the Museum of Art in Łódź, sygn. DS/1013.

² A hundred and thirteen archival objects (letters, postcards and epistolary drawings) have been preserved; these were created in the period 1959-1979 by Franciszka Themerson and Irena Grosz. The biggest part of these materials – postages to the avant-garde artist – comprises seventy-four artefacts from the period 1959-1979, which are deposited in the Themersons' Archive in the National Library of Poland in Warsaw. The painter's responses, thirty-nine documents from the period 1964-1978 are held in the collections of the library of the Museum of Art in Łódź. Franciszka's correspondence is deposited in the Museum of Art in Łódź, collection: "Franciszka's and Stefan's letters to Irena Grosz", The Archive of the Museum of Art in Łódź, sygn. DS/1013.

³ See the books with catalogue numbers: DS/874, DS/875, DS/880, DS/882, DS/889, DS/890, DS/894, DS/931.

⁴ These are: Franciszka Themerson, „Szkiec jednej z figur do przedstawienia „Opera za 3 grosze Brechta” [„A sketch of one of the characters for “Brecht's ‘The Threepenny Opera’”], 1976, cat. no. MS/SN/RYS/1639. Franciszka Themerson, “Bez tytułu” [„No title”], 1972, MS/SN/GR/1908 and Franciszka Themerson, „Między dwoma aktami dramatu” [„Between two acts of a tragedy”], 1962, MS/SN/M/1859. I would like to thank Paulina Kurc-Maj and Paweł Polit for their help in establishing the details of this donation.

death. Both women rest in the same grave⁵, and some fragments of Irena's correspondence show they may have been life partners, but it is equally possible they were close friends or family members. I tried to contact Irena's family and left messages with my phone number on her grave, but for many months there was no response to my requests for contact. The employees of the Museum of Art in Łódź were helpful but not able to provide any more information than what I have indicated in the footnote.

Just as unclear are the circumstances under which the journalist made the artists' acquaintance. Letters exchanged between the two women and the Themersons' mutual correspondence indicate that Irena had been Franciszka's friend since the '30s, which can be read both from the familiar tone of their first letters and a few allusions to pre-war Warsaw. Moreover, I am not at all convinced that the records which were preserved first are indeed the first instances of their correspondence, even though the entire corpus has a consistent structure and there is little evidence of the "accentuated lack" (in other words: that any letters were lost or removed). But the most important piece of evidence here is Irena's mention of *Droga do Owidza* [*The Way to Owidz*] - a text which was supposedly written by Stefan before the war⁶. If it is not the case that the women met in the '30s, then the artists may have contacted Irena in the '50s for pragmatic reasons and become acquainted through mutual friends from Poland, which is suggested by the coincidence of dates and mentions of the journalist in the artists' letters to each other. Franciszka's letters to Stefan date back to the time when the avant-garde artists were organizing their first arrival to Poland (1957), after more than two decades spent away from their home country. Irena not only helped them with the formalities during their first visit (she organized the majority of the Themersons' visits to Warsaw), but Franciszka also often stayed at the journalist's home during these visits.

Notably, Grosz mediated between the artists and the Polish art market, handling professional issues (contacting the authors' association ZAIKS, organizing exhibitions) or sending to the Themersons journals and books published in Poland⁷. She also organized for Franciszka a comprehensive rheumatology treatment at the National Institute of Geriatrics, Rheumatology and Rehabilitation in Warsaw, which was probably related to the political situation in Great Britain and the financial crisis of the National Health Insurance in the '60s⁸.

⁵ A gravestone at the Powązki cemetery in Warsaw, see Military Cemetery, Plot: B 37, Row: 2, Grave: 1. According to information obtained at the cemetery, Siedlecka was a near-contemporary of Irena Grosz and the Themersons (she was born: 01.04.1909), but she died as the last one of them 12.07.1991.

⁶ See Irena's letter to Franciszka, dated: 7.02.1962.

⁷ See, e.g., Franciszka's two letters to Stefan: „Nothing special here, a letter from Piw [State Publishing Institute] that they have my 500 but they refunded you in total. It's hard to understand what it's all about - but it doesn't matter, there is enough money there anyway, which means Irena is keeping an eye on things" (KW2, vol. 1, c. 86r, 05.08.1959, see: <https://polona.pl/preview/6bb91cc7-1c03-4696-b316-ffb3daee3269>) and "Irena already has the permission to buy tickets" (KW2, vol. 1, c. 90r, 07.08.1959, see: <https://polona.pl/preview/6bb91cc7-1c03-4696-b316-ffb3daee3269>). As well as Irena's letter to Franciszka: „One more thing - the exhibition. I talked to Samborski and Lonia: we still need to talk to the Ministry blokes. I'm not very resourceful and I can't be charming - I always tell it like it is, but I'll try" (The letter dated 13.08.1961, see: the Irena Grosz box).

⁸ See Martin Gorsky, "The British National Health Service 1948-2008: A Review of the Historiography", *Social History of Medicine* vol. 21, issue 3 pp. 437-460. As well as: "1968-1977: Rethinking the National Health Service". Online access: <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/chapter/1968-1977-rethinking-the-national-health-service-1>

That was all possible thanks to Grosz's political position and her influences in PZPR (the Polish United Workers' Party)⁹.

Part one. Correspondence

On April 10th 1969, Franciszka Themerson wrote a letter to Irena Grosz, which is worth quoting as a longer fragment:

I am so bored with this [bold type in all examples - by H.S.] because it has been a year now, and everybody is asking how I am doing, as if I have just had a newborn, and then I reply that I do, it's just it hasn't started walking yet. **Medical history:** In March 1968! we went (unawares) to the so-called Arts Laboratory, where **the youth (is it 40) throw [?] performances, exhibitions, read poems and play the guitars, which they subsequently set on fire.** The performance was dreadful, we had to sit on boxes [a drawing of a cube, captioned with "Fig. 1" and "75 cm" next to the three sides of the cube - H.S.], painted in different colours. In what was probably meant to be a dramatic moment in the performance the lid underneath me collapsed and, for fear of what could have been inside the box, I saved myself with the help of my leg - Fig. 2 [a drawing of a person falling inside a box and a flexed leg with the caption "bruise FIG 3" - H.S.]. N.B. my box was small (a psycho-somatic injury with serious implications.). The bruise, however, was huge and green. Then it passed and healed completely. Or maybe something entirely different passed and healed completely. Because after this traumatic incident - two years prior I had polymyositis and I was **gobbling on** „indoeiel" for three months - I am

⁹ Based on the women's correspondence as well as the reminiscences of Grosz's former subordinates, one might assume that Irena's political position allowed her not only to be administratively efficient, but also it allowed a fairly individual approach of the authorities in her work. "Gromada. Rolnik polski" ["The Cluster. Polish Farmer"], whose Editor-in-Chief she was in the period 1949-71, was one of the most influential newspapers in Polish People's Republic and an interesting phenomenon of a journal whose mission was not always consistent with the party line. We can see it in the reminiscences of her co-workers at "Gromada. Rolnik Polski". The quotes here are from a book published in 2002 and of course they are subjective portraits created by her subordinates more than two decades after the journalist's death, but the recurrence of narrative schemes is worth noting and it overlaps with the image of Irena evident from her correspondence with Franciszka. "The editor in chief - Irena Grosz - did not always agree with the censors at Mysia street, believing she was better suited for establishing what was politically right and what was not. In cases of conflicts with Mysia, she would contact the building on the other side of the Nowy Świat street, where she usually gained support for her ideas (p. 105). Also: „Of course, it's because of Irena Grosz, whose position in the then party-government establishment was secure, she could do more than others. Here is another example: after some meeting in the Committee of Planning, when the Editor-in-Chief was standing in line to get her coat, Jaroszewicz - the then deputy PM - walked up to her and asked her how she liked his speech. You know - she answered - I don't like it when somebody discusses something they have no idea about. In response to that, the deputy PM mumbled a few words, said goodbye and left. Jaroszewicz wasn't surprised at this comment, because he knew Irena Grosz wasn't an enthusiast of the government's policies then and had low opinion of many people who were in office. Here's an example: to a huge propaganda fanfare they announced a new decoration - the Standard of Labour. This decoration was accorded to two journalists: Irena Grosz and Henryk Korotyński. -The day and time of decoration at the prime minister's has arrived and the Editor-in-Chief doesn't seem to be going anywhere - as told by her secretary, Irena Gembicka. When the boss came to pick something up from the secretariat, Gembicka asked her: - The decoration ceremony at the prime minister's begins in half an hour; shouldn't you be on your way? To which the boss, with a typescript in her hands, answered - You know, Irenka? In the light of such agricultural policy, I won't know which body part to expose for that decoration" (p. 108). Irena's need to "mix things up in the social life of the village, so that it doesn't rest in immobility, a sense of impossibility, in cronyism" (p. 42), which she expressed both in her press articles and letters to Franciszka, was related mostly to her ambition to co-create the journal with farmers. In practice, her employees would go directly to see the farmers, collecting information about current issues of individual communities, at the same time encouraging people to write texts which were later published in the magazine. On the one hand it was a bottom-up paper, on the other hand, it produced educational content, created by the contracted journalists: from pragmatic advice on how to grow sugar beet, through posters promoting fitness and hygiene among children, to information on politics or culture. See "Gromada - Rolnik Polski". Była taka gazeta [„The Cluster. Polish Farmer" There used to be a paper like that], ed. by Wojciech Borsuk, with co-operation by Henryk Borzęcki, "Nowy Świat", Warszawa 2002.

also **the happy owner of a chronic** [muscle?] **infection** and **staphylococci use me as the Nicea's „Promenade des Anglais”**, roaming from one place to another, causing all manner of trouble. **Now that the artistic part is over, the treatment begins.** First, I went to osteopaths – they did an x-ray on me – it showed nothing bone-related, no sign of arthritis – and **the chief osteopath** said that since the inflammation was serious and there was “water in the knee” – osteopathic manipulations could not be performed, but if I came to him for a private visit he would treat me “homeopathically”. **And since he was Indian, I'm sure he would've added a bit of “contemplation”, which is very boring.** So, I went to see a rheumatology specialist – who was relatively young, but he was already the chief of the ward in one of the hospitals. Between May and December I went to see him on private visits. Seven times he drew some fluid from my knee (fluid analysis showed no infection) – and in the end he announced he had no idea what it was – because two gigantic shots of “cortisol” [?] he gave me didn't help so he offered that his **colleague could have a look** inside – i.e., he would operate on the knee. (Oh! before that I'd had physio 3 times a week – short [?] waves and exercises) I said **Thank you and went to another “TOP” specialist** – Dudley Hart – (**December 68**) This one is our age and he knows that a leg can be useful even in one's sixties, so he said – nonsense just to cut. For the first few months – inflammation (pain like in periostosis – at nights – severe and less so during the day. ~~3 weeks~~ He gave me indoeid [?], high dose (8 pills a day) and three weeks ago he gave me a high dose of antibiotics [?] Cloxcaillon-aulisteplilococs – for six days. I'm feeling much better now – that horrible fatigue is gone but my knee hurts and still won't let me walk longer than 5 minutes at a time. But there's an upside to it, too. Because then I'm home and I work on, imagine this, a “comic strip” for UBU. I have to finish it by the end of June. Lots of work so I work all day long and when I don't work, I sleep¹⁰.

The fragment above is a rare example of the avant-garde artist's illness correspondence. Iwona Boruszkowska described such records in the following manner:

The defective subject is **a subject afflicted by illness, forced to reformulate the idea of one's own “I” because of a psychosomatic event (affecting the subject or somebody else)** and made to include into their life space-time the new factor of illness. Biography and illness are thus combined in the defective identity. As a result of a medical experience changes occur in the subject's perceptions of the “I”, the body and the world. These changes impose onto individual elements of reality new, different meanings. Incorporating the medical experience into the biography of the subject **influences their identity and implies its re-construction.** Depending on the extent of that incorporation and the “patient's” ability to make sense of this new role, the consequence is either a re-construction of the identity or the disintegration of the patient's “I”. Contextualising the illness leads to a more or less conscious reintegration of the identity into a new wholeness of a defective subjectivity. **A defective subject may employ various strategies, including or excluding the illness from their own biography: incorporation, fusion, transformation, rejection, silence, concealment¹¹.**

Following this, it is worth pointing out that textual strategies featuring in the visual artist's illness correspondence adopt the form of not so much rejection or concealment as a skillful balancing act on the boundary of **distance** and **engagement**, reflected through the con-

¹⁰Museum of Art in Łódź, collection: „Listy Franciszki i Stefana do Ireny Grosz” [“Letters of Franciszka and Stefan to Irena Grosz”], catalogue number DS/1013. The letter dated: 10.04.1969. .

¹¹Iwona Boruszkowska, Defekty. Literackie auto/pato/grafie: szkice [Defects. Literary auto/patp/graphies: sketches] (Kraków Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2016), pp. 16–17.

vention of **jokes** and **self-irony**. In the light of the typology proposed by the scholar these records are an example of the convention of “transformation”. The artist’s compositional consistency is particularly interesting because it concerns not only her illness correspondence with Irena Grosz, but also her drawn and painted self-portraits.

The above-quoted Franciszka’s letter is clearly spontaneous, as suggested by the sweeping handwriting as well as verbal declarations: “Darling, I read the letter again, please forgive the incoherence and scrawl. I’ve no patience for rewriting it, so suffer. Kisses”¹². The artist rarely interfered with her correspondence with Irena by means of erasures and corrections – her records are short and specific. Franciszka moved smoothly from one topic to another, often quite literally announcing subsequent parts of her composition: “The artistic part is over, now the treatment begins” or “Medical history”. A characteristic feature of these illness narratives is ambiguity, playing on the semantics of foreign language phrases, to name but the Promenade of the English in Nice (“staphylococci are using me like the «Promenade des Anglais»”), or the term “orders”, which, used in her correspondences to Stefan may mean in Polish both “military decorations” or “purchase orders”. Her casual mixing of Polish and English orthographic norms is reflected, e.g., in her capitalizing the names of the months in Polish (following the rules of English orthography). There are also recurrent instances of code-switching, even though the author probably knew Polish equivalents of the English terms she was using (e.g., “polymyositis” or “comic-strip” instead of their Polish translations. Abbreviations like “fig.” (from English ‘figure’) instead of Polish “rys.” (for Polish *rysunek* ‘drawing’) are likely a reflection of the fact that on a daily basis the author was using English rather than Polish, in which she writes her letters. In this context it is also worth pointing out that the author relays her dialogues with doctors, which the avant-garde artist parodied with gusto: “my colleague could have a look”, “the chief osteopath”, “but if I come to him for a private visit he will treat me «homeopathically»”, “I said Thank you and I went to another «TOP» specialist”. All these phrases are examples of an ironic joke, through which the painter distances herself from everyday expressions and linguistic schemes of medical communication.

We can learn a lot about the convention of transformation used by the painter from what she writes about the (forty-year-old) youth, burning guitars on stage. In this manner Franciszka not only expressed her distance from the performative practices of the punks, but crucially, she archly portrayed herself as a clumsy senior. The sixty-year-old is thus far from being martyronly and purposefully eschews any sense of eminence. A similarly construed self-irony can also be seen in the other letter of the painter:

Irenka, Darling,
Happy, happy, happy New Year 1977! [the original opening lines are in English - translator’s note] Do feel better, love, and see you in spring. I hope we too will be strong enough to come and give you a hug! For now, we diet on painkillers and try to work. It’s all going very slowly. Old age [original phrase in English – translator’s note] is a silly thing. Stefek is just finishing his Polish translation of “general

¹²Museum of Art in Łódź, collection: „Listy Franciszki i Stefana do Ireny Grosz”, catalogue number DS/1013. The letter dated: 10.04.1964.

Piesc” – for Twórczość¹³ – soon you will be able to read it in Polish – it is even more moving! – And I’m – also – slowly trying to make a few more canvas for the New York exhibition next year. If there is next year – so “sursum corda” – which in Polish means “chin up” – and that’s it! We miss you a lot, we keep thinking and talking about you. Now a funny scene to illustrate the state of my old head: two days ago I went to Gaberbocchus¹⁴ to check the morning post. It was cold as hell, so I was wearing sheepskin, scarf, etc. etc. I was just going to go back home when I noticed I’d lost my glove. For fifteen minutes I was walking around the office, I looked inside drawers, bins until finally I gave up and decided to go home. The phone rang. **I picked up the receiver to say: hello – and suddenly I noticed I was holding that ridiculous glove with my teeth!** So as you see – life, while uncomfortable, is still funny! [a drawing of Franciszka holding a glove with her teeth with the caption “It’s me!” – H.S.] We love you terribly – with a glove between our teeth or without... [a symbol of two hearts – H.S.] Franka & St. P.S. Darling, please stop paying that unfortunate ZAiKS for me. Stefan wrote to them to have them pay my dues from his account, as there’s still income transferred to it. Love, F¹⁵.

The previously parodied interaction with the wooden box is here replaced by the artist with an item of clothing. The misplacement of the glove – again – is for Franciszka an impulse to create a self-ironic narrative about her own absentmindedness. It is worth noticing that the woman used the opportunity to neutralize all the events she is writing about, including her description of the ailments which require her to take painkillers: “old age is a silly thing”. The painter’s record concerns not only her own experience of illness, but also it morphs into forms in which include her husband:

Meanwhile, despite that famous drought, we have had some flooding here. The main water pipe burst underneath Warrington Crescent¹⁶, blew up the street, causing an amazing fountain to shoot up to the second floor. And then it bent and smacked right into our balcony, and cascaded down a river underneath the doors to my studio and Stefan’s room. All of this happened at 4 a.m. and from four till six a.m. we had a dozen firefighters and all our neighbours bucket the water out onto our kitchen patio. It’s still wet, the floors are all twisted and we’re both dead tired. But I can now sit at the table and write to you because they have already turned the light on (and it’s warm). I think it’s ridiculous to have such adventures in old age. But besides the floors everything is alright. It was like on a sinking ship. Except the ship didn’t sink. And poor Stefan then had (and still has) problems with his spine. That same “slipped disc” [original in English – translator’s note]¹⁷.

We are here constantly dealing with records of illness, dominated by the tactics of distancing oneself from the experienced bodily states, which the author consciously construes by means of hyperbolic imagery, paradox, anecdote, by which the subject’s self-creation is aiming for a self-ironic joke. Franciszka’s letters are then a space in which the fountain is “amazing” and it “blows up the street”, driving a huge, unstoppable stream of water, like a killer whale in the ocean.

¹³The Polish literary magazine.

¹⁴The Gaberbocchus Press was a publishing house founded by the Themersons in 1948.

¹⁵Museum of Art in Łódź, collection: „Listy Franciszki i Stefana do Ireny Grosz”, catalogue number DS/1013. The letter dated: 8.01.1977.

¹⁶The home address of the Themersons.

¹⁷Museum of Art in Łódź, collection: „Listy Franciszki i Stefana do Ireny Grosz”, catalogue number DS/1013. The letter dated: 17.09.1976.

That same stream of water ultimately “breaks and smacks” right onto the artists’ balcony, which concludes with the firefighters’ intervention, aided by many neighbours woken up in the middle of the night and encouraged to participate spontaneously in a rescue mission. A series of these visually described events is summed up by the artist by means of a water-related metaphor of the sinking ship, which ultimately managed to survive the storm thanks to the help of its crew. Everyday language is mixed with vivid descriptions of events, which on the one hand demonstrate the dramatic nature of the event (a flooded studio), on the other – they repeat anecdote-based narratives. Even though the record was created shortly after the event it describes, as we can learn from the letter (“It’s still wet, the floors are all twisted and we are both dead tired. But I can now sit at the table and write to you because they have already turned the light on”), we do not really notice any meaningful compositional differences between the reconstruction of a months’-long treatment and this report, created immediately after the event it describes.

In these vivid “ridiculous old age adventures” one can constantly hear signals of the author’s impatience: “everybody is asking how I am doing, as if I have just had a newborn, and then I reply that I do, it’s just it hasn’t started walking yet”¹⁸. Franciszka thus emphasizes not so much her suffering as her impatience: “I am so bored with that”¹⁹; “And since he was Indian, I’m sure he would’ve added a bit of “contemplation”, which is very boring.”²⁰. It is therefore worth emphasising that the subject construes herself through constant expression of dissatisfaction with her unfitness for regular work, which the author presents as a state of utter boredom. In this sense it is quite characteristic that the painter sidelines her experience of pain and avoids directly describing her health, occupying herself with visual narrations of events coinciding with her illness instead. Similar **conventions of transformation** can be observed when Franciszka’s writes to her husband from the rheumatology hospital in Warsaw. In those letters Franciszka described her daily life²¹, devoting very little space to the details of diagnosis or her experience of pain; rather, she focused on recounting conversations with the visitors she had, or on discussing daily issues with her husband. The contrast between Franciszka’s records and Irena’s extensive pathogenic letter to Stefan, written on the latter’s request, is remarkable:

My Dear,

I promised therefore I must. Here lies the problem – to give you a matter-of-fact account of Franciszka’s health with some kind of forecast. Both she and everybody around her, doctors in particular, declare a significant improvement in her general health, which was poor when she arrived: immense fatigue, increased allergic symptoms, big ecchymosis/ bruises/. One proof of improvement is, for example, the fact that Franka enjoys her baths. Of course, even with the best of care it is that hard to cure somebody in a month of an ailment they have been suffering from for five years, especially that the origins of some of her complaints were traced in all the wrong places, it

¹⁸Museum of Art in Łódź, collection: „Listy Franciszki i Stefana do Ireny Grosz”, catalogue number DS/1013. The letter dated: 10.04.1969.

¹⁹Museum of Art in Łódź, collection: „Listy Franciszki i Stefana do Ireny Grosz”, catalogue number DS/1013. The letter dated: 10.04.1969.

²⁰Museum of Art in Łódź, collection: „Listy Franciszki i Stefana do Ireny Grosz”, catalogue number DS/1013. The letter dated: 10.04.1969.

²¹National Library of Poland in Warsaw, The Themerson Archive. Franciszka and Stefan Themerson’s mutual correspondence from the period 1947–1974, catalogue no.: Rps akc. 20241, vol. 2, c. 173r.-201r. See: <https://polona.pl/preview/9921deca-b613-49f2-9f25-d0726903c331>

seems. Franka will bring the detailed medical report with her so I'm not mentioning the diagnosis, which the doctors believe they have finally established. It doesn't mean that they determined the causes of the allergy or of the hemorrhagic diathesis; these are issues which require months'-long diagnosing, and even, when it comes to allergies, many years. But one can live with them "till one dies", that is, until very old age, it's just that these ailments are troublesome, which can be relieved in a manner of ways. As for the weakening of the cardiac muscle, which is a mild complaint of all of us over 45-50 years old, there has been some improvement but... This "but" concerns both this and the condition of the leg: dr Szpilmanowa, during **a long conversation** / and she is not just a wonderful, inquisitive, sensible and knowledgeable doctor, but also someone very kind to Franciszka/ emphasized the need to lose weight – both to spare all the organs, including the heart, as well as to relieve the knee, that's why she removed all carbohydrates from Franka's hospital diet; she prescribed a meal plan which / I think/ is not at all cruel, but which Franka doesn't like because your wife doesn't like cooked meat or salads and **fruits "already make her puke"**. What is one to do? **She is also saying, probably rightly so, that this diet would require a lot of involvement from her – she would have to do the cooking, grating, peeling, so... and supposedly dr Szpilmanowa told her "ok then, if she can't..."** but she shouldn't be starving herself. That much is obvious, but we must find some solution. Because it's a vicious circle: one of the reasons for Franka's dislike of movement is/ to simplify the reasoning here/ her being overweight, and the reason for her being overweight is lack of movement. Could you not reach an understanding with your Kali? after Franka's return on how to decide on her *façon d'être*, of course, in accordance with her medical record and decide on a menu which wouldn't be too much for her; we don't know, here in Warsaw, your opportunities, but the doctors prescribed a diet for her. It's just that **one cannot be too pushy with her**, you know Franciszka better than I do. And I think I offended her, even though I wasn't pushy, I really wasn't, I was only looking out for her, for her only. Now, as you know, she is in Obory, where she's **"bored white"** [**"bored white" is a language game that is invisible in translation – H.S.**], even though she is relaxing, especially in such nice weather. Lonia and Gwen visited her today, I'll probably go on Thursday because today I've finally picked up my car and I've got a thousand errands to run²².

It is worth pointing to the expressions of care²³ and the tenderness in the journalist's manner writing: "It's just that one cannot be too pushy with her, you know Franciszka better than I do.

²²National Library of Poland in Warsaw, The Themerson Archive. The Department of Manuscripts, Irena Grosz folder. The letter dated: 22.09.1971.

²³See also: The National Library of Poland in Warsaw, The Themerson Archive. The Department of Manuscripts, Irena Grosz's Folder. The letter dated: 24.08.1970. I quote: „What do you need? Unfortunately, I wrote we don't have your «Europa» here, only photos – the film itself is in some South-American republic. Jaleuna [?] was promised to find out where but I've already written about that". In her letters to Franciszka, Irena was more casual than in the case of the letter to Stefan, quoted in the main text. What is constant in Grosz's writing are calm and matter-of-factness, as well as compositional structure, which in this case was reinforced by her using the typewriter. In the material sense the above-quoted letter is unique because the majority of letters by both correspondents are handwritten. A choice of this form provokes questions concerning the functionality of the document and allows one to suppose that this was a purposeful choice on Irena's part. On the one hand the journalist may have been aware that the document would be a useful supplement to the medical report, which the painter probably received on being discharged from the hospital. Such interpretation in some way could help explain such cold – in comparison to the remaining letters – tone of the letter. On the other hand, I suppose – on the basis of my readings of letters written by the avant-garde artists of that period and on the basis of Irena's joke reflecting Franciszka's attitude towards her illness („Could you not reach some kind of an understanding with your Kali?") – that adopting the poetics of a detailed description of the treatment in Poland was closely connected to the need for agency on the part of the author and her care, as she was well aware of the fact that the artist might not inform her husband about the details of her recuperation.

And I think I offended her, even though I wasn't pushy". Despite the rational poetics of her letter Irena was no stranger to a refined joke, e.g., by referring to a series of Franciszka's white paintings: "she is bored «white»." The allusion is proof of Irena's linguistic facility, as she aptly combines Franciszka's personal trait, her art (through a reference to the monochromatic technique, i.e., the white colour used by the painter) and a spin on the phraseological meaning of "make somebody see red". **As a consequence of this tactic we are given a provocative phrase: "to be bored white" is then a state of being forced to rest, which creates a sense of impatience.** The painter addressed this reversed principle of organizing her own life in another letter:

So, you can see unf we are **unfit for rest**. On the contrary, we work a lot, somehow, we (maybe I shouldn't be saying "we" because it is very subjective), so I am beginning to be in a hurry. Not that I think that what I do is so important, quite the opposite, but my exhibition is in September 1975 (!) – a big one because there's lots of space in Whitechapel Gallery so I'm trying to produce a few more "perimortem" paintings. (to explain where this madness is coming from – Jasia is now the head of the Whitechapel – and you might be interested to know that right before me she is doing a big exhibition of Abakanowicz)²⁴.

It is symptomatic that the adjective "unfit" is combined here via a paradox – or a break up with the logic of the expression "unfit for work" – with the word "rest". Franciszka, who is unfit for rest, is busy creating "perimortem" paintings, which she is doing with the involvement represented by the pronoun ("I am") and the verb phrase ("beginning to be in a hurry"). Her drive for action is noticeable not only in what she is literally expressing in the fragment of the letter but can also be discerned in her output. Indeed, in the '60s and first half of the '70s the artist was experiencing a meaningful stage in her artistic development²⁵. This artistic boom was interspersed with her hospital stays, many hours of sleep as cure for her fatigue, drug treatment, and – let us not forget about it, because the painter herself remembers – the need to cook healthy meals, which might have contributed to her improving health (or so dr Szpilmanowa said), but in this correspondence they prove to be synonymous with a waste of time, another embodiment of boredom.

Part two. The drawings (correspondence-related and others)

A common practice of both women's illness records was commenting on their motor-movements by means of correspondence-related drawings. For example, the stick-man, drawn by Franciszka in ballpen, represents Irena, absentmindedly sitting on a chair, which is followed by an invitation to movement: "it is very important to transport one's buttocks from the bed onto the chair and I'm sure soon enough you'll be carrying them with your own hands, or actually – legs" [a drawing of a woman,

²⁴The Museum of Art in Łódź, collection: „Listy Franciszki i Stefana do Ireny Grosz”, catalogue number DS/1013. The letter dated: 22.07.1974.

²⁵See: Honorata Sroka, „Co warto wiedzieć na pierwszy rzut oka? Zarys praktyki dydaktycznej Franciszki Themerson (1963–1968)” [„What is worth knowing at first glance? An outline of Franciszka Themerson's didactic practice (1963–1968)”, *Autobiografia. Literatura. Kultura. Media 1* (2022)]. An interesting coincidence here is the initial date of Franciszka's correspondence with z Irena, which was simultaneously the last day of the initiative Gaberbocchus Common Room and the moment when the Themersons visited Poland for the first time after the war. A year later one of the avant-garde artists' movies was rediscovered (*Przygoda człowieka poczciwego* [The Adventure of a Decent Man]).

a bed and a chair with the caption “Irenka”]²⁶. One should point here to *Ostatni autoportret*²⁷ [*The last self-portrait*] with a drawing, accompanying a letter to Irena, dated “April 4th, 1971”. That correspondence sketch represents Franciszka in two poses: in one she is proudly standing on her own, on a plinth of an antique column, whereas in the other she is walking on crooked and crumbling pillars, which substitute for her legs. The contrast between the two states of the same physicality is similarly presented as a caricature in the above-mentioned drawing, created six months before the painter’s death (*Ostatni autoportret*). That work depicts images of two faces, with some kind of tension between them – the smiling one is painted *en face*, whereas only the left profile of the crooked and wrinkled one can be seen. The relationship between the sickness stages in the artist’s body also features in her work from a year prior: *Self-portrait with a stick* (1987)²⁸, which the painter layers with intertextual overtones, painting her likeness on top of a painting produced more than twenty years before²⁹. There is no coincidence in this gesture, given that while Franciszka created countless self-portraits over nearly sixty years of her professional activity, and these can be grouped on the basis of their similarities and differences, however, only once did she repeat the outline of her own face present in the *Topography of Aloneness* (1962). This non-accidental reference opens up a new field of interpretation. On the one hand, there is the difficulty inherent in discovering ‘aloneness’ in one’s illness. On the other, there is the recurring issue of an individual’s autonomy in the world and search for the desired aloneness, which Stefan mentioned in his own description of that painting³⁰. The body divided into two parts correlates with the division of the subject – this points not so much to the fight between youth and old age, as to the tension between the communal act of being ill, the need to rely on others and desire for aloneness and self-reliance, which the painter is unable to fulfill. Considering, e.g., *Self-portrait with a stick*, it becomes clear that while on the one hand Franciszka often sneered at the fact that she had to walk with support³¹, on the other hand she did reveal her inner organs, confrontationally highlighting their colourful joyfulness with chalk, at the same time emphasising the face of a woman she had been twenty years earlier.

In order to understand better the importance of this reference let us point out that Franciszka implements a completely different intertextual technique in her letter to Stefan from 1955³², in which the painter draws the recipient’s attention to a series of her self-portraits in a reversed position³³. When she writes to Irena, both in the drawings which are related to her illness and

²⁶The Museum of Art in Łódź, collection: „Listy Franciszki i Stefana do Ireny Grosz”, catalogue number: DS/1013. Letter date: 10.07.1975.

²⁷*Ostatni autoportret* [*The last self-portrait*], December 1987, black oil crayon, 42 x 29,5.

²⁸*Self-portrait with a stick* (1987), black and coloured chalk, 42 x 29,5.

²⁹*Topography of Aloneness* (1962), oil on canvass, 122 x 183.

³⁰I am referring to an interpretation of this painting present in Stefan’s letter to Franciszka from 24.02.1964. See: The National Library of Poland in Warsaw. The Themerson Archive. Franciszka and Stefan Themerson’s mutual correspondence from the period 1947–1974, catalogue no.: Rps akc. 20241, vol. 2, c. 15r. See: <https://polona.pl/preview/9921deca-b613-49f2-9f25-d0726903c331>.

³¹Nick Wadley, Franciszka Themerson (Gdańsk, Londyn, Łódź: Fundacja Terytoria Książki, Themerson Estate, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2019).

³²Zob. The National Library of Poland in Warsaw. The Themerson Archive. Franciszka and Stefan Themerson’s mutual correspondence from the period 1947–1974, catalogue no.: Rps akc. 20240, vol. 1, c. 33v. Online: <https://polona.pl/preview/6bb91cc7-1c03-4696-b316-ffb3daee3269>

³³*Am I standing on my head? Or, is the world upside down?* (ok. 1949), pen and ink, 15 x 10,5. *Middle-aged woman on a flying trapeze*, oil on canvas, 63 x 76,5. 1952, *Emportez moi sans me briser*, oil on canvas, 62 x 75. *Composition with a grey square*, oil on canvas, 76 x 101. 1959, „Comme la vie est lente comme l’esperance est violente” (cytując Apollinaire’a), oil on canvas, 101,5 x 151.

those which are not (for instance numerous examples of “hugs from the Themersons”), self-visualisation is the author’s signature move, an appendix to her signing off with “Franka”, at the bottom of the letter. Such sketches are created using the same tools as the text (most frequently – ballpoint pen). The function of the painter’s correspondence drawings was then not only to underpin the literal message, but also to construe subjectivity by means of diversifying means of expression. Differing from “draw-writing” [Pol. *rysopisanie*], problematized by Bożena Shallcross, or genetic concept of “doodles”, or Adam Dziadek’s “semiography”, Franciszka’s correspondence tactics is a category in itself. As Shallcross explains, referring to Czesław Miłosz’s documents:

In a different sense, in the sense of a trace element of the author’s presence, all these fragments sometimes dispersed over the manuscripts of his most beautiful poems reveal the psychic content, which can be described as the shifts of focus from the currently ongoing process of writing to the sense or expectation of the incoming writing moment. Visual notations are supposed to bring this moment closer and reinforce the weakening will of writing, renew the creative energy with every new symbol committed to paper. Therefore, the poet’s drawings are something different than a pause in writing and a withdrawal into idleness, because they talk about persevering at draw-writing, at a sheet of paper³⁴.

In Shallcross’ approach the basic tenet of a co-dependence of text and image is the processual nature of writing itself, whose dynamism is linked to a smooth transition from word to image. Franciszka’s case is different because rather than composing the correspondence record by “draw-writing”, i.e., removing the boundaries between the dynamics of writing and drawing, the painter comments on the written part by means of a drawing, she complements the text. Both techniques are similar by virtue of a non-hierarchical relation of text and image, but they differ in purpose, which – in the case of Themerson’s life records is relevant for the process of constructing the subject. A doodle, however:

Is something that is created next to a manuscript of a given text, and is coequal with the record, it may be analysed just like the text, as something accompanying the text, not as something separate from it. It is something that **allows us to take a closer look at the act of writing, recreate the order of activities, movements of thoughts, the formation of the rhythm of utterance**, something that allows us to reveal at least a fragment **of the mystery of its creation**. The drawings make us aware of the temporality of the creative act, its longevity, pauses necessary to think about words, the layout of the entire text, and on finding the most appropriate word for a particular phrase or verse³⁵.

In the above-summarised framework it is the very processuality of the creative act that is highlighted, which is irrelevant in Franciszka’s correspondence drawings. Semiography, in turn, is thus described by Dziadek (with reference to Aleksander Wat’s documents):

As for drawings in the manuscripts, **it is difficult to talk about their artistic value, because usually they have nothing to do with works of art**, they have no meaningful esthetic value. These are not the situations described and analysed by Michel Butor in his book *Les mots dans la peinture*; it is not about the words which appear in images and supplement their meaning, **it is not**

³⁴Bożena Shallcross, „Poeta i sygnatury” [„The poet and signatures”], *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2011): 59–60.

³⁵Adam Dziadek, „«Mój wiek» Aleksandra Wata – uwagi do przyszłej edycji”, [„Aleksander Wat’s «My century» - issues for a future edition] *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (2020): 214–215.

about the way in which the painter's signature is embedded in the painting, all that is the subject of entirely different analyses. It is not about the author's signature either, even though in every analysed case drawings are an element confirming the uniqueness and individuality – a drawing, like handwriting, is a trace of a unique identity, even if the handwriting changes under the influence of numerous external conditions (irritation, nervousness, the experience of pain, illness, etc.)³⁶.

Franciszka's correspondence drawings related to her illness are her authorial signature, which creates for the painter space to mold her subjectivity in the state of illness and, as I have been trying to demonstrate, they are closely related to her art. In the light of the above-mentioned approaches, one should view this strategy of correspondence drawings as a phenomenon distinct from the above-outlined concepts of "draw-writing", "doodles" and "semiographics".

Parallels between techniques used by Franciszka in her self-portraits in the correspondence-related and artistic space are numerous and too intriguing to be ignored. I argue that this coherent manner of visualizing herself, in particular her subjectivity under the condition of illness, is a purposeful and consistent autobiographical strategy. The painter created a thick network of connections, through which she narrated her life, presenting meanings she chose not to express directly, but whose traces she needed to leave behind. Following the clues left by this avant-garde artist, we can see an image of subjectivity fully consistent with what we can read from her artistic manifesto and the only autobiographical text she wrote with publication in mind³⁷. **Joke, self-irony, anecdote are in all these cases figures of active self-control, an expression of the convention of transformation.** That is why Franciszka's illness records are an example of **active silence**, purposeful conventions of not so much talking about herself as indicating meanings.

Part three. Experimental illness records

Franciszka Themerson's war drawings (1940-1942) are typically viewed as her key autobiographical works³⁸, demonstrating an interesting contrast between Franciszka the little girl and the background portrayed in the drawings, i.e., a world burning with innumerable acts of violence. On the other hand, I interpret the illness life-writing records (letters, paintings, drawings) as expressions of a broken subjectivity, torn between the need for aloneness (self-sufficiency) and the loss of ability to work (agency), as well as a trace of a disharmonious individuality stitched together from a mosaic of states experienced in the past as well as traces of subjectivity, which – not without effort – yet constantly, chooses joy.

³⁶Adam Dziadek, „Semiografia rękopisu” [„The semiography of a manuscript”], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2020): 226.

³⁷Franciszka Themerson, „Bi-abstract paintings, in: Nick Wadley, *Franciszka Themerson* (Gdańsk, Londyn, Łódź: Fundacja Terytoria Książki, Themerson Estate, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2019).

³⁸See: Paweł Polit, „Franciszki Themerson gry z narracją” [„Franciszka Themerson's games with the narrative”], *Czas Kultury* 3 (2020): 154–160. Honorata Sroka, „The Experimental Avant-Garde Art of Franciszka and Stefan Themerson A Way of Dealing with Crisis”, in: *Crisis*, ed. by Sascha Bru, Kate Kangaslahti, Li Lin, Iveta Slavkova, David Ayers (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022). Nick Wadley, *Franciszka Themerson* (Gdańsk, Londyn, Łódź: Fundacja Terytoria Książki, Themerson Estate, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2019).

Amongst all the embodiments of the artist's subjectivities (always plural)³⁹ the illness-related one is highlights the vacuum between Franciszka and empty background. It is remarkable that the background, which is always filled in her drawings from the '40s, remains a monochromatic, seemingly unoccupied sheet in her illness-time works. Whiteness proves to be here, for the last time, the painter's metonymic pronouncement about the devastation she is experiencing or **a self-ironic deconstruction of liminal emotions and states**. Insofar as we accept – following Łukasz Żurek's suggestion – that spatial arrangement in *Self-portrait with a stick* can be interpreted differently still, the foreground positioning of a hand clenching a walking stick proves to be of key importance⁴⁰. The shape of a skinless shin, understood to be a reference to Franciszka's rheumatism, may also be read in contrast to the rest of the body. Despite its enlarged size the rheumatic hand proves to be a suspended, limp shell, unbound to the space by any contact points. Our entire attention is then focused on the ironic-confrontational colourful stick-shin, which is the only fulcrum, as well as the basic break for action, a counter-levitational burden.

Franciszka's visual and textual (or a combination of the two) autobiographical tactics are connected to what Aleksandra Grzemska described as Ewa Kuryluk's strategies of documenting and transforming one's life in art:

Artistic expression is **a consequence of work on personal memories, experiences**, and these, multiplied, encrypted, rhetoricised or turned into figures, are embedded in always planned and never accidental forms of autobiographical practices, whose effects are **transposed by Kuryluk to the public sphere, in encoded contents** and contexts⁴¹.

Covering one's tracks through self-ironic **tactics of one's own (non-)presence, confusing the clues with rhetorical techniques of the ease of expression in talking about the most difficult issues, multiplied autobiographical games**⁴², engaged in by Themerson, just like in Kuryluk's case (nb. the author of interesting memoirs on the Themersons⁴³), are neither coincidental nor consistent. Franciszka's illness records contain a dialectic argument between "beginning", "remnants" and (in her final works⁴⁴) "regression". Stylising manners of representing her internal organs to look like children's manner of using coloured chalk, the artist **dismisses any pathos** – understood here as stylistic opulence – when discussing her own illness. On the other hand, this directional and coherent convention of transformation may be

³⁹See: Aleida Assmann, *Między historią a pamięcią. Antologia* [Between history and memory. Anthology] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2014).

⁴⁰I would like to thank Łukasz Żurek for suggesting a wonderful interpretative clue, as well as the students attending my course on life writing of Polish avant-garde, with whom I had the pleasure of discussing these drawings and Franciszka's letters.

⁴¹Aleksandra Grzemska, „Praktyki autobiograficzne Ewy Kuryluk” [„Ewa Kuryluk's autobiographical practices”], *Autobiografia 2* (2016): 95.

⁴²I am adopting Artur Hellich's concept of „autobiographical games”, see: Artur Hellich, *Gry z autobiografią. Przemilczenia, intelektualizacje, parodie* [Games with autobiography. Silences, intellectualisations, parodies] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2018).

⁴³Ewa Kuryluk, „Radioklub poszukiwaczy przyzwoitości” [„Radio-club for the hunters of decency”], *Gazeta. Magazyn 16* (1999).

⁴⁴See: Adam Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej* [A project of somatic criticism] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2014).

interpreted as a sign of the deepest honesty⁴⁵ in turning her own condition into a narrative. All these tactics are undoubtedly characterized by a critical reflection on the esthetic possibility of presenting the body in the state of illness. That is why we are approaching what Julia Kristeva defined as abjection, a concept thus described in the context of the avant-garde art by Hal Foster:

[W]ith scarred sacks for breasts and funky carbuncles for noses; these bodies **break down the upright lines of proper representation, indeed of proper subjecthood** [...] This body is the primary **site of the object** as well, a category of (non)being defined by Julia Kristeva as neither subject nor object, but before one is the former (before full separation from the mother) or after one is the latter (as a corpse given over to objecthood⁴⁶)

The abjection status of the subject from the artist's final works, to which her correspondence serves as introductory notes of sorts, is Themerson's way of manifesting her refusal to simply dichotomise youth and old age within the framework of illness narratives. What is at stake here is to mould a targeted message, an avant-garde mindset to adopt an innovative gesture, which in the case of those life-writing records depends on a surprising juxtaposition of the figures of youth and impatience and suffering, as well as on the experimental form of her drawings, which are stylized like a child's drawings. The transformation thus happens both on the level of a self-ironic distancing in the contents of the records, as well as on the level of visual esthetics of the works of art themselves. In the case of both of these types of autobiographical traces we are dealing with a connection of two orders, captured in Agnieszka Taborska account of the parallels between the works of Franciszka and Alfred Jarry. Both artists make the decision to "talk about horrible things using a «naïve» language⁴⁷. Adding a small corrective to the term "naivety", I would add that here we encounter tragedy represented by means of unpretentious, blunt humour, conveyed with the help of experimental techniques.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

⁴⁵I am using here the notion of honesty in the common meaning of the word, but I am aware of the complexity of this term in the context of studies on life-writing records, see: Agata Sikora, *Szczerłość. O wyłanianiu się nowoczesnego porządku komunikacyjnego* [Honesty. On the emergence of a modern communicative order] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2020).

⁴⁶Hal Foster, *The return of the real. The avant-garde at the end of the century.* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), p. 148.

⁴⁷Agnieszka Taborska, „Początek sytuacji». *Rysunki i obrazy Franciszki Themerson* [„The beginning of a situation». *Franciszka Themerson's drawings and paintings*], *Literatura na Świecie* 9-10 (2013): p. 242.

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KEYWORDS

FRANCISZKA THEMERSON

archive

ABSTRACT:

The article discusses the concept of experimental and illness-related life-writing records on the basis of Franciszka Themerson's correspondence, and her correspondence-related drawings and works of art. I have established that the avant-garde artist was using coherent compositional methods in taking up the topic of her illness both in her life-writing records and in her avant-garde art. The tactics of "transformation" in her correspondence, drawings and paintings assumed the form of self-irony, joke, distancing herself from her own body in the state of illness. The analysed correspondence is one of few cases of the painter's autobiographical records we know of; they were stored in the Museum of Art in Łódź, as well as in the National Library of Poland in Warsaw (The Themerson Archive).

life - writing

correspondence

the avant-garde

EXPERIMENT

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

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