

Psychological magazine

CHARACTERS

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A dove full of strength / Agata's shields

Dr Agata Norek is a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice. She has obtained a diploma with honours and a nomination for the award of the Prime Minister for her doctoral thesis "Shields Against Violence". In 2015 she came forth with an exhibition of 27 shields in the province of Upper Bavaria, Munich in Germany. It was opened by the president of Upper Bavaria, Barbara Stamm. To this day, she has organized thirteen individual exhibitions in Poland and Germany and joined 25 corporate exhibitions in many countries. "VOGUE" magazine coming out in Germany, Austria and Switzerland (issue 01|2016) published an article about her project. In April 2016, the artist presented the project to participants of "Women of Silesia Voivodeship Congress" where she received a title "WOMAN OF SUCCESS" for her accomplishments. In July 2016 "Shields Against Violence" won a third place in a competition "AUSBURGER MEDIENPREIS" in the category "INSPIRATIONS". Since 2004 she has lived in Germany. She acts not only at an artistic field but also a social one. Through exhibitions, performances and workshops she educates in the effects of violence and how to prevent it. It is the main purpose of SHIELDS AGAINST VIOLENCE SAC e.V. Association established by herself. She has developed an authorial method called ARTrauma®, whose goal is to transform traumatic experience into strength with art's help.

Dorota Krzemionka: - You seem to be fragile and strong at the same time, sensitivity connected with power. What makes you strong?

Agata Norek: - Maybe it's in my genes. My grandmother had my mom when she was only 17 years old. A circus was passing by the city. She saw an acrobat walking on a rope and it was like a lightning bolt crashing at her; after the show she followed him to the circus caravan and this is how my mother was conceived. At least this is how I remember this story.

The circus moved on...

And grandma gave birth to my mom. She obviously became badmouthed by neighbours. What did she do? She put high-heels on, the baby to a pram and walked the street until everybody had enough of gossiping. On the day of her death, she requested vanilla ice cream, she wanted to die with its taste in her mouth, relish it until her last second of life. Maybe I have her genes. But I have become strong because of my experiences. I have had a few moments in life where I felt it's either the end or I have to do something with it.

One of those moments was an accident...

Yes, in April 2013 I defended my doctoral thesis. In my Shields I had closed almost everything that I could work over emotionally and intellectually. There were scars, cuts, surgical sutures. And half a year later, while riding a bike I was hit by a truck. I had 17 fractures, my pelvis collapsed into two pieces, I went through 14 surgeries. There are not many places in my body without surgeon's interference. Doctors who see the list of my injuries look at me and look around asking: where is Ms Norek? They do not want to believe that after all this, a human being can be in such a state as I am.

What made you overcome it?

I had my stages of crisis, of course. Especially when I had to learn how to walk again

and suffered from insomnia. I told my surgeon, who had operated on me multiple times, that I had to promise a hospital psychologist that I wouldn't hurt myself. He replied: I would be deadly offended if you hurt yourself, because to put you back together was a great challenge. Then, he admitted that he had been in an ambulance crew for 20 years, he was a surgeon in Formula One, but he had never met such a strong human being like me. He wrote to me: from the outside fragile as a feather, but from the inside full of strength and energy.

It reminds me of one of your Shields, “Peace Dove”. Defensive Shields, Shields Against Violence. Why violence as a topic?

Life has strongly confronted me with it. When I was 24 years old, I started to recall terrible things – some sort of spilled puzzle; pictures, scraps of memory, which didn't fit in together... I wasn't sure if the things had happened or if I was going crazy.

Artists work on their personal material; it comes to my mind that you have suffered bad things.

I ran to a psychiatrist and asked if my suspicions might be right and memories real. He nodded his head. I remember that when I went out of that building, a cheerful sound of birds was unbearable. Shields let me speak about the hardest topics. There are many answers.

A Shield “Lampshade” says: “no one knows that it is he who lives inside our peaceful and warm house. No one suspects that heavy, flowery curtains of the living room hide deep suffering”. Sometimes, violence has such a subtle countenance that a victim can't even complain, because of what?

I myself had a problem understanding what violence really is. Additionally, at the worst time of my life I was involved in a very toxic relation. I felt like many bad things were happening, but I would blame myself and couldn't make a step forward. I thought there is something wrong with me. I was prone to believe that the person who hurt me was actually trying to help me and that I reacted inadequately. This person made me believe that if not him, no one would want me. At that time I had a

diploma with honours, accomplishments for which I had been respected for years. I could not understand why this man makes me feel like trash, like nothing and why he would humiliate me in my suffering.

People often wonder: he beats her and still she comes back to him. Why? Violence invades self-esteem. A vulnerable victim sees her tormentor as strength and rescue for herself...

Because once she loved the one who hurt her. She had to love, she had no other choice. If you experience violence early in life, then your mechanisms of self-defense won't work. Back then, I had a feeling that even if I had stood in a basement and water would fill it in and everybody around was to run away, I would have been standing still, without any reaction.

Your feelings had been frozen, you wouldn't have borne them otherwise...

When there was nowhere to run and scream, I had to learn how to last and not feel. It's one of the effects of violence. Some people, with no scruples, sense this condition and there is danger they are going to torture you. I've experienced it myself a couple of times. Understanding and breaking this mechanism took me a lot of time.

How did the idea for the first Shield emerge?

Fifteen years ago I drowned into an inner reality, completely messy. I felt that I was beginning to have an insight into something I'd rather not want to see. What I most wanted was to delete it from life and consciousness but it was there and demanded to hear itself out.

Until we listen our demons out, they will be messing with our life...

They will oppress, torture, suffocate and take away the quality of life. Personally, a book called "*Women Who Run With the Wolves*" written by Clarissa Pinkola Estés helped me a lot; thanks to this book, for the first time I understood that there are

worlds inside of us we don't have a clue about, but they are a part of us and are rightful to come back in the guise of pictures and dreams. I also understood that my subconscious wants to help me. I would put a duvet on my head thinking: I throw myself into it, leaving everything I know and I open to a completely new experience. I've started to filter all the hardest emotions through myself, it created pictures and this way among others, ideas for Shields were born.

Was it your technique for emotional chaos?

Being twenty something years old at the time I didn't know what was happening to my psyche, till then I was very sorted out. But I started to trust this process, especially that it was bringing a relief. It turned out that a reality of the deepest sensations and subconscious also has its rights, and that it is ruled by dependences. The world of emotions is logical, everything comes from somewhere and correlates with something. I discovered that the truth and all the answers to acute questions are deep within me. When I felt like something would start to squish me I simultaneously knew it was a promise of relief and release. I realized I found the key. Relief was a rating of being on a good path. The puzzle which originally had no sense or order, terrifying fragments of nightmarish compilation, suddenly started to combine...

Into one story.

One picture. "Shield – The Secret of Resurrection" is all about it – scattered fragments, buried deep under the ground so they would never see a light. And now it awakes, from scraps cleaned by its own tears it learns compassion and love towards itself. Finds pieces of the body. Grows and surfaces. Walks to tormentors' house who wash their hands of guilt and show they've got nothing in common with it.

Did you go to tormentors' house?

At the beginning, yes. But I had to bid goodbye to this thought, because after some time I discovered what courage it demanded from me to let the repressed subconscious in, after all that had happened. It had a dazzling power and could kill. I didn't expect from them to open up to such a painful process. In any case, I knew

then who I was and what had been done to me. People have an impression they have to get even with a tormentor. It's one of the strategies to cope with the effects of violence, if there is such a possibility. But usually there is none. It's impossible to talk to somebody who is gone or dead. What's more, I realized I absorbed tormentors' behavior – how cruel and ruthless I became towards myself and how hard it was to stop it. Thanks to that, I understood how hard it was for them to change. This consciousness helped me to absolve those who were guilty.

To understand doesn't mean to justify... You talk about the effects of violence – about oblivion of what has happened, violating your self-esteem and identification with tormentor...

A person thinks that violence has only one limb, but the effects of violence are like hydra – we chop one head off, three regrow.

Violence is like a cancer tissue, overgrows everything and garners healthy cells.

At some point we must go to our desert and face ourselves – what we have inside, honestly look through it, what energy we are carrying, what mechanisms rule us. Otherwise, we are wasted. I would be wasted.

What Shield was created first?

I don't remember. I felt that neither canvas nor graphic would carry what I wanted to communicate. Everything seemed to be too superficial. I knew I had to give away the pain I had got to know. I was creating mandalas with a round inside and I was burning it with a coil heater.

Just like a stigma, like a cattle owner burning his mark. You deal with such a mark...

Not anymore. But we are speaking about 2002. Then, my colleague psychologist saw my paintings and said they reminded her of something like a shield. It stuck into my

head – a shield stands between a tormentor and the one who tries to protect himself. It keeps traces and tells about what has happened. It is a witness and a trophy after you walk away from a battle.

There is a saying that you can “come back with your shield or on it”...

I prefer with a shield. I remember when my son was playing in a sandpit and I was creating “Shield – Frozen Flowers” with staples. My physics teacher used to tell me how her husband policeman terrorized her with a blackjack because “the soup was too salty”. Everything had to be served at the right time and the blackjack was always ready. To calm herself, she embroidered tablecloths. She showed them to me, whole acres, quadratic miles. I have created this Shield in a tribute to her – instead of thread, I took staples and was embroidering frozen flowers with them on a silver shield, similar to those frost paints. This was one of the first shields, lacy structure with slots from which barely visible nails stick out. If somebody had attacked, fragile surface wouldn't have stood it, but the nails would have protected it. Shields are actually proof of triumph.

First association: shield is something that protects

A tank protects us – closed in a tight capsule, we can attack. A shield is with us, mobile, leaves the whole space behind us. Elżbieta Owczarek, philologist, has written a beautiful text about a project where people, mainly men, were telling their stories on shields. Men were fighting, women were yarning. Thread could be weaved and then unraveled. Women also want to tell their stories in a more permanent way. This is how an idea for my shield was born, a shield that is more resistant than tapestry but yet not so involved with the male world of war, like a sword. Shield is a defensive weapon.

It doesn't serve to attack.

But it can, since it's all about a battle. During my doctoral thesis defense, one woman asked me if there is a Shield you can punch with. There are two Shields like this. One of them is “Shield for Mia”, for my daughter. A girl receives a castle on a hill from her

mother, she can play with it. But when she grows and becomes strong enough, she will lift it up and discover there is a handle. This is her weapon – depending on the situation she will be able to defend or attack, the points are really sharp. The Second shield like this is “ Shield- Dove of Peace”.

Apparently, the gentlest...

A dove tries to break through a battle field but her agitating about peace falls on deaf ears. So she becomes a bird of prey, a bomber dropping bullets on cities. When I was performing in the Parliament in Munich, this shield brought consternation and discussion. Listeners knew the symbol of dove of peace as an innocent bird but at the exhibition they faced it as a version of righteous anger and valid fight. Victor Frankl had written about it, an aggression in the service of good. It can be met in nature – when a nest is in danger there is no forgiveness, a beak and claws are used. I don't see a conflict here. In my version the dove remains innocent, agitates for peace, but is also able to transform into a predator and connects those two elements within herself without a problem.

Otherwise she would end dead. She can be a dove of peace, because she is not only a symbol of gentleness but also strength. What gives you strength?

Watching things as they are. Although it is hard and painful, it gives me more strength and decisiveness than feeding myself with illusions and vain hopes. All I have been through has shaped such an attitude in me. Sometimes I pay a huge price of emotions, discomfort, enforcing certain things. I have learned to truly cry so I am able to derive true happiness from life. I know how I feel, when I'm honest with myself and set boundaries, it gives me strength. I derive it from sensitivity and gentleness as well.

The shield – emblem, I have received and wear pinned to my lapel, is a woman breast with a nipple. Protects and feeds at the same time...

One old man approached me after the Munich exhibition and said:” I am a man, you know what I have associated woman breasts with my whole life... but when I watch

those breasts here and read stories they carry, I'm starting to respect them." On the other hand, a woman who works at a psychiatric hospital, has written to me that in psychoanalysis one breast is good and the other one is evil and that with this project I offer the good breast. It's a beautiful interpretation, which moved me deeply.

Shields have given you strength, allowed you to transform. Now you give them to others.

People walk into the exhibition, start to read descriptions of objects and... different reactions appear. Many people, although they see me for the first time in their lives, trust me and share painful, most intimate stories. I remember a 60 year old lady who said: I could never understand why I'm stuck in such a dependence towards my husband. He treated me horribly. When I read "Shield – Eroticism of the brain", I understood it and I regret that nobody handed me a key to this mechanism earlier." I saw a man who was looking at the Shields and tears were falling down his cheeks. He said when he was a 5 year old boy, his parents would keep him in a basement as a form of punishment. There he had one book, about physics, it was his only alternative world. He thought his soul was dead, but thanks to the exhibition he could feel it again. Sometimes – rarely – the reaction was denial and hostility. One man said he feels 'nazified'. He had a feeling that the exhibition's content was directed to him personally, he felt X-rayed.

You have developed a method called ARTrauma® for people who have experienced violence

This method was created by a burning need to handle post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. I myself had been looking for help for a long time. Sometimes I heard paradoxical propositions. One woman, a psychotraumatologist, suggested I imagine having a remote control and switching pictures of what had happened.

She prompted you a way to deny, look for a trick that would remove a spell...

For a goodbye she said she doesn't like artists, because they always have to find

their own way. I understood that basing on different methods and tools I had got to know I had to find a way out on my own. I opened myself to what had happened to me, internalized it and moulded myself into one piece. I also decided I wanted to share this experience with others. In art therapy the artistic value of what a client creates is not number one. In ARTrauma® I want the creation to be artistically valuable and at the same time meaningfully deep. In any case, between art therapy and ARTrauma® there are huge differences and this is what we want to develop. Currently there are talks going on for holding a pilot project and its role will be to scientifically devise and document this method. The first time workshops with building Shields Against Violence took place was in September 2016 in Tychy (Silesia province) in a seminars cycle organized by Verso. Their effect shows how huge is the need to talk about experiences connected to psychical abuse and supporting clients' faith in their feelings and ability to express them. This is what we are going to deal with basing on visual arts and the symbol of shield. A clinical version of ARTrauma® will face posttraumatic stress disorder and the most painful versions of it.

It's hard to understand violence, especially psychological abuse.

It's because it happens in an invisible space. I've experienced both of them. Psychological abuse and devastation of the body during the road accident. I could see how those experiences converge. Lying in intensive therapy after the accident, I could see the parallel between psychological and physical fractures.

Physical wounds are visible and may represent something what is not so visible, they can give access to this second experience that way...

I was in my body when childhood events happened and when I lay crushed after the accident. I can assure you that inner desolation as well as devastation of a body during a road accident are similar. A person doesn't have a clue where to run away since there is no centimeter in their body without interference of a strength which makes them absolutely exposed and defenseless. After the accident mechanisms I had known were turned on. After another surgery I had to turn into a stone, cut myself off to avoid sensation of a scalpel, to not see the sewn skin. A physiotherapist told me: "Agata, I can't do anything, there is no energy flowing through you". I started

to cry terribly and it turned out to be relieving. The accident damaged my sight, almost took away my life and sensation, but helped me to get through to a bare bone, to eventually dig out what was in my subconscious. Only now I feel that early traumas don't influence me anymore. During my doctoral thesis defense, professors were saying: "your Shields are so beautiful they would perfectly fit on a wall, but when I read texts that assist them, I think: oh my God!". Back then you wouldn't see anything when looking at me. I had a feeling that what was happening in my soul did not match a perfect, unaffected body. A few months later I ended up under a truck. The accident confronted me with death and paradoxically made me bounce back. Everything bonded inside. My sister said: "now you've become a shield, with scars and surgical sutures". Just see me.

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