

## Research Article

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# New Peredvizhniki, or Artists on the Move

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**Abstract:** In 2013 Honorata Martin, a young artist from Gdańsk travelled about six hundred kilometres on foot. No other work than the journey itself was created apart from the scrapbook with her notes and a short video. By putting herself in the precarious position of a nomad/migrant, the artist achieved multiple goals. One of them was to put an end to the alienation of work. The result is a work that is deprived of a “labour force,” and as such, it cannot be exploited. Martin adopted the strategy of a “passive subject” (as opposed to the “active subject” of Lazzarato). She followed the instructions, fitted the image that was being proposed to her by people she encountered, and this was exactly the move that triggered emancipatory power. Her perverse answer to the danger pointed out by Lazzarato was the creation of a subject without a soul who cannot be put to use in the economic structure based on immaterial labour. Her project “Setting off for Poland” contributes to decades-long discussions about the role and function of art institutions.

**Keywords:** Honorata Martin, performance art, journey

## The Traveller-philosopher

I got the idea for this essay when looking at the painting *The Traveler*, by Lyubov Popova, at the Norton Simon Museum in Los Angeles. The painting, dated 1915, oil on canvas, by a Russian artist of the Avant-Garde, is one of the most accomplished works from her early period; it was painted in a style that is usually located between French Cubism and Italian Futurism and considered typically Russian (Popova).

According to the Norton Simon website:

Like many young women from prosperous Russian families at the turn of the twentieth century, Popova traveled widely in Europe. [...] This abstracted composition suggests the speed and sense of dislocation associated with modern travel and seems to include an oblique self-portrait in the central figure: a woman wearing a yellow necklace and high-collared cape, who reads a magazine or newspaper in her seat on a train, grasping a green umbrella in one gloved hand. Snatches of text (including the Russian words “magazines,” “danger zone,” and “natural gas”) suggest advertisements within the compartment and signposts outside its windows. With her use of found text, fragmented forms, and shapes rhythmically repeated to create a sense of acceleration, Popova here assimilated both French Cubism and Italian Futurism in a uniquely Russian hybrid known as Cubo-Futurism. ([www.nortonsimon.org/art/detail/M.1967.11.P](http://www.nortonsimon.org/art/detail/M.1967.11.P))

The painting is indeed a combination of fragmentation and speed; it brings to mind Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity, which was formulated at the same time; yet, as has been widely discussed, one cannot draw an analogy between Cubism and relativity theory (Laporte 313-15). Rather, it is a metaphor for a fundamental change that appears in the art of the era. As Alexander Dörner writes of the revolution in painting that has taken place since the Enlightenment and culminates in what he calls “abstract art”: “The energization of the form-idea broke up the unifying centre of the three-dimensional world, and thus exploded the traditional form symbolizing the three-dimensional static unity of reality” (Dörner 95). What

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is extremely attractive here is how the female subject seems deprived of the “unifying centre.” Magdalena Dabrowski, the author of a biography of Popova, suggests that *The Traveler* was modelled after existing portraits by distinguished Modernist artists such as Jean Metzinger, Picasso, Malevich, Juan Gris, or Albert Gleizes (Dabrowski 14). The difference is that this is a self-portrait by a woman. *The Traveler* is a significant statement since it represents the adoption of the European Enlightenment idea of *Bildungsreise* [educational travel] by a woman (see Johnson 303-24). Observed through the window of the train compartment the woman is dynamically dismembered, and her image cannot be grasped. It gives no sense of unity or linear narration. Dislocated parts are set into a spinning motion; her face, hair and necklace seem to fall apart, and the composition recalls the strange description of an obsessive and stubborn image haunting the memory in Diderot’s *Mystification*, a short story written in 1768 (Diderot 55). It is not a simple portrait or any kind of straight iconic representation. Rather it is a reflection on memory, on the retinal image that has left its trace in the unconscious and is perpetually being processed. It looks as though Popova was especially interested in subverting the idea of travel. For it is an eye that is in motion, not a sitter. A woman traveller, or a travelling woman, is a woman who is collecting memories of a journey. I would like to turn to the specific moment when this canvas was painted, to “historicize” it, extracting it from the history of the pure form.

In 1914 Popova left Paris after two years of studying with such painters as Henri Le Fauconnier and Jean Metzinger. Coming from a wealthy family, she took advantage of her privileged position, and prior to the Bolshevik Revolution and the First World War, she was able to divide her time between Moscow, Paris and other European cities. In 1914, as a Russian citizen, she was summoned back to her country. Thus, when she was working on the painting, she may have felt cut off from the possibility of travelling. She did not know yet that because of the war and the Revolution, she would never be able to leave the country again. After the Revolution, she became involved in the movements of Constructivism and Productivism. She died suddenly of scarlet fever in 1924.

In 1915, the year she created *The Traveler*, she also painted a portrait of her younger brother Pavel, called *The Philosopher* (or *Portrait of a Philosopher*), now held in the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. These two images form a sort of pair. One can see the part-words “OR” in the image of the woman-traveller and “EXP” in the composition representing a man sitting in a train compartment. Magdalena Dabrowski reads the latter as the beginning of the word “Exposition,” but one might venture an interpretation that together they make up the phrase “Orient Express” (Dabrowski 15). Even if this is pure fantasy, the images could be regarded as a particular, personal memorial to past travels. They are both based on the memories of motion that is now beyond reach. The parallel between a philosopher and a traveller is at the core of Popova’s artistic statement.

## The Empty Subject of a Pilgrimage

I would like to look at travelling/thinking as a specific, emancipatory artistic practice. In purely Marxist terms emancipation is an objective of revolution, which enables the masses to work under new conditions in which all activities become the source of joy, work is not separable from creativity, and there is no more exploitation. Today, in the post-utopian society, however, it is hard to believe in the full emancipation of labour, and all the implications of work entangled in the network of alienation, commodification and production of a surplus-value cannot be avoided. If we analyse current relationships in the field of contemporary art we can see that even in the visual arts, where the money invested and earnings are relatively low (taking into consideration the global art scene) there is a broad spectrum of abuses (*Scholette, Fabryka sztuki*)—for example, underpayment, unpaid work, lack of stability or gender discrimination. Even immaterial values, like pleasure, leisure or fame are eventually turned into commodities. Yet this is not to say that art cannot influence the social or political sphere on another level. First of all, I am convinced that an analysis of current art practice can contribute to our understanding of how the field of cultural production, as Pierre Bourdieu calls it, is structured (327-41). Secondly, I agree with Jacques Rancière that every artistic gesture constitutes a kind of political act, since art and politics “do not constitute two permanent, separate realities” and are linked “as forms of presence of singular bodies in a specific space and time” (Rancière

25-26). According to Rancière art possesses a special emancipatory power which enables it to reconfigure social space.

Let me now turn to the case of a woman artist who, like Popova on the eve of the First World War or Hannah Höch in 1920, undertook her *Bildungsreise*. Yet unlike Popova or Höch she transformed her journey itself into a piece of art, and by that I mean there was a conceptual dimension to her activity. As in the artwork of Bas Jan Ader (Godfrey 319), or Francis Alijs (Heiser), the very motion or dislocation was turned into art, in which recording (movie, notes, photos) is the only trace of the work.

In the summer of 2013, Honorata Martin, a young artist from Gdańsk, set off on a journey across Poland. After two months she ended up in the city of Dzierżoniów, in the region of Silesia in south-west Poland, having travelled about six hundred kilometres on foot. There is no other work beyond the journey itself. There is also no traditionally conceived “work of art” to testify to it, apart from some snapshots that were made with her mobile phone and a film that she made with a simple video camera and which can be viewed on the website of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw ([artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/praca/martin-honorata-o-wyjsciu-w-polske](http://artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/praca/martin-honorata-o-wyjsciu-w-polske)). The film is technically poor: it could be mistaken for an average YouTube production. The footage is interwoven with cartoon-like drawings which she made on her journey; recording conversations with the people she encountered in villages and small towns (she avoided highways and big cities). There is also some footage of her recovering from the hardship of the long journey. The title of the project, “Wyjście w Polskę,” could be translated as “Setting off for Poland.”

The paradoxical model of communication that Martin introduced is based on the fact that the people who made up the primary audience on her walk did not know she was an artist, and the secondary audience—the visitors to the exhibition where she shows the archive of her journey or people who look up her website—have no access to the real “work.” We see the images, yet the artist alienates us from her work. The excerpts from her notebook prove that it was an alienating experience for her as well.

When asked the reason for her journey, she was not eager to disclose it and simply replied: “I have always wanted to do it” (qtd. conversation between Martin and the author). The first stage of her journey ended in a village not far from her home in Gdańsk. She started the walk with her dog, an elderly Alsatian, who appeared unable to keep pace with her. It needed assistance and longer breaks to recover. Martin decided to call on her father, who happened to live nearby; he took care of it, so she could go on without it. After a short stay at her father’s house, she set off again. Her scrapbook gives us an insight into what she experienced. What is peculiar about it is that most of her encounters are noted down in the form of a dialogue. For instance:

- Aren’t you scared?
- Yes, I am
- Are you not afraid, walking on your own?
- Yes, I am.
- How come you’re not afraid?
- But I am afraid.
- All the way from Gdańsk?!!! On your own?!!! And you’re not afraid?
- Yes, I am afraid.
- You’re on your own, and you’re not afraid?
- Actually no. I’m not afraid.

It is clear that this is not a documentary report on one specific conversation but rather the summary of a series of exchanges that took place during her journey. She was acting like a sociologist who for the sake of her research organises the material she has collected into a set of selected topics. One of them would be gender-oriented issues, i.e. how her sexual identity affects the behaviour of the others. Another is the religious disposition of the random sample of society she met on her way, which the next examples clearly show:

- Is this a pilgrimage?
- No.
- Are you going for some religious purpose?
- No.

- Is this a charity? Are you collecting money for sick children or something?
- No, I'm not.
- Ah! It's a competition. Are there more of you?
- No.
- Why do you think you are walking?
- I don't know.

Interestingly the people looking at her performance do not know that they constitute an audience. Nor do they know that they are the objects of a piece of sociological inquiry. The figure of the “artist as ethnographer” proposed by Hal Foster to define contemporary artistic practices is very apt here. Foster transforms Walter Benjamin's paradigm of the “author as producer” (Benjamin 768-81) into a new model, in which

the object of contestation remains in large part the bourgeois-capitalist institution of art (the museum, the academy, the market, and the media), its exclusionary definitions of art and artist, identity and community. But the subject of association has changed: it is the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the committed artist most often struggles. (Foster 173)

Foster reiterates the dilemma of the Russian revolutionary artists that was highlighted by Walter Benjamin in his text *The Author as Producer* (1934). The dilemma is based on the observation that when artists become involved in the actual industrial production, they generally become ideological leaders rather than becoming members of the working class. Foster remarks:

under the influence of the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht and the factographic experiments of Soviet writers like Sergei Tretiakov, Benjamin called on the artist on the left “to side with the proletariat.” In Paris in 1934 this call was not radical; the approach, however, was. For Benjamin urged the “advanced” artists to intervene, like the revolutionary worker, in the means of artistic production—to change the “technique” of traditional media, to transform the “apparatus” of bourgeois culture. A correct “tendency” was not enough; that was to assume a place “beside the proletariat.” And “what kind of place is that?” Benjamin asked in lines that still scathe. “That of a benefactor, of an ideological patron—an impossible place.” (Foster 171)

Following the observation by Benjamin that “siding with the proletariat” is rather utopian, and the artist cannot be a creator and a producer at the same time, Foster proposes another concept which according to him exists already in the practices of particular contemporary artists like Fred Wilson or Andrea Fraser: the artist as an ethnographer. This figure seems more promising since it allows for less distance. An artist maintains his or her artistic tools but can combine them with the vocabulary of ethnography. This results in artworks that take the shape of subjective surveys, interventions into existing social spaces, reorganising museum collections or other infrastructures. What is peculiar about the “ethnographic shift” in contemporary art, as Foster calls it, is that artists, following “ethnographic surrealism,” realise that the “pure outside is almost impossible,” and instead of binary structures of otherness they have to accept the relational model of difference (178). This means that an artist is never outside their area of inquiry and that the supposed distance taken towards the object of their work is illusory but also that they are never totally “inside” either. The artist can maintain the position “in between.” What makes this observation relevant to Martin's attitude is her fundamental decision to rely on other people's suggestions throughout her journey—hence the dialogical structure of her notebooks. The subject of her work, the dialogical or relational self, is being created in the course of the exchanges that take place along the way.

According to Émile Benveniste, ‘I’ is constantly redefined in the course of dialogue, by *you* and *her/him* (1-12) and it emerges as a result of discourse. The ‘I’, as proposed by Martin in her work, emerges in the same way but she extends the notion of dialogue to the exchange of gazes (see Kordys 3-27). In one of her drawings she represents herself passing through a village pulling a cart loaded with her belongings and, exposed to the gaze of the inhabitants standing in a row in front of their houses, her body seems to be bent under the weight of their gazes. As Małgorzata Lebda notes in her essay on Martin's journey, the artist became a site of social mediation and cultural exchange (122).

The itinerary of Martin's journey was deliberately left to others to decide. The artist has said that at the

beginning she had no destination, so she decided to let herself be directed by other people. When asked where she was going, she would answer “Nowhere” or “I don’t know,” which caused embarrassment and fear. A decisive change took place when someone discovered that she was an artist and that she was to participate in an exhibition in Wrocław later the same year. She remembers the relief of her interlocutor. Locating Martin in the suddenly invented category of “the artist who is about to have an exhibition,” this person gave her directions to Wrocław. And although Wrocław was six hundred kilometres away, she decided to continue in this direction.

It is extremely important to understand this position: it is the empty subject, the subject understood as a network of projections, the “nomadic” or performative subject. As literary scholar Ewa Kołodziejczyk observed at the Warsaw CLE Conference in May 2017, Honorata Martin exactly follows the model established by Witold Gombrowicz, in his brilliant play *Princess Ivona*, written in 1935. In this satirical portrait of the society as a network of changing discourses, Ivona is an ordinary country girl who, at the whim of the local prince, is invited to the court. Even after she marries him, she remains alien. Silent and clumsy and extremely shy, she provokes other people’s desires and projections. She is a pure signifier, an empty container for thoughts and wishes, a neuter, as Roland Barthes puts it (qtd in Bielecki 64-66). What makes her a centre of attention and later the most dangerous element of the play of intersubjectivities, an intruder who has to be eliminated, is the common assumption that she is hiding her “real” personality behind her indistinct public performance. So, in the end, Ivona is murdered. She becomes not only a mirror but also a witness to their compromising deeds.

Honorata Martin’s advantage was that the audience of her performance was not aware of her precarious position as a mirror and/or witness. Crosscutting the society, looking at them with her panoptical gaze, she went unnoticed while being exposed to their gazes. She was visible, but not recognisable. Honorata Martin’s work reports on this gap.

## Art and Immaterial Labour

Using the terms of political economy, one can also understand her journey as breaking away from the current division of labour. What could it mean in terms of the neoliberal capitalist economy to leave home on foot, with a dog, a sleeping bag, a few clothes and a mobile phone and start walking in an unknown direction? One’s car, work and family are left behind, as well as one’s daily routine. I must add that Honorata Martin is a well-established young artist, a lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, a highly skilled and accomplished professional who, since her studies in Gdańsk, has participated actively in the local art scene. Her social status is quite significant since this is the role that she decided to quit for a while.

As Maurizio Lazzarato notes, most of the jobs that people do today are based on immaterial labour (133-148). This applies to all sorts of professions that involve decision-making, spontaneity, imagination and choosing among alternatives. They all involve what Lazzarato calls an “active subject” (134). Nevertheless, immaterial work can be fully controlled; Lazzarato argues that it is even more controlled than traditional production. According to a contemporary slogan cited by Lazzarato, “the worker’s soul becomes part of the factory” (133). Although it is supposed to enhance cooperation and trust among workers it represents a much bigger danger than the old “alienation” observed by Marx, argues Lazzarato. When, in the factory or another workplace, all souls become one, “the worker’s personality and subjectivity have to be made susceptible to organisation and command” (133). The Western discourse of subjectivity can thus be really insidious, hiding an authoritarian agenda, since “capitalism seeks to involve even the worker’s personality and subjectivity within the production of value” (135).

Why do I mention these points in the context of contemporary art? According to Lazzarato, this mechanism applies not only to the factory and highly skilled workers but also to all sorts of labour, including immaterial production. One can conclude that the role of the proletariat has been taken over by the “intellectual proletariat” (Lazzarato 136).

Now, if one tries to apply this observation to the field of production in the visual arts, one must observe a particular shift. Whereas in the 1960s conceptual art was directed against the commodification of objects,

today it is not enough to break away from the object to avoid commodification: immaterial labour has been commodified too, and it can easily be absorbed into the art market. Thus Honorata Martin's endeavour to break away from the vicious circle of immaterial labour is worthy of our attention. She is adopting the strategy of a "passive subject" (as opposed to the "active subject" of Lazzarato). She follows the instructions, fits the image that is being proposed to her, as though she were filling an empty cup. And this is exactly the move that triggers emancipatory power. Her perverse answer to the danger pointed out by Lazzarato is the creation of a subject without a soul. She turns herself into a subject without a soul, who cannot be put to use in the economic structure based on immaterial labour.

## Barge Haulers and Sdvig

In conclusion, I would like to recall a famous painting by Ilya Repin which depicts extreme exploitation—*Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870-1873). It represents a group of male workers who are dragging a barge along the banks of the River Volga, oppressed by heavy labour. The Peredvizhniki group, which was active at the turn of the twentieth century (1871-1923), advanced the idea of bringing art to the masses by organising travelling exhibitions. The desire to break away from the official system was parallel to Courbet's decision to leave the official Salon or the strategy of independent exhibitions adopted by a group of Impressionists. Yet the Avant-Garde strategy of Peredvizhniki was contradicted by their rather traditional way of painting. In Russia, the next step towards extending art to the masses was taken by the Constructivists, including Lyubov Popova, whom I mentioned earlier. Their efforts to bring art to the masses are very well known and widely analysed.

At the start of the October Revolution Popova became involved with the idea of integrating art into society. She belonged to progressive circles, became friends with Alexander Rodchenko and his wife Varvara Stepanova and contributed to a variety of projects that involved Avant-Garde art forms and aimed at modernisation of the country. There were also many disappointments. For instance, Popova's attempt to collaborate (together with Stepanova) with the First State Textile Printing Works in Moscow was a failure for both artists. In January 1924 Stepanova reported on her work at the factory, criticising various aspects of the contemporary structure of the textile industry: "1. the isolation of the drawing department from the production and marketing organs of the factory; 2. the work of the artistic atelier being divorced from the production process; 3. the dominance of consumer taste [and] fashion" (Lodder, par. 11).

Both she and Popova felt useless, and after a short time, they left the factory. As Claire Bishop has demonstrated in *Artificial Hells*, her book on the participatory practices of twentieth-century artists, there is strong a connection between the first Avant-Garde of the 1920s and the artists active since 1968 who aim to involve audiences in their work (41-104). They had many failures and misconceptions. Firstly, audience reactions cannot be predicted; secondly, an agenda of bringing separate social classes together (workers and intellectuals, artists and homeless people) often subverts its own assumptions, reinforcing the class divisions instead of eradicating them. The question is how to avoid categorisation. How can one collaborate with the "other" without trapping them in a fixed category?

One may observe—and this is in tune with Bishop's conclusions—that recent artistic activities reach beyond the idea of participatory art as defined here and are critical of the utopia of inclusiveness. Martin's work is a new formulation of this criticism. Her work could be read as a critical commentary on the whole range of activities that try to bridge the gap between art and "society." To quote from the footage of her film: "They looked at me as if I was some sort of weirdo. That cart! Nobody knows what's on her mind." Or: "I felt lost in my own country. I felt misplaced and I never felt well. The beautiful landscapes pissed me off. I did not want to be afraid but I was" (Martin). She recalls moments when she did not feel human any more and asked herself whether the people around her were human either. On the social level, this implies the loss of one's fixed category. It is similar to the presence of migrants and the fear they induce. Fear is intersubjective. Martin causes anxiety, but she is also scared. She transports her fear from village to village. The fear is augmented by other people's fear, and she feels almost deprived of any identity until she is pinpointed by definition when she becomes "an artist travelling to Wrocław." I'd like to ask if she might also be regarded

as a migrant because a similar mechanism applies to the transient identity of a migrant. “Refugees are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution. [...] migrants choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives,” so says the UN Refugee Agency ([www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/](http://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/)). This definition is to help us distinguish a migrant from a refugee, an asylum-seeker from an economic migrant. It is very much a legal issue. The name indicates what law (local or international) should be applied. For the person who arrives in a foreign country the first term they encounter “migrant,” “refugee” or “asylum seeker”—may decide their whole future. As the author of the above-cited entry states: “Word choice matters.” Thus one can say that Honorata Martin is the figure of a migrant who travels through words. It is interesting that after the journey her memory seems to break down. She can hardly remember what happened when she was walking, sleeping under the stars, in courtyards and garages, and very occasionally at other people’s houses when she was invited. Here I would like to bring in a term used by artists and poets of the Popova age—“sdvig.”

The Russian word “sdvig” has a meaning close to the English words “dislocation,” “displacement” or “passage.” As Johanna Drucker observes, the term was applied to poetic as well as painterly techniques in early twentieth-century Russia (Drucker 168-192). It was used in the poetic language of the Russian Avant-Garde by Ilya Zdanevich or Aleksei Kruchenykh, and it implies a split, a gap, a slide, a turn, and a tilt of words or, as Drucker puts it, “displacing a verbal mass into another position” (175). Something is cut and lost. Yet the memory of “sdvig” still haunts any composed thing.

I would like to argue that “sdvig” can also be traced in the practice of contemporary artists, especially in performance, when, through the transformation of daily routine, a new sense of action is evoked. In Martin’s work the process of “othering the self,” so important in the critical discourse of ethnography, would never have happened without motion. Today the idea of motion is easily appropriated by tourism, which turns mobility into a commodity. Martin performed a gesture of reclaiming motion from the commercial zone and turned it into a way of questioning the accepted conditions of life. Her special focus, though, were the conditions of work of artists in neoliberal society. To put it briefly and somewhat ironically: it was the professional journey that cannot be reimbursed. It was a motion of a special kind, not without a reference to the other meaning of “sdvig,” which is “losing one’s mind.”

To conclude: it is a migrant, here personified by an artist, who makes us feel alienated from our life. A Nobody, a *neuter*, a subject without a “unifying centre” or a subject without a soul, forms part of the most effective artistic strategy. It is especially important in the situation of today’s “crisis globalization” [*sic*], to borrow a term from T. J. Demos, in which the “multitudes are reduced to the status of what Giorgio Agamben terms *bare life*” (Demos XIV). In this context space and motion have a power of estrangement which could be compared to “sdvig.” It is illuminating that it is enough to travel 20 kilometres on foot from one’s home to ask questions about identity, memory, national and political belonging. The answer is as uncertain as ever.

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