Silence will not protect you: Speaking up, speaking out, and speaking against domestic violence through the medium of jewellery in *The body language - scars* by Dominika Kuźniar

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I focus on an art project entitled *The body language - scars* (2023 – ongoing) created by Dominika Kuźniar, a Polish jewellery artist. The collection, which includes six jewellery items, is explored as an arts activist practice raising awareness of gender-based violence, specifically domestic violence in Poland. I will pay attention to the new visual language developed by Kuźniar via the medium of jewellery to counter the culture of silence and shame surrounding domestic violence and encourage collective responsibility and accountability. Focusing on the language of jewellery, I interrogate how we hold space for women to speak up, speak out, and speak against GBV in solidarity and adjacency.

Keywords: feminist arts activism, domestic violence, gender-based violence, Dominika Kuźniar, culture of silence, adjacencys.

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Introduction

'I was a victim of domestic abuse. My mother was my oppressor', responded Dominika Kuźniar, a Polish jewellery artist, to my question about the origins of her collection entitled *The body language - scars*[1] (2023 – ongoing; Figure 1). It includes six jewellery items and keeps expanding: so far, the artist has created the earrings *Bruises* and *Cigarette burns,* the bracelet *Wrist cut*, the brooches *Scar* and *Burn scar* and the pendant *Cut*. Kuźniar crafted the collection in a healing gesture to her own trauma of surviving domestic violence, first perpetrated by her mother and later by her partners. *Body language* is intended to raise awareness of domestic violence in Poland and the culture of secrecy surrounding it.

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Dominika Kuźniar, *The body language – scars*, 2023 – ongoing. Courtesy of the artist.

There is a saying in Poland – 'Mowa jest srebrem, a milczenie złotem' (Speech is silver, silence is golden). However, silence can be deadly. It is a fertile ground for the intensification of gender-based violence (GBV), defined as forms of violence harmful to an individual based on their gender (as a social construct), gender identity or expression, and more specifically, domestic violence, nourished by victims' fear of reporting abuse and the

social stigma toward survivors of GBV. The feelings of shame, denial, blame, and guilt often experienced by the survivors become internalised out of dread of reputational damage or social judgement. The culture of silence feeds domestic violence which is further perpetrated by shame. There is an expectation to keep domestic abuse private according to Heron and Maarten (2021), which is maintained by the abusers, as argued by Towns and Adams (2016), or family members, and institutionalised (Birchall & Choudhry 2022). GBV is pervasive. It is also persistent over time and space, occurring throughout one's life-course in any social setting. The World Health Organisation (WHO 2025) reminds us that one in three women globally experiences physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. UN Women (2024) reports that in 2023, a woman was killed every ten minutes by a partner or family member. GBV has become normalised and ordinary; it is experienced by most women and girls in their everyday lives. The statistics are staggering, evidencing that GBV is systemic. A radical change is needed to dismantle patriarchal norms feeding violence and also, and perhaps above all, to recognise that a collective commitment and responsibility are necessary to break the silence around GBV.

Audre Lorde (2007:40) wrote that silence needs to be translated into language and action. Her words have had a significant impact on me and my thinking about my role as an art historian and theorist. I have started to question: What can I do to counter GBV? What can art do? Searching for answers has been driven by a desire not to regret silences and my complicity in maintaining them. How can we break the silences in adjacency, I have been asking myself. And how, following Mary Brydon Miller (2004:5), to recognise the privilege and oppression of my own academic practice, acknowledging that while confronting injustices, I write from the position of social and economic privilege, which upholds the intricate web of power relationships? The location of my disempowerment is the result of my gender, and so my experience is not synonymous with the experiences of others whose disempowerment may be linked to their race or sexuality, for example. How does this inform my understanding of the other, so that I do not speak for them?

Lorde pronounces (2007:40), 'I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared'. I took these words to heart. Language is my working tool to practise art history and theory, and I am committed to employing it through my research on arts activism and GBV to give voice to artistic practices that raise awareness, advocate, and educate about women's right to a life free of violence, as a fundamental human right. This article, in which I engage in a dialogue with Dominika Kuźniar,[2] is one such attempt. I do not intend to speak for or on behalf of others, but rather hope to speak out against the silencing of domestic violence and to analyse Kuźniar's jewellery collection as arts activism against GBV, specifically domestic violence in Poland, and the culture of shame surrounding it. The multilayered pressures

to keep things private, whether out of fear of reputational damage, societal judgement and/or legal repercussions, reveal the necessity for collective accountability. Silence is not golden. Lorde (2007:41) asks herself if she 'had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed herself into small silences', while planning to speak one day or waiting for someone else to do that on her behalf. The small silences pile up, prolonging a person's agony and suffocating them; it is death by a thousand silences to paraphrase a popular figure of speech (otherwise known as 'slow slicing' or 'lingchi'), referring to a form of torture originating from Imperial China. Brydon Miller (2004:13) writes about being compelled to 'speak out about important social issues' and accepting the legitimacy of one's own voice. I believe in the possibility of change via action, so here I am holding space for Kuźniar, and women whose experiences she represents, to speak up, speak out, and speak against GBV in solidarity and adjacency.

First, I discuss Kuźniar's jewellery practice and contextualise it within GBV discourse. Then I attend to domestic violence as a violation of human rights and address its context in Poland. Finally, I focus on the artist's *Body language* collection as an example of arts activism.

Jewellery: Adorned in advocacy against GBV

Kuźniar has been making jewellery since 2014, combining a variety of techniques.[3] She works with metals, predominantly silver (sometimes incorporating stones), which she hammers, solders, sometimes manually chisels, and galvanises. Some of her pieces include fragments of old photographs or newspaper cuttings collaged and covered in transparent resin. At times, she engraves quotes on washpapa, a washable sewing paper. She is a curious explorer experimenting with fragile materials, such as assembly foam or glass, and with scale – the jewellery items range from smaller pieces such as rings to large necklaces or bracelets that are almost impossible to wear, as though to negotiate and test the lengths the wearer is willing to go to adorn their body.

> Kuźniar 2025: *My adventure with jewellery started in Wyższa Szkoła Rzemiosł Artystycznych i Zarządzania (Higher School of Artistic Crafts and Management) in Wrocław, Poland. I already had some knowledge of design having graduated from Studium Projektowania (Postgraduate Design Course) in Wrocław and worked as a fashion designer for a well-known Polish high street fashion brand. While studying jewellery, apart from modules in art history, geology and gemmology, I learnt traditional jewellery techniques. I was attracted to unconventional materials and began working with paper, concrete and what is often considered junk. I have always searched for new shapes, technical solutions and materials, intersecting artistic practices such as sculpture, graphic design and illustration. My only limitation is the size – all objects I create must be wearable.*

Kuźniar's practice catalyses embodied meanings to communicate an idea, which, according to Damian Skinner (2022), is characteristic of art jewellery, also called contemporary, studio, or author jewellery. Skinner adds that contemporary jewellery is self-reflexive and its creators 'often work in a critical relationship to the history of jewelry-making', questioning and expanding this practice. Jack Cunningham (2008:13) notes that using non-precious materials also achieves this. Skinner and Monica Gaspar (2015:3) emphasise the relational potential of contemporary jewellery, the actions, gestures, and meanings that are made possible. Such framing is important while analysing Kuźniar's commitment to jewellery making and its potential for advocacy for women's rights and raising awareness of GBV, particularly reproductive violence and/ or domestic violence in Poland. Many of her pieces are intimately addressing the Polish government curbing sexual and reproductive health and rights since 2015, when right-wing, national-conservative Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice) took power. Despite the 2023 parliamentary election in Poland resulting in a left-liberal-Christian coalition government, not much has changed in advancing women's rights and access to reproductive healthcare. The time of writing this article coincided with the presidential election in Poland. The results of the first round held on 18 May 2025 were harrowing, revealing an exponential surge in votes for far-right and fascist parties (enduring right-wing tendencies can be observed on a global arena) and a drop in confidence in the current coalition government.[4] Karol Nawrocki, the presidential candidate supported by PiS,[5] has alleged ties to criminal activities and links with neo-Nazi groups (PAP 2025). The danger of accelerating the hateful exclusions and further curbs on women's rights is becoming a grave threat. Klein and Taylor (2025) warn that we live in times of genuine existential dangers deepened by contemporary far-right movements ideologically and financially committed to escalating disasters, absolute dominance and 'ever-expanding assemblage of dehumanized others'. This belief system, 'is genocidal at its core', grounded in abuse and 'racial, ableist and gender biases about which parts of humanity are worth enhancing and saving' (Klein & Taylor 2025). To resist this age of emergency is not to betray our duties to one another, to commit 'across our many differences and divides'. And this is what Kuźniar practices, interrogating what jewellery does as a medium – it invites interaction but also acts as an agent of meaning making.

Domestic violence: A human rights violation

Domestic violence is a human rights violation. On 7 May 2024, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union (EU) officially adopted the Directive on Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence Directive,[6] its first law on combatting violence against women and a first of its kind in the world. While critiqued for not banning forced sterilisation, forced marriage, and cyber violence, and not including a common

definition and criminalisation of rape, it outlines crucial obligations for all EU Member States to end violence against women. The United Nations (UN [sa]) raises awareness about domestic violence, also called 'domestic abuse' or 'intimate partner violence', as a pattern of behaviour in any relationship to gain control. It can happen to anyone of any gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation or religion, and socioeconomic and/or educational background. Those abusive actions can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological and are aimed at frightening, intimidating, manipulating, hurting, humiliating, blaming, injuring or wounding an intimate partner. The UN ([sa]) emphasises the broader system of abuse that surrounds domestic violence; one action becomes reinforced by other acts, instilling the fear of future attacks and enabling the abuser to establish and maintain control over their victim's life and circumstances.

Article 2 Section 1 of the Act of 29 July 2005 on counteracting domestic violence in Poland (amended on 22 June 2023) defines domestic violence as an intentional act or omission exploiting a physical, mental or economic advantage, and violating personal rights, bodily integrity, freedom, and privacy. Domestic violence in Poland remains widespread but also often hidden. Although men are also subject to domestic abuse, statistics consistently show it is disproportionately perpetrated by men against women. The 2019 report commissioned by the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy in Poland revealed that 63% of women experienced some form of domestic violence in their lives (Kantar 2019). It was originally unpublished and leaked in 2020 by a news website Gazeta.pl, when the Polish justice minister at that time, Zbigniew Ziobro, initiated the process of withdrawing Poland from the Istanbul Convention, a treaty of the Council of Europe to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence. Poland ratified the treaty in 2015 under the government led by the centrist party Platforma Obywatelska (PO, Civic Platform), just before PiS orchestrated an illiberal transformation of the country, severely eroding the rights of women, LGBTQI+, and migrants. In 2014, Ziobro called the Istanbul Convention a 'feminist invention that is meant to justify gay ideology', further adding that 'you don't need a convention to [know] you cannot beat a woman; you can just read the gospel' (NFP 2020). Polonia Christiana, a Catholic magazine published since 2008 in Poland by the Christian Culture Association, called the Convention 'a gender ticking bomb', seemingly fighting violence against women but in reality smuggling 'gender ideology' and endangering Catholic values (Polonia Christiana 2018).

While there are multiple organisations and activist initiatives committed to fighting GBV (for example, in Europe there is Women Against Violence Europe WAVE and the Council of Europe's annual 16 Days of Activism campaign to combat GBV) and domestic violence more specifically (such as the European Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence, Victim Support Europe, and, in Poland, the Nationwide Emergency Service for Victims of Domestic Violence 'Blue Line'), I argued elsewhere (Sliwinska

2024a:2) arts activism generates and facilitates other means 'that have potential to lead social change in thinking, practice and, finally, legislation'. It can open spaces and work where different forms of activism may stutter. The innovative visual and performative strategies it develops often arise from radical imagination that, instead of representing political issues, do politics that imagine potential futures (Sliwinska 2024a:11). Arts activism is not synonymous with other forms of protest, and it can mediate circumstances where those other forms are disallowed, or when fatigue exists on other processes for change. Intersecting artistic practice, visual culture, politics, and social actions, arts activism galvanises advocacy for change by innovating strategies driven by artistic methodologies and practices to communicate an argument (Sliwinska 2024b). Arts activism imagines alternative, desirable futures.

Jewellery: Communicating domestic violence

In the specific Polish context, Kuźniar has been dedicated to advocacy for women's rights through practising a politics of location referring to the political struggles situated in particular spaces, which, as argued by Raili Marling (2021:94) and Nina Lykke (2010:55), is critical to meaningful transnational feminism and yet often still neglected or not adequately adopted. Her collection *Body language* of (as of now) six jewellery items portrays the aftermath of domestic violence, the visible wounds and scars that, with the passing of time, become less prominent. The six objects attend to specific instances of domestic violence and negotiate in silver the photographs of abused women that the artist sourced online. The oxidised silver and gold-plated earrings *Bruises* (Figure 2) replicate the black eyes of a battered woman. The earrings *Cigarette burns* (Figure 3) map the marks left by the intentional burning of neck skin with a cigarette. The brooch *Burn scar* (Figure 6) portrays forearm skin damaged by pouring boiling water over it. The pendant *Cut* (Figure 7), enamelled in red with rubies cast in silver, visualises cuts made with a sharp knife over a woman's face. The brooch *Scar* (Figure 5) and the bracelet *Wrist cut* (Figure 4) show the cuts left on forearms.

Kuźniar confessed that the idea for the collection germinated for some time. Her ability to speak was compromised by her commitment to protect her mother, who was her oppressor. Remaining silent was a coping mechanism that she also activated later in her life when emotionally abused by her partners. Then, in 2023, she came across a competition in La Pinacothèque in Luxembourg. She immediately sensed this was an opportunity to resist her oblivion and self-silencing. The bubble burst. She said she needed to spit it out; her story was like a leakage that could no longer be stopped or prevented. As Sara Ahmed (2007:260) reminds us, 'Those moments of recognition are precious .... With a moment comes a memory'. Each item in the collection, while referring to her own

FIGURE Nº 2

Dominika Kuźniar, *Bruises*, earrings from collection *The body language – scars*, 2023 – ongoing. Courtesy of the artist.

experience, is also an attempt to speak with other women, standing with them in solidarity, to recognise, as Ahmed (2007:215) proposes, other women being in that situation too, 'you too, me too, she too, we too'. Kuźniar realised that most of her friends have experienced GBV, often disguised through gaslighting, so the victims do not trust their own intuition that whispers to them that something is not quite right. She also observed that usually, after a fight in a relationship comes a moment of reconciliation and apologies. Sometimes this is accompanied by a gift, which is often an item of jewellery. These observations prompted the collection and its multilayered messages revealed through the process of what Jane Bennett (2005:41) calls 'seeing feeling', describing both a feeling that is imagined but also regenerated through an encounter with an artwork,

> the point at which one both feels and knows feeling to be the property of another. It is a trivial, unwilled response that in terms of spectatorship can constitute an experiential link between affect (sensation in the present) and representation (Bennett 2005:43).

The visceral language of Kuźniar's jewellery collection invites the viewer to think through the body by locating themselves in relation to the objects and recognising affective micro-bodily responses.

FIGURE Nº 3

Dominika Kuźniar, *Cigarette burns*, earrings from collection *The body language – scars,* 2023 – ongoing. Courtesy of the artist.

The communicative potentials of contemporary jewellery are explored by, for example, Skinner (2022), Gaspar and Skinner (2015), and Passos (2019:64), the latter foregrounding the relationship between jewellery and memory, as a methodological process and a resource, focusing on the generated affects. As an adornment but also a token of belonging or a talisman, a piece of jewellery catalyses multiple intertwining meanings ranging from ornamental, economic, symbolic, religious, social or sentimental. Its capacity to evoke something other than aesthetic connotation is addressed by Scarpitti (2021:63), who argues it opens the possibility to imagine new ways of being in the world. Cunningham (2008) foregrounds the socio-cultural relevance of jewellery as a powerful means of societal expression. Similarly to Passos (2019), he draws attention to the potential of jewellery to acknowledge life stories, which is particularly potent in Kuźniar's practice as a nexus for her own storytelling bearing her experiences, as well as those carrying it and viewing it. Cunningham (2008:14) explores the diverse art forms characterising contemporary jewellery, such as materials and form, whether architectonic or kinaesthetic, and focuses on the narrative category that emerged in the 20th century. Drawing on examples of jewellery as a means of political commentary (items worn by the Women's Social and Political Union to publicly convey suffrage allegiance) or expression of support (pins and ribbons such as the AIDS red ribbon or breast cancer

pink ribbon), Cunningham (2008:18-21) argues that the wearer becomes a living and moving intervention, another kind of display, to transmit messages. His approach, however, has limitations in not attending to the sensorial, which is raised by Sabine Pagan (2014), writing about jewellery objects as conduits of bodily experiences enabling new ways of interacting with the world. In her own practice, Pagan, similarly to Kuźniar, employs material tacit knowledge to explore relational possibilities of jewellery. Kuźniar employs its language to convey meanings with an activist intention as a testimony against injustices reproduced by silence.

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Dominika Kuźniar, *Wrist cut*, bracelet from collection *The body language – scars*, 2023 – ongoing. Courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE **Nº 5**

Dominika Kuźniar, *Scar*, brooch from collection *The body language – scars*, 2023 – ongoing. Courtesy of the artist.

Several jewellery brands advocate for women's rights. Pomellato, an Italian jewellery company, has advocated for women's empowerment and gender equality since 2015, when Sabina Belli took over as its CEO. Its initiative #PomellatoForWomen features an annual campaign raising awareness of GBV. The message of its 2025 initiative is simple: 'silence is complicity'. Communicated via a video launched on 8 March, International Women's Day, it features well-known actresses addressing the stigma, social judgement, and isolation the survivors battle, further extending their suffering. While powerful and potentially impactful on its customers, Pomellato's message could be seen as an example of what has been termed 'popular feminism'. Lauri and Lauri (2023:458) explain that it 'captures the popularity of feminism on social media, where celebrities, influencers and users endorse feminism and reiterate empowering quotes', adding it also describes the increasing presence of commodities with feminist messages. While it is not my intention to explore here the co-option of feminism by neoliberal capitalism and its consequences, such as women internalising neoliberal norms through, for example, values of empowerment, as Lauri and Lauri (2023:458) point out, popular feminism affects feminism and it needs careful attention. It often undermines feminist critique or serves to individualise the feminist movement, offering a quick 'fix' for social change (wearing a pin with a feminist slogan is simply not enough) and impairing the urgency for structural changes and solidarity. However, feminist activism has the potential to utilise the market to serve feminist purposes, as explored by Lauri and Lauri (2023:458). It does not absorb the political to mobilise visibility as its end goal, which often accompanies popular feminism as observed by Banet-Weiser (2018), but catalyses political visibility towards social change. This, I argue, is at the heart of Kuźniar's practice, which is firmly grounded in feminist politics to mobilise awareness of women's rights and their violations in Poland.

While Pomellato advocates against domestic violence via diverse initiatives built into its brand's mission, the medium of jewellery itself is not employed to activate the message. Jewellery can be a powerful communication tool. Its etymological roots point to a Latin word *iocum* indicating adorning oneself while having fun. However, contemporary jewellery surpasses this definition as a medium of non-verbal projection of meanings, and develops new aesthetics, meanings, and processes (Scarpitti 2021:64;67). Similarly to how clothing has been a potent tool for queer[7] or reproductive rights activism,[8] jewellery too conveys politically charged messages, as evidenced by Kuźniar's practice.

> Kuźniar 2025: Jewellery is the perfect medium. Similarly to the way in which the wall is a painting's background, the body serves as a background for jewellery. We wear jewellery daily, and this opens potentials to communicate messages either concerned with our identity or politics. It can open spaces for important discussions that perhaps are difficult to initiate otherwise. Holding the objects close to the body we stand with them. The personal is political.

FIGURE Nº 6

Dominika Kuźniar, *Burn scar*, brooch from collection *The body language – scars*, 2023 – ongoing. Courtesy of the artist.

The collection *Body language* does not conform to what jewellery is expected to be (adornment and decoration), nor to what domestic violence looks like; the bodily harm made visible by Kuźniar is aesthetically pleasing, being hammered in silver, gold-plated, and cast with rubies. It does not speak for the survivors but encourages those who remain silent to speak up and speak out. This is achieved by the artist sharing the stories behind each of the pieces either via brief textual descriptions accompanying the collection when the items are displayed in her own studio or in gallery settings, for example at the *Woman's Essence Show* at the St. Art Gallery in London (May 2025) and *Strefa komfortu* (*Comfort zone*) in Niegaleria in Wrocław, Poland during Noc Muzeów (Museum Night) from 17 to 31 May 2025;[9] or verbalised when talking to women.

Kuźniar told me that both the context in which the items are displayed or worn *and* their stories are important.[10] She confessed she doesn't wear any of the objects as they are too intimately interlaced with her own story. She also shared that most women who put on the earrings took them off after seeing the source photos. However, some women felt empowered wearing the items, reminding them never again to remain in an abusive relationship. Beata, who visited *Strefa komfortu* said, 'maybe this kind of art will finally unseal women's lips, and they will no longer be afraid to speak up'. Monika observed that the jewellery pieces could potentially make the abusers reflect on their actions. The artist has considered developing the collection to include amulets crafted for specific

FIGURE Nº 7

Dominika Kuźniar, *Cut*, pendant from collection *The body language – scars*, 2023 – ongoing. Courtesy of the artist.

women in response to their stories of domestic violence. These talismans, attending to diverse cultural traditions in which objects are potent and invested with power, would protect them from dangers. Annie Thwaite (2019) traces the origin of the word 'amulet' while discussing their therapeutic, apotropaic or healing functions. She also addresses the beliefs about their preventative and curing functions. Thwaite explains that amulets are invested with healing potency, which, if understood historically, intersects a range of approaches from medicine, religion, astrology and magic to cure a disease but also avert a malevolent force.[11] This broad and multilayered capacity of objects that are situated but also performative is an opportunity for Kuźniar to further mobilise her advocacy against GBV.

Snapping to break the silence

One of the differences between Kuźniar's approach to GBV advocacy and, for example, that of Pommelato is a complex and nuanced negotiation of agency and visibility, which is localised and contrasts with the neoliberal economy of visibility. Marling (2021:95) convincingly argues that there is a danger of co-optation of the publicity-friendly feminism

within neoliberal rationality. This doesn't allow for the challenging of power hierarchies and accounting for exclusions and invisibilities. Paying attention to situated politics of location offers new forms of relationality and negotiation of local grassroots activism, nurturing feminist politics. Marling (2021:100), after Chandra Talpade Mohanty, warns against feminism becoming co-opted and disconnected from systemic critique. She proposes (2021:102) to foreground careful local archaeologies that catalyse agencies and visibilities countering historical and systemic exclusions and to draw attention to the discourse of rights. This is what Kuźniar practices, departing from generalisations concerning GBV and domestic violence towards attentive and material-based strategies encouraging women to tell their stories while she speaks against domestic violence. The collection was initiated in 2023 and the project is ongoing; its full potential for advocacy against GBV is yet to be unlocked, particularly to expand its relationality and reciprocity. Agnieszka, one of the first women who saw *Body language* in Kuźniar's studio, said, 'it affects me deeply, it should be viewed by as many girls as possible so they can feel strong'. The local archaeologies Marling writes about are at the core of each of the jewellery items, attending to Polish women's lived experiences of domestic abuse and portraying its horrifying evidence through the medium of jewellery. The objects are crafted to generate conversations, unlocking their narrative potential, as Cunningham (2008) discusses, and subsequently to catalyse self-liberation from the shackles of silence.

The bodily markers of physical violence are most often obvious, and usually its victims try to disguise and conceal them. The incompatibility of this visuality and secrecy and shame around GBV is a challenge to arts activism. Some artists choose to show the signs of abuse in a mimetic sense (such as Ana Mendieta in *Rape scene*, 1973) while others depart from iconic approaches and explore alternative visual means (for example, Suzanne Lacy in *Three weeks in May*, 1977, Jenny Holzer in *Lustmord table*, 1994, or Patricia Cronin in *Shrine for girls*, 2015). Lauren DeLand (2025) interrogates arts practices employing nondidactic and substitutive means to visualise GBV, specifically forced pregnancy, and proposes the term 'aniconism' to analyse the works of Aliza Shvarts, Edie Fake, and Thank God For Abortion and its founder, Viva Ruiz. DeLand argues that their intentional aesthetic approaches operate outside of the iconographic and ideological terms established by political rights. While useful to understand potential reasons behind Kuźniar's choice to portray the bodily signs of trauma and abuse, her strategy is different. The artist employs representation to show the unrepresentable; she searches for the aesthetic means that are socially and culturally expected to be kept private. This exemplifies artistic endeavours Bennett (2005:2) interrogates 'to find a communicable language of sensation and affect with which to register something of the experience of traumatic memory'. Caring visual language to communicate an account of trauma is at the heart of Bennett's (2005) exploration of affective operations of art and the ways of seeing and

feeling it generates to mediate a message and, above all, evoke a subjective experience. Bennett's (2005:21) concept of 'empathic vision' conjures affective and critical operations that render trauma a political rather than subjective phenomenon (Bennett 2005:151). These instigate empathy grounded not,

> in affinity (feeling for another insofar as we can imagine being that other) but on a feeling for another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible (Bennett 2005:10, emphasis in original).

According to Bennett (2005:3), trauma is 'beyond the scope of language and representation' and so trauma-related art invites an awareness of diverse modes of inhabitation, embodied perceptions locating us in relation to the world.

Kuźniar's search for formal innovation attends to the complexities of silencing, including self-silencing, of the survivors of domestic violence. It foregrounds the gendered violence of secrecy and guilt legitimising the Catholic glorification of suffering embedded in the Christian martyrdom, and the culture of guilt and shame sanctioned by the seal of confession, bound to keep things confidential. The Holy Bible in 1 Timothy Chapter 2 (New International Version) verse 11-12 explicitly says, 'A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ... she must be quiet'.[12] The expectation to remain quiet and passive, internalised also by the women who wore or viewed *Body language*, complies with the Catholic gender norms and models of accepted femininity (being a mother, a saint and/or a martyr), which equates with obedience, chastity and submission to a male patron (husband). Catholic notions of martyrology are firmly embedded in the Polish national narrative and identity around Poland as the 'Christ of Nations' suffering to create a better future for others. Szczepanski (2012:273) explains that the figure of the Catholic Pole, 'the ideal citizen', projects the romantic martyrdom concept of 'polskość' (Polishness) built on homogeneity, exclusionary politics, and marginalisation of any experiences that fall outside of heteronormative Catholic patriarchal structures. Kuźniar was brought up and educated in the Catholic faith, which restricts women's autonomy, and while speaking to me, she claimed that the 'Catholic Church is the most violent institution in the world'.

Body language communicates the visual aftermath of domestic abuse. Hammered in silver, a malleable and lustrous white metal, the jewellery items record the scars, burns, and bruises. Their aestheticisation, whether through gold plating, oxidation, or adding vibrant red enamel or gemstones, makes the wounds visually pleasing until we hear the stories behind the seemingly abstract patterns the artist attentively and carefully crafted. Holding a space for conversations that start with the body wearing the objects was one of Kuźniar's intentions. *Body language* is also a visual archive committed to making the violence evident. The artist chose silver, a lightweight and durable metal, that can withstand harsh daily activities to counter the remarkable ability of the body to heal wounds.

Resilience, the intricate bodily process of preventing and repairing damage and disease through immune response, stem cell and tissue regeneration, makes the physical marks of abuse invisible with time. Here, hammered in silver, the blood cannot be washed off, the bruises do not fade, and the scars do not heal. They are permanent and visible, a reminder that the bodily signs of domestic abuse may disappear with the passing of time, but their aftermaths are much deeper than skin.

Lorde's (2007) proposal to 'write your truth' is materialised in the practice of Kuźniar, who created the collection to break her own silence and suffering. Ahmed (2017:3) describes 'that moment when she does not take it anymore' as a 'snap', which is what happened to Kuźniar. Ahmed (2017:162) elaborates that a 'feminist snap is about how we collectively acquire tendencies that can allow us to break ties that are damaging as well as to invest in new possibilities' to be willful and creative. *Body language* is a record of wilfulness; cast in silver wounds of women who either do not speak about their abuse or have no voice out of fear. Kuźniar says many feel they cannot share or confide even in their friends. The quoted earlier statistics from Poland reveal many prejudices, taboos, and erroneous knowledge of what counts as domestic abuse, further exacerbated by poor sexual education and awareness of one's rights. Lorde (2007) argues that silence leads to becoming invisible and having no power, which often echoes in stories of GBV survivors. The multilayered nature of silence necessitates diverse strategies to give voice and enable speaking up and out, especially since some lived experiences are unspeakable and require another register to account for the spectrum of affects. Kuźniar works *from* the body using it as a site. Intuitively, she crafted items clearly visible to the viewer when worn, located either on the ears (earrings) or chest (brooches and the pendant). The medium of jewellery and its closeness to the body, being worn by and carried with the body, holds space to uncover embodied fears and traumas, embedded in personal lived experiences and the tyranny of shame that inhibits survivors from being vocal about their abuse. There is secrecy. There is silence. And there is shame. This is how histories of what cannot be revealed are born and maintained. Until they are not. Ahmed (2017:23, 24) describes her own experiences of being violated as sensory events that at the time were too overwhelming to process:

> You begin to feel a pressure, this relentless assault on the senses; a body in touch with a world can become a body that fears the touch of a world ... Perhaps you try to forget what happened. You might be ashamed. You might stay silent. You might not tell anyone, say anything, and burn with the sensation of a secret. It becomes another burden: that which is not revealed.

Ahmed (2017:22) proposes that feminism begins with a body 'in touch with a world' to attend to sensory violations. Kuźniar's history of abuse by her mother accumulated in her body over time until it reached a tipping point and spilt. The sudden urge to create

the collection addressing domestic violence was her snap; in Ahmed's words (2007:199), 'a moment with a history, that history is the accumulated effect of what you have come up against'.

> Kuźniar 2025: *Trauma can be understood in many ways: as a struggle, defeat, journey, cause or effect of other events. To heal and build trust, it must be processed. My own experience taught me that silence is intimately intertwined with trauma, which perpetuates abuse protecting the perpetrator and giving them power and control. Breaking the silence is crucial for healing. Creative work has potential to open conversations and encourage others to share their own stories and break their own silences.*
>
> *My collection about domestic violence inspired women who saw it, tried it on or wore the items to share their own stories of abuse. I did not expect for such an overwhelming emotional response. We shed many tears over the stories. Never in my life have I hugged so many strangers. It was a difficult but also empowering collective experience.*

Arts activism as a catalyst for adjacency

The breaking of silence is difficult for many reasons. While the collection so far does not visualise lived experiences of specific women, in its further development, there is potential to bring in stories of survivors to open dialogue about domestic violence as a symptom of broader issues generated by heteropatriarchy.[13] The jewellery items are activated when they are worn or seen, as Kuźniar shared with me. This is where its capacity to encourage reflection, raise awareness, and build solidarity is most fruitful, as revealed in women's responses, some of which I quoted earlier. *Body language* has the potential to catalyse what I call a 'budding activism' (Sliwinska 2021; 2024a; 2025), growing from an "I", towards a "you", budding into "we". Individual stories shared by women with the artist transform silence into an evolving narrative of intertwined individual experiences of domestic abuse. They are no longer a secret, and I am curious to see if and how Kuźniar chooses to record these and forge a community of support and solidarity. I argue elsewhere, 'Budding activism starts with an "I"'; it is 'a particular feminist organising structure, [that] is processually oriented. It is an archetype of gradual development, forming new life through maternal relationships of care' (Sliwinska 2021:53). The seed of the "I", Kuźniar's own story of abuse, is embedded and embodied in each of the jewellery items of the collection. It grows towards a "you" when the objects are either worn or touched by other women, encouraging them to reflect on their own experiences. I am interested to see whether the artist will expand the collection to bud into a "we", an agentic collective affording women their voice and advocating against domestic violence.

Through the jewellery objects, Kuźniar stands in solidarity with other women who, like herself, experienced domestic abuse. I would risk suggesting she stands in adjacency, to borrow Tina Campt's (2019) reflections on the term. Campt (2019) analyses 'the black gaze' focusing on *autoportrait* (2017) by Luke Willis Thompson, a still-moving-image, a silent portrait of Diamond Reynolds, which, as she argues, presents 'a particularly challenging point of view that confronts us with the precarious state of black life in the twenty-first century'. In contrast to solidarity, adjacency concerns the spatial positioning of Black and non-Black people that demands not putting oneself in place of another but,

> the affective labor of adjacency. It is the work of feeling done both in spite and because of these differences, and choosing to feel across that difference rather than with or for someone living in very different circumstances (Campt 2019).

As a reparative practice, adjacency requires transforming proximity into accountability, positioning oneself in relation to another (Campt 2020) to acknowledge complicity and demand action. Redi Koobak (2023) builds on Campt's reflections and writes about solidarity as a praxis of feminism, which, however, especially for those who grew up in the former Soviet Union, has connotations with the authorities' 'vicious game of power'. Koobak (2023) argues feminist radical solidarity must transgress normative inclusion; 'Thinking feminism and solidarity together suggests that feminism requires an expansive solidarity and vice versa – solidarity is most expansive when feminist'. Kuźniar is not shy about her own complicity in maintaining the culture of secrecy around domestic violence. Her shame kept her oppressors safe and sound for years. Until it did not, when she started searching for modalities that would enable her to express solidarity and adjacency. Through jewellery, she nurtures feminist awareness of GBV to cultivate co-acting to speak up, out, and against. Her story is a seedling for other stories to learn from each other and embrace those other stories while not making them your own. The medium of jewellery affords the capaciousness to imaginatively and ethically speak with women's lived experiences, and I hope she will expand the project to test its potential, firstly to record specific stories and secondly to understand the affective impact of wearing the objects over time. Koobak (2023) encourages us to 'keep searching – constantly and consistently – for language and concepts that reflect our different positionalities and complicities'. *Body language* renders bodily action; the objects are to be worn or touched. It produces discomfort, exploiting its aesthetics to demand we feel beyond our security or secrecy. We can choose to remain speechless or silent, or to confront the vulnerability of domestic violence survivors, some of whom are still searching for their voice to speak out.

Concluding thoughts

Kuźniar's project has the potential to build solidarity and adjacency to raise consciousness about domestic violence and educate about internalised shame and social stigmas inhibiting survivors from reporting abuse and sharing their pain even with their closest allies. Ahmed (2017:260) writes about the necessity for willingness to 'give to others the support you received or wish you received'. *Body language* opens conversations to, paraphrasing Ahmed (2017:260), not let her speak on her own, 'Back her up; speak with her. Stand by her; stand with her'. When worn or viewed, the jewellery objects have the potential to create moments of solidarity to say enough is enough and no more. Not ever again. While a collection such as this one is not enough, it contributes to feminist work and its persistent and continuous effort to make visible the implications of staying silent, empower others to find their voice and tell their stories, while we stand with them, nurturing the capaciousness within feminisms.

Silences do not protect the self. They do, however, protect the abusers. Kuźniar's *Body language* is an attempt to speak the truth through the refusal to be silent and an invitation to speak up, speak out and speak against, in adjacency.

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Notes

1. In the text I refer to the collection as *Body language*.
2. Kuźniar's writing in dialogue is italicised in the text. All quotes are based on our conversations in person and on Zoom in 2025, which I translated from Polish.
3. Some of Kuźniar's artworks can be seen on her website here: https://www.qzniar.com.
4. Far-right and fascist parties' candidates received 29.54% and 21,15% of votes respectively. See full results: https://www.pkw.gov.pl/uploaded_files/1747706738_obwieszczenie-pkw-wyniki.pdf.
5. Nawrocki won the second round held on 1 June 2025.
6. See the full text: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/PE-33-2024-INIT/en/pdf.
7. See for example the AIDS activist T-shirts discussed by Vänskä (2014).
8. The Repeal sweatshirts by Anna Cosgrave are a potent example of grass-roots feminist organising in Ireland supporting the 2018 Repeal the 8th campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution since 1983 banning abortion in the country.

9. The collection will be displayed in October 2025 in MiserArt, an experimental space addressing issues of social exclusion and supporting homeless people, and in March 2026 in the Theatre Museum, both in Wrocław.

10. None of the items is for sale. They are intended to be displayed and worn by the viewers. Kuźniar occasionally lends them upon individual request.

11. For further reading on amulets and talismans, see: Bonner (1950) or Skemer (2015).

12. See https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Timothy%202&version=NIV.

13. Kuźniar is not specific about the future of the collection, but she is planning a workshop to focus on GBV lived experiences of specific women.

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