

Arts and Politics between Avant-Garde and Propoganda

Panel 6

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From Self-Defence to Counterattack. How the Populists in Poland reclaimed the Language of Contemporary Art

Marek Wasilewski

In his paper *From Self-Defence to Counterattack*, Marek Wasilewski investigates the change in the orientation of political interventions in art and culture. From an iconoclastic tradition, a progression towards political art can be observed which itself uses avant-garde visual languages and formats to convey conservative and anti-democratic messages. The contribution traces this development for the populist circles in Poland, in a country where post-communist democracy is strongly contested by two different ideological visions: secular-republican and religious-conservative. In the process, visual culture becomes the arena for public debate over tradition, religion, and individual autonomy, with, increasingly, images and works no longer providing an occasion for reflection but rather threatening to become weapons in the political struggle.

Crowds and Power? Two Polish Artists in London: Marcin Dudek, Ewa Axelrad in the context of ›Brexit‹

Sarah Wilson

At the end of 2017, two simultaneous exhibitions in London, Marcin Dudek's *Steps and Marches*, and Ewa Axelrad's *Shtamah*, addressed the relationship between masses, power, and violence in relation to Polish nationalism. While Dudek, influenced by his own biography, investigated the phenomenon of football hooliganism, Axelrad dealt with the display of a strongly male-dominant group affiliation. In her contribution *Masses and Power? Two Polish Artists in London in the Context of the ›Brexit‹*, Sarah Wilson analyses the visual languages of both artists in the context of classical theories of the masses and propaganda, for example in Hobbes, Le Bon, Benjamin, or Múnzenberg. The exhibitions invite art-critical analysis, but also seem to become a mirror for the contemporary British public.



Fig. 12: Coven & Dziejczynstwo, *Bedtime*, Berlin 2018, Exhibition view

FROM SELF-DEFENCE TO COUNTERATTACK. 125 HOW THE POPULISTS IN POLAND RECLAIMED THE LANGUAGE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Marek Wasilewski

Introduction – art as politics in Poland

In 2000, in an essay titled »Art according to politics«, Piotr Piotrowski wrote: »The political system created in 1990s Poland maintains the authorities' policy, which is neutral but in fact reactionary or even repressive towards identity-searching strategies. Conflicts around our body and gender reveal a war going on between the political establishment and open-society groups, whose art according to politics is one of the few forms of expression. Culture, including art institutions (museums, galleries, art criticism), is a territory of war between advocates of a conservative society and supporters of a liberal, free and open society.«¹ When he was writing about the authorities, Piotrowski did not have any particular party in mind. What he meant was a political and intellectual group that came to power after the overthrow of communism and combined economic liberalism with, broadly interpreted, faith in the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Nineteen years ago, Piotrowski, one of Central Europe's most perceptive art historians, wrote that culture in Poland is a territory of war, and art is one of the few forms used by representatives of the open society in their struggle for democracy. Today, Piotrowski's words have lost nothing of their relevance, and the points made below can only complement and elaborate on his ideas. It is worth adding that this war – which could be called a Thirty Year's War, because it has been waged since the fall of communism in 1989 – like any prolonged conflict has been full of ostensible truces and violent clashes.

At present, we are experiencing one of the most heated moments of this struggle, in which the conservative side has an institutional, financial and political advantage. In his essay, Piotr Piotrowski presented the idea of creating art as a way of conducting political discourse. However, at the time he published his observations, only the liberal side used this kind of language. Conservative populists seemed to be passive, only responding to provocations from avant-garde artists. This attitude changed as populist ideas moved into the political and media mainstream. We can see conservative populists' evolution from accusing art of rejecting traditional aesthetic values and offending religious feelings to promoting their own artists who will express right-wing ideas using the language of contemporary art.

1 Hurt – insulted – reactive

Jan-Werner Müller defines populism as »a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified [but fictional] people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior.«² The central message spread by the conservative populists holding power in today's Poland is that mysterious and harmful forces, that are undermining our cultural

1 Piotr Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki*, Krakau 2007, p. 207.

2 J.W. Müller, *Co to jest Populizm?*, Warszawa 2017 p. 26.

identity, endanger us. Such messages are usually grotesquely clumsy, but at the same time powerful and dangerous. To give one example, Maciej Mazurek wrote on *wPolityce.pl*, a right-wing news and opinion website, that:

»the fierce fight taking place for cultural institutions seems to suggest that they are very important, perhaps the last Polish bastions of a cosmopolitan leftist international, which is a new incarnation of a communist party network, and activists who live by wreaking havoc and provoking conflict. Sexual scandals and attacks on all religions, which are part of a strictly political strategy, should be treated as such, and tales about artistic freedom are just a pipe dream. Anyone who knows something about the first stage of the Bolshevik Revolution will see that we are simply dealing with neo-bolshevism.«³

The author raises the alarm that cultural institutions in Poland have fallen into the clutches of a leftist cosmopolitan international that is introducing the first stage of the Bolshevik Revolution. This type of reasoning has ceased to be absurd or funny, because it is reaching a broad audience that interprets such words literally, and easily absorbs inverted meanings and paranoid conspiracy theories.

If you present the situation in this way, you can interpret your actions as justified self-defence. Such self-defence frequently consists in resorting to legal repression under the pretence of violation of article 195 of the Penal Code, which punishes what is called »offence of religious feelings.« Pursuant to this article, if at least two people have an impression that their religious feelings have been offended, and report the fact to the prosecutor's office, the latter launches an investigation into the matter. Needless to say, the category of offended feelings is extremely vague and, in practice, prevents any criticism of religious beliefs, especially in the field of visual culture: art, theatre and film. Instigated by the media, activists present themselves as an injured party defending itself against aggression, and resort not only to legal measures but also often to physical attacks involving acts of vandalism. This is what happened at *Zachęta – National Gallery of Art* in 2000, when an MP, in a daring action, removed a meteorite from a sculpture of Pope John Paul II by Maurizio Cattelan titled *La nona ora*. A strong protest also took place during an exhibition at the *Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art* in 2013, when a group of praying protesters threw paint on the screen showing a work by Jacek Markiewicz, titled *Adoration*. The work, which depicts a man leaning on a crucified Christ, was condemned as blasphemous and sparked protests by high hierarchs of the Church.

2 Counterattack by means of fake news

The fake-news strategy, in all its glory, became part of the arsenal of Poland's right-wing populists in 2010. The turning point was the crash of a presidential plane near Smolensk airport. Anyone familiar with history and the mechanism of conspiracy theories,

3 <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/328840-lewactwo-w-galerii-w-poznaniu-mamy-kolejna-odslone-wojny-kulturowej> (last visit 18.10.2020).

such as those concerning the causes and the course of the JFK assassination, could easily anticipate subsequent reports generated by politicians and activists whose main aim was to generate fear, suspicion, as well as sharp political and social divisions with the help of an avalanche of increasingly fantastic reports and theories. Their awkward implausibility at first provoked laughter and shrugs of the shoulders, but later they caused only disgust and fear of their unexpected effectiveness and impact on the audience. Fake news is an international offensive weapon used by populists of all persuasions, with Poland being no exception in this respect. After the populist government took over the public media, a casual attitude towards facts and all kinds of innuendo, manipulation and distortion became an accepted standard among their employees, rather than a deviation from the norm. Victims of such an information policy included those artists and art institutions that do not support the ruling party. The strategy used by the official media towards art is to create a scandal and to make cultural institutions responsible for hosting extremely tasteless and indecent events. The strategy is to adopt the so-called common man's point of view, sympathise with his ignorance, and present this deficit as a virtue, which should be a reference point for corrupt intellectual elites. When Jerzy Miziołek, the newly appointed director of the *National Museum in Warsaw*, removed from the exhibition a work by the Polish avant-garde icon Natalia LL, he in all seriousness invoked a letter that the museum had allegedly received from a mother shocked by the fact that her kid had seen a painting she considered obscene.

News that is false, or partly false, or probably true, usually has its origin in a grey legal area so that it will be as difficult as possible for the injured party to defend itself, place a disclaimer or win compensation. This is a technique brought to perfection by tabloids. An item of news does not usually appear as the author's direct product, it is a report from a third source. If you take the risk of not citing other sources, you add question marks or edit the text so that its content will be logically inconsistent and that the necessary associations will be made only in the reader's mind. Properly fabricated information can be enhanced with a commentary by an expert with an academic degree, whose opinion is based solely on the absurd thesis presented by the author. Another effective method is to add howls of outrage from representatives of 'common people'.

Such operations can be stepped up by cooperation of populist activists and politicians as well as Catholic priests with pro-government local and national media. Fake news in the form of a city councilor's absurd accusation is announced on local television, quoted by a radio station, commented on by a columnist of a weekly published in Warsaw, and then it goes viral in social media. Thanks to this, the fabricated content circulates continuously at various levels, and its impact reverberates like an echo. On the basis of frequently quoted information whose source has long been forgotten, the prosecutor's office may take action to investigate the case, which makes the report even more credible. The narrative in right-wing media is to present progressive and avant-garde activities in culture, particularly in theatre and visual arts, as a leftist conspiracy which – with the help of Marxist ideology supported by secret sponsors from cosmopolitan communist-capitalist circles – wants to undermine the traditional family and culture, as well as the healthy national and Catholic foundations of society. What makes this narrative effec-

tive is referring to Stalinist propaganda paradigms – deeply rooted in the older part of society – according to which the cause of all evil was always a demonised stranger in two incarnations: an external sponsor and an internal enemy who is an agent of hostile forces. This was the mechanism of a campaign launched in Hungary by Viktor Orbán against the open-society promoter George Soros. Identical techniques are used in Poland. To illustrate the working of this mechanism, let me give three examples of media operations directed against the work of *Poznań's Arsenal Municipal Gallery* over several months in the years 2018 and 2019.

The target of these attacks was not art as such but, above all, the liberal local-government that funds the gallery. The attacks took place in the time of local elections, which the populist right wanted to win at any price. In 2018, the fiftieth anniversary of the Polish March, Prague Spring and Paris May protests provided the gallery with an opportunity to hold a series of events titled *Revolution Workshops*. The purpose was not to reminisce about what happened 50 years before, but to discuss how revolutionary ferment forms in today's world, how societies organise resistance to threats they face, and how today's dreams and utopias come true. Right-wing Radio Poznań, which used to be a very popular and well-liked public radio station before Jarosław Kaczyński came to power, used a 40-second fragment of a performative lecture delivered by the Gyne Punk group on the history of gynecology to accuse the gallery of instructing the audience how to abort pregnancy at home, which is prohibited by Polish law. Despite the absurdity of the accusation, the matter was picked up by right-wing politicians and the Poznań archbishop – who devoted part of his sermon to the gallery during a Corpus Christi procession – and investigated by the prosecutor's office. The fake news fabricated by right-wing propaganda functionaries was then spread by Catholic newspapers and government television stations.

Another excuse for attack was *Bed Time*, an exhibition created by the artistic collectives *Coven* from Berlin and *Girlhood* from Poznań. As early as two months before the scheduled opening of the exhibition, radio Poznań reported that the gallery wanted to corrupt under-age participants with an anal sex workshop. This wild accusation was picked up by a local television station which devoted a special program to the subject. As a result of the *Coven* group's artistic intervention, and to the delight of the public, the television program itself became part of the exhibition. An attack on *A Ten-Minute Break*, an exhibition by photographer Bownik and painter Zbigniew Rogalski, coincided with a debate about pedophilia in the Polish Catholic Church. As part of whitewashing the topic and diverting the public's attention from the heart of the matter, government media reported that the professional group most infected with pedophilia were not priests but bricklayers. The media also repeated the claim about minors being »sexualised« by the gay community. Bownik and Rogalski's exhibition consisted of a series of photos that extremely formalistically presented a male nude. Talking about a curatorial guided tour for families with children, a radio Poznań journalist reported that »young children with parents are looking at pictures of a naked man« and quoted an expert's opinion: »The psychologist Bogna Białecka, head of the Foundation for Health Education and Psychotherapy, is appalled by the event. ›Convincing a small child that the view of a naked



Fig. 13: Paweł Bownik and Zbigniew Rogalski, *A Ten-Minute Break*, exhibition view

stranger is OK and natural is an element of grooming. By destroying its sense of intimacy, we make the child vulnerable to pedophiles' adds Białecka.«⁴

3 Does modern national art exist?

Conservative critics and media have always held the traditional view that the avant-garde language of twentieth-century art is immoral and degenerate. Such an opinion is shared by the majority of Polish society. Attacking artists who use media such as performance or installation, has become too easy to satisfy more ambitious columnists. However, the widespread belief that these technically suspicious forms are employed only by left-wing deviants – sick people whose only ambition is mockery, scandal, fraud and manipulation – has slightly changed in Poland. It has turned out that, paradoxically, modern means of expression can also be adopted to express conservative, religious, as well as nationalist and xenophobic views. As a manifestation of these tendencies two exhibitions can be mentioned: *Tymos – the Art of Anger* at Toruń's Art Centre in 2012 and

4 Krystyna Rożańska-Gorgolewska: »Małe dzieci z rodzicami oglądają zdjęcia nagiego mężczyzny«, at: Radio Poznań, 26.04.2019, <https://radiopoznan.fm/.../male-dzieci-z-rodzicami-ogladaja-zdjecia-nagiego-mezczyzny...> (last visit 18.10.2020).

Rebellion Strategies at Poznań's Arsenał Municipal Gallery in 2016. Anger, rebellion, as well as an aggressive and uncompromising attitude, are meant to be the hallmarks of this trend.

Its patron is Stanisław Szukalski, a forgotten crazy visionary who is now being rediscovered in Poland, and who, in the 1930s, created extraordinary and formally perfect utopian visions for Slavic state fascism, a system that never came into existence. In 2008, a critical and controversial analysis of Szukalski's work was made by another Polish artist, Piotr Uklański, who used foam to reconstruct one of the designs, titled *Stach's Eagle*, and showed it at New York's Gagossian Gallery. Today's patron of the conservative trend in Polish art is Zbigniew Warpechowski, an outstanding and once uncompromising performer who advocates nationalist and xenophobic views. His 2009 sculpture titled *What Else* depicts a toilet bowl and a board featuring ideas such as culture, dignity, freedom of speech, faith, patriotism, honor, and motherland, each waiting for its turn to be flushed down the toilet – according to the artist. Warpechowski's attitude has lost nothing of its radical rebelliousness; what has changed is that today the artist acts as a mentor and teacher who opposes the evil represented by liberal cosmopolitan elites. It seems, however, that there is no rational criticism here, there are only insults hurled blindly, full confidence in one's own knowledge, and lack of any attempts to understand the problems of the modern world.

Jacek Adamas is an alumnus of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and member of a group of Prof. Grzegorz Kowalski's former students who include the most recognisable Polish artists, such as Paweł Althamer, Katarzyna Kozyra and Artur Żmijewski. Adamas is a sculptor and local activist. In his best-known works, he approves of various conspiracy theories related to the Smolensk plane crash. His installation titled *Mourners* depicts shooting-target figures riddled with bullet holes. The name »Smolensk« underneath clearly suggests that the author identifies with the reports claiming that the crash victims were allegedly finished off with gunshots by agents of Russian special services. The work was displayed by the artist in front of Warsaw's Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art on the day the plane crashed near Smolensk and, after a few hours, removed from public view by gallery staff.

TUSK 154, the title of a mobile sculpture, is a combination of »Tu-154«, the airliner type, and »Donald Tusk«, the name of the-then Polish prime minister. For many years now, right-wing populists have been unsuccessfully trying to prove that the Polish prime minister took part in a plot to assassinate his political competitor and, together with Vladimir Putin, caused the plane to crash.

Adamas is perfectly aware of the huge potential of modern art's language to form a political message. However, his politically engaged works violate the ethical obligations of political art, one of which is to encourage us to think and ask questions. Rather than contributing to a critical debate, these works are part of a political witch-hunt, which has brutally, by means of outright lies, helped to provoke a political conflict which enabled populists to seize power.

As Jacques Rancière wrote, »art is politics not because of the messages or feelings it communicates about the world order. Nor is it politics because of the way it presents the social structure, conflicts and identities of social groups. Art is politics through the

very distance it keeps from its functions, through the type of time and space introduced, through the way it divides this time and populates this space.«⁵

Ignacy Czwartos used to be the author of subtle painting compositions whose style referred to Jerzy Nowosielski, the great nestor of Polish painting, and to the tradition of Russian avant-garde and Orthodox icons. However, the artist's close links with the community of football fans led to his artistic language coming to be used for different purposes. The series of paintings titled *Everyone Has His Own Heroes* is dedicated to post-war anti-communist partisans. The uncritical cult of those soldiers has become an instrument used by Polish right-wing populists to intensify the political dispute.

We could ask the question about the difference between the political art created by, say, Artur Żmijewski and the art of his university friend Jacek Adamas. Are their activities symmetrical, differing only by opposite directions of their thinking? Is this, as Piotr Piotrowski put it, art according to politics, or art in the service of politics? To conclude, I would like to quote Piotrowski's words written over ten years ago, words that sound as if they had been written today:

»Now that Poland is undergoing civilisational transformation, that the shape and value system of our society are being decided, that the options of open versus authoritarian society are clashing with each other, I strongly believe that we need art as much as we do oxygen, an art that will shake us out from the rut of conventional seeing and thinking.«⁶

5 J. Ranciere, *Estetyka jako polityka*, Warszawa 2007, p. 24.

6 P. Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki*, Kraków 2007, p. 216.



Fig. 14: Zbigniew Warpechowski, *Co jeszcze?*, at the exhibition *Strategies of rebellion*, 2019

Sarah Wilson

I wish to present two Polish artists whose London shows made a huge impression on me in 2017, with continuing relevance for today. First, Marcin Dudek whose sculpture and video installation *Steps and Marches* was shown at the Edel Assanti gallery, secondly Ewa Axelrad whose *Shtamah* was shown at Copperfield. (‹Shtamah› means boys' solidarity implying group aggression).¹ Marcin is based in Brussels and Krakow; Ewa is a Polish artist based in London. Ewa's huge black papier mâché lions, life-size replicas of those in Trafalgar Square, dominated the roof of Hannah Barry's Bold Tendencies gallery, a multi-storey car park venue in Peckham, in the summer of 2017. When I saw them, I experienced a visceral sense of recognition: visceral reaction is important in my talk.² I discovered Marcin's show as an Edel Assanti gallery fan.

These two art exhibitions, created as installations and with remarkable and complementary poetics, work with political propaganda, media images and their mediation. The Brexit context and the rise of right-wing populism in both Britain and Poland is what makes these artists' works so relevant. In September 2019, the *Guardian* newspaper ran a headline »Polish ambassador urges Poles to ›seriously consider‹ leaving the UK«. There were 832,000 Poles living in Britain in 2018; 116,000 had already left, but Ambassador Arkady Rzegocki declared that only 27% of Poles had applied for »settled status« after Brexit.³ Concurrently, in the autumn, the Lisson Gallery showed Ai Wei Wei's Lego wall piece, *Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election* (The Washington, DC, report of March 2019) at the Frieze Art Fair.⁴

The evil genius of the Brexit-linked connection in Britain is Alexander Nix, CEO of the organisation Cambridge Analytica.⁵ An alumnus of Eton and Oxford, like David Cameron and Boris Johnson, he wears the poppy in November to commemorate the first world war, like any member of the British establishment. Beyond the systematic harvesting of millions of Facebook profiles (40% of Vote Leave's budget was linked to data-mining strategies) Nix is known for ›honey trap‹ bribes (Ukrainian girls) and more, hiding behind the deceptive company logo which looks both like a network and a brain.

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- 1 *For Steps and Marches*, (22 September – 4 November 2017) see <https://edelassanti.com/exhibitions/45/overview/> and <https://edelassanti.com/news/163/> and for *Shtamah* (20 September – 18 November) <http://www.copperfieldgallery.com/ewa-axelrad-shtamah.html> (08.03.2021) together with the artists' websites, <http://marcin-dudek.com/> and <http://www.ewa-axelrad.com/> (25 October 2020).
 - 2 Ewa Axelrad, *Let's go Yes, let's go (They do not move)*, Bold Tendencies, summer 2017.
 - 3 Sarah Marsh, *the Guardian*, 18 September 2019.
 - 4 <https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/ai-weiwei-lego-london-lisson-gallery-a4250816.html> (25 October 2020).
 - 5 »The Cambridge Analytica data scandal came to light in March of 2018 and has since been dubbed the ›biggest political scandal of the century‹, as data harvested from over 87 million Facebook profiles was used to determine the outcome of both the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential election.« Celen Ebru Paytoncular: »Cambridge Analytica Main Players: Where Are They Now?«, 19.12.2019, <https://www.women-in-technology.com/wintec-blog/cambridge-analytica-main-players>

Cambridge Analytica was exposed by Carole Cadwalladr, a *Guardian* newspaper journalist – my heroine, along with anti-Brexit businesswoman Gina Miller.⁶ Together with established criminal fraud around Brexit, which the judiciary does not pursue, there is also the issue of the media's refusal to give adequate coverage to the ›whistleblowers‹ Chris Wiley and Shahmir Sanni, who exposed the workings inside Cambridge Analytica and the ›Leave‹ campaign's offices.⁷ Our national anti-hero, Nigel Farage (leader of the now moribund UK Independence Party (UKIP), revels in his links to Steve Bannon and Donald Trump. In 2018, the figure who had no face, Dominic Cummings, the ›Leave‹ campaign's mastermind, was portrayed by Benedict Cumberbatch in the film *The Uncivil War*. In the current demonstrations, carnival masks present Cummings as the devil to Boris Johnson's ›dunce‹ in pointed cap – a master-slave dialectic like the relationship between King Lear and the fool. Who is the fool? (Cummings did not go to Eton and was at Exeter College, Oxford – there is a significant class difference between the two men).

I became interested in the ›Crowds and Power‹ issue straight after experiencing the Dudek and Axelrad shows, and have lectured on the subject in both Vienna and Moscow.⁸ The evolution of thought around mass propaganda and control is so interesting with regard to art history, that I hope you will allow the rapid overview I present here.

Everyone knows the famous frontispiece by Abraham Bosse to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, where the benign sovereign ›contains‹ the mass of citizen subjects brought into his body to create the ›body politic‹.⁹ *Leviathan* was written in the bloody context of the English Civil War (1642-1651); a mirror for our times. Protestant ›Roundheads‹ under Oliver Cromwell, with their austerity-driven Puritan ways, were pitched against formerly Catholic or Anglican Royalist ›Cavaliers‹, the land-owning aristocrats.

A much later but relevant work by the Scot, Charles Mackay, investigated not the structure of legitimate government, like Hobbes, but the irrationality within political and popular behavior. *Extraordinary delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, 1841, treated alchemy, the Crusades, burning witches, the tulip craze in Holland and the South Sea bubble (a nationwide financial speculation that imploded). The move to study ›groupthink‹ begins here.

6 Gina Miller, the Guyanese-British business woman took the British Government to court in a case contesting their power to take Britain out of Europe without approval from parliament and won. She suffered racist abuse.

7 Carole Cadwalladr, »The Cambridge Analytica Files. The Brexit whistleblower: ›Did Vote Leave use me? Was I naive?‹«, in: *The Guardian*, 24.03.2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/24/brexit-whistleblower-shahmir-sanni-interview-vote-leave-cambridge-analytica> (25 October 2020).

8 I have given lectures on this in Moscow and Vienna. Cp. »Crowds, Power and the Rape of the Masses«, Department of Art History, University of Vienna, 30/11/2017. »Culture and Emigration, Crowds and Power«, HSE Art and Design School, Moscow, inaugural keynote lecture, 10/4/2019.

9 See Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies, A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton NJ, 1957.

After the invention of psychology, Gustave le Bon's *Psychology of the Crowd* (published in French 1895, in English 1896) saw many editions. In almost every case, writers specialising in mass behaviour have personally experienced the visceral horror of rampaging crowds: Lebon had witnessed not only the Franco-Prussian war, but the Communards setting fire to the Tuileries Palace in Paris. His book was taken up by the military who wished to form the perfect *esprit du corps* of the fighting body, and by the early discipline of criminology. At the turn of the twentieth century, Georges Sorel's *Reflections on violence*, 1908, inspired the Futurists. A revolutionary syndicalist, Sorel was interested in class struggles and revolution: Sorel was reedited in 1921 and 1937. The move from Futurist violence to later ambiguities is interesting here, and I beg another illuminating art-historical digression.

Modernism, with its militarised notion of the avant-garde, was often linked to violence and the contemplation of the crowd. The contrast is striking between Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, *The Fourth Estate*, 1906 – the march towards the viewer of the proletariat claiming its rights (with recognisable portraits), and Carlo Carrà's *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli*, 1910-1911. It looks like a whirl of algorithms, psychic emotion transcending forms: far more than just futurist 'lines of force'. Galli was killed by the police in 1904; mounted police would not let mourners into the cemetery: horses, pallbearers, weapons are involved. In both Italy and France, artists and poets were influenced by Jules Romain's poetry and his theory of *unanimité*: the crowd acting as one soul, unanimously. Here, we enter the field of 'group psyche' theory, or collective consciousness.

In the later 1930s, the peaceful Popular Front processions, with banners celebrating Voltaire, Courbet, Paul Signac in 1936, turned to violent demonstrations around strikes, and another police victim's funeral in 1937. Walter Benjamin, a refugee in Paris, turned again to his earlier readings of Georges Sorel and his *For a critique of violence*, 1921. He spoke of the strikers' current quandary as to »when and under what conditions a legal action must convert itself into an illegal action and an illegal action into a violent act«. ¹⁰

By this time the Soviet Comintern, the largest world propaganda machine in existence, was flourishing, directed by Willi Münzenberg, a Berliner, who moved with his international operations to Paris after the Reichstag fire in 1933. All new media were co-opted: photography, photomontage, film and reportage. Initially an antifascist, he turned against Stalinism from 1937-9, and was 'disappeared' in 1940. His book *Propaganda as a weapon*, 1937 (published in German in Paris), became a textbook for the Soviet dissident in Paris, Sergei Chakhotin. His *Rape of the Masses. The psychology of totalitarian political propaganda* (French 1939, English 1940, Russian 2016) brought his background as a biologist and student of Ivan Pavlov and the Soviet school of reflexology to bear on propaganda. *Le Viol des Foules par la Propagande Politique* (the French title) means 'mind violation' or 'mind rape'. The book was immediately pulped when the Nazis entered Paris in 1940.

10 Compare Benjamin's *For a critique of violence* of 1921 with his letter to Fritz Lieb, 31 December 1937, see; Chryssoula Kambas, »Walter Benjamin, lecteur des *Réflexions sur la Violence*«, in: *Cahiers Georges Sorel*, 2, 1984, p. 85.



Fig. 15: Marcin Dudek, *Steps and Marches*, 2017

It is Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, 1962 (*Masse und Macht*, 1960) which gives my talk its title. Curiously anthropological and post-Freudian, it was initially motivated by his witnessing (like Sigmund Freud) the Nazis' triumphant takeover of Vienna. His first novel, *Die Blendung*, 1935 (English *Auto da Fé*, 1946), exposes mob action, group thinking and individual pathologies. To turn to our artists, however, it was William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, 1954, which was important for Ewa Axelrad's thinking. Translated into Polish as *Władca Much*, it was made into a UK film in 1963 and shown in Polish cinemas and on television: here English schoolboys interact together in a state of lawlessness which degenerates into tribal behavior and cruelty.

It was not until the 1970s, however, that what we now call ›the construction of masculinity‹ was addressed by Klaus Theweleit from East Germany with his *Männerphantasien*, 1977-1978 (*Male Fantasies*, 1987). It has had a huge impact on liberal studies – English literature during the First World War for example – and while ›toxic masculinity‹ is today's phrase (the dialectical other of the #MeToo movement), the British political establishment seems immune to these debates.

So back now to Martin Ducek who was born a poor boy in a high-rise block in still-Communist Poland, and whose excitement was to go out as a supporter of the Cracovia football team. Polish Cracovia fans dress in orange. Orange is the color of the team's

bomber jacket lining (turned inside-out for fighting); it signals opposition.¹¹ The orange installation in the Edel Assanti gallery asked the public to step through a steel turnstile sculpture as though entering a stadium in an orange haze. *Well washed*, 2017, hanging on the wall, is a cast of Marcin's brother's trousers, the day he was stabbed in the leg at a match: the gallery and the art scene become an experimental crucible as opposed to the event on the pitch or on the street. (Fig. 15)



Fig. 16: Marcin Dudek, *Total Event*, 2017

11 »Today, in Eastern Europe, orange functions as a token of opposing those in power and the establishment. At the turn of the 1980s in Poland, it was also a symbol of Orange Alternative's anti-communist happenings and at the beginning of the 21st century – of the political revolution in Ukraine. Orange is also a color symbolising aggression – a form of a visible manifestation, contrasting with grey«. Przemysław Strożek, tr. Patryk Grabowski November 2017; English translation see: <https://culture.pl/en/artist/marcin-dudek> (25 October 2020).

The sculpture, *Total Event*, 2017, is a lead cast from a Soviet army helmet (worn by Polish riot police) inside which is cast of stadium terraces; useful repurposing – to beat up the fans. (Fig. 16) *The Mob was present*, 2017, a ›pleated-plane‹ sculpture on a rectangular stand freezes non-lethal police pellets on the slopes of a football pitch in miniature, as though about to rush down the terraces onto the ground. The simplicity of the metal stands, and the sensual texture and sharpness of the black shapes, riff on the modernist Polish postwar sculptural tradition. In poignant contrast is the display of a jesmonite cast, *Wara*. This is Dudek's own knitted balaclava — fans must be anonymous — stiffened anatomically into a faceless skull.

Dudek uses personal photos taken at the Poland vs Romania match in 1995. He also kept a one-year diary of archive footage and research. At Edel Assanti he showed videos in which black and white photographs of the crowds together with police surveillance footage appear pixelated; orange cubes appear and disappear over the screen, lending sparkle and animation to the entire installation. Fans, police, victims and perpetrators become indistinguishable.

Dudek's performance, called *Hooligan*, where he smashes up his Brussels gallery, Harlan Levey Projects, took place as part of the parallel exhibition. Here he relives the mixture of adrenaline and testosterone, the physical power, the ›muscle memory‹ that he experienced before he was an artist. The mental distancing required to perform in a gallery space surely threatens to collapse in the heat of the moment. One source of intellectual corroboration for Dudek is Raymond Mombousse's *Riots Revolts & Insurrections*, 1977, generated by the race riot of late 1960s America. In 1967 itself, Paul Jacob's *Prelude to Riot, a view of Urban America from the bottom* explicitly raised the ›underclass‹ issue. This chimes with both Dudek's and Ewa Axelrad's agendas, which investigate both the physical violence and psychic effects of the collapse of Communism on the least privileged members of society. Popular art is in so many ways the art of the football world — so much more than a sport in Britain and in Poland (Polish émigrés tune in to their own channels to watch). There is a spillover of hooliganism into behaviour of our right-wing UKIP and neo-fascist demonstrations — equally unpleasant.

To turn now to Ewa Axelrad, and *Shtamah*, the interest here is that a female artist of the same generation confronts the same issues around masculinity, crowds and politics, with equal formal power, equal sensuality but with delicacy and reflective tranquility. As we enter the Copperfield gallery, waves of flagpoles make a sine and cosine curve, while the video at the end of the room shows arms grasping each other in a circle – a male bonding scene, just like British rugby or football players. (Fig. 17) In the center stands a sensual wax torso, suggesting both armour and skin; in the video we see it pierced, inevitably recalling religious imagery — Saint Sebastian pierced by arrows. The placing of a finger over a hole in the video is so moving: Doubting Thomas's finger placed in Christ's wound? Axelrad brings intensely Catholic imagery and male vulnerability into her art, so evidently distinguished from the propaganda and religious intolerance which lies at its origins. Almost like a tray of toothpicks, an array of small implements was also crafted and displayed to suggest neo-fascist insignia in miniature. Far from speaking from the ›imperialist‹

position of the centre, in any self-righteous or nationalistic way, I wish to highlight to the shameful British neo-fascist groups with similar insignia.

These parallel shows of the work of Marcin Dudek and Ewa Axelrad, each formally innovative, and richly political, not only speak of Poland but are commentaries on the state of populism in the UK: British right-wing Brexiteers, British neo-fascists, similarly demonstrate with aggression, and harness hatred — (including women). Boris Johnson's government has put money aside for anticipated violence around October 31st — the date we were destined to leave Europe.

I end this article by juxtaposing Ewa Axelrad's *Gorilla*, the superbly lifelike inflation of a black puffer jacket with puckered ›arsehole‹, and a snap of Dominic Cunningham. The public always desires masterminds, and personalities in whom anxieties crystallise. Cunningham stands outside Tory Party Conference headquarters with its ›Get Brexit done‹ mantra: it coincided with the very week of the AICA conference. I intended to demonstrate outside the Houses of Parliament for the third time on 19 October, as I demonstrated on 23 March 2019, with artist Adrien Sina's poster: *Brutal Ruin of Economy, Xenophobic Intolerant Tediousness*. The tedium of three years of Brexit debates relates to the power of the ›Get Brexit done‹ mantra used by Johnson to consolidate his power. The hopelessness of Britain's divided left fills our hearts with fear: great danger beckons for all our European friends, the Europeans living in Britain, the British living in Europe — and the post-Cold War consensus of the whole body politic.

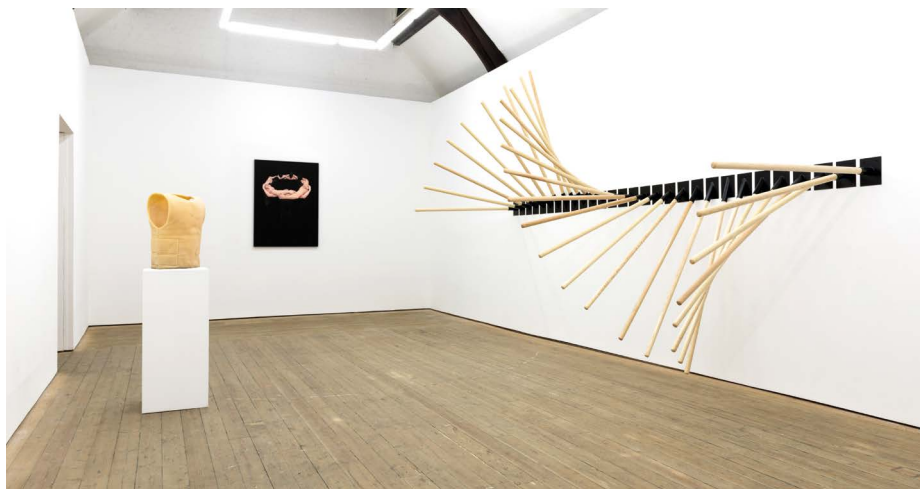


Fig. 17: Ewa Axelrad, *Shtamah*, 2017

We know what happened next.

Moderator Catrin Lorch

Catrin Lorch

I would like to start with a question to Marek Wasilewski about Jacek Adamas. What I found so interesting about this artist (whom I know by name but never knew that he had this proper artistic background) regarding the topic of how things ›tip‹ I found this figure very interesting because, obviously, he ›tipped‹ in a way. Can you describe what he was like that when he was at art school? Has he been someone who propagated right wing ideas? What happened to change him in that way?

Marek Wasilewski

Okay, so this is a difficult question because you have to go inside someone's mind. I can only say what I know about him. I know that he's a graduate of the Academy of Arts in Warsaw, from the famous class of Grzegorz Kowalski, and as far as I know by his biography he was always very politically engaged, also in the underground in the 1980s, printing the illegal Press for Solidarity. So, there was always this engagement, and the Solidarity Movement was very diversified, because on one side it was a worker's movement, it was the union's movement. On the other side it was very much connected with the Catholic church and conservative values. On yet another side you had leftist intellectuals like Jacek Kuroń or Adam Michnik. So, it was a kind of kaleidoscope where all parts of Polish society came together against the common enemy. I can only assume that part of this biography then made some kind of impact on his later choices when he decided to leave Warsaw to go to the countryside, where he started to be a local activist fighting local governments who were corrupted and doing things against the people. Then I could sense this kind of anger that was growing in him, which in the end, at the turning point, which is marked by the president Kaczyński's plane crash in 2010, the moment when people took sides – the ›point of no return‹ you could say – he flipped to the ›dark side‹ of nationalistic populism.

Catrin Lorch

So, the rhetorically counter-figure to this might be Marcin Dudek, whom you, Sarah, were talking about and who was someone battling in front of football arenas and now turning this into art. Can you tell us a bit more what made him choose a career as an artist, and is this linked to him coming to Great Britain, or did he come to Great Britain as an artist?

Sarah Wilson

He was discovered as an artist by the young gallerist Jeremy Epstein. He does not live in England, he lives in Brussels, but he trained (which is very important in terms of people quickly absorbing the right types of theory and also, to be more cynical, the right kind of language) for two years at Central St. Martins college of art in London from 2005 to 2007. But what interests me as a critic is that there is one kind of criticism you can do when you walk into the art gallery and you think the works plus the labels speak for themselves. However I am always interested in what actually produced the works of art, in terms of not just an artist's training but the emotional and intellectual nexus which spurred them. Marcin is so successful that, although I've also encountered a splendid work he did in Palermo last year, he never has enough time to talk to me in a deep way about that

transformation. I think, when we were having a little word together earlier, I said I'm aware that Arman also smashed up a gallery in New York as a work of art. But I think that then, Arman was re-performing an inner rage he'd had in Paris at the time of the Algerian war that was too complex and not transportable to New York. I think the proximity of the events, and also this idea of the physical action, and this very great violence permitted by the gallery when the artist himself is re-enacting, is very interesting. This puts into question the artist's self-formation, self-control, and the desire to get out of what Marcin Dudek must have seen as an impasse, a ›no-future‹ type life that he managed to get out of. It raises all sorts of questions for how we as critics or historians approach the artist where their biography, their subjectivity, and their emotional investment in what they're doing, their libidinal energy, affects things as well as simply the work of art in the gallery.

Catrin Lorch

Well, still I found that opposing the two or three images – i.e. the way in which Dudek turned the football memorabilia, the clothes and the signs – so striking compared with Adamas, who somehow turned the language of this conceptual, partly figurative and very literate art, against it, and I found this was a very similar movement which created totally different art experiences in the end. I found that, with these two names that you were talking about, you somehow really framed what we were looking for in this session, to say how close and how different these art activities can be at a certain point. So, I found that really striking. Now I would like to learn a bit more about why you, Sarah, framed this work so intensively in the discussion about street protest and revolt? There was a lot of anger visible.

Sarah Wilson

Yes. Well, I suppose if you think of the earliest work, that earliest Italian work, the artist Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, coming before all the Futurists whose names we know, was finding it imperative to stop painting nudes and salon pieces, and to give proletarians on the march the status of a history painting. So, he's doing this and as spectators of *Il Quarto Stato* (The Fourth Estate), 1901, you're actually in front, as though you are the establishment with the people coming at you. So, his imperative was to record what was on the street in the same way as the Futurists. I mean, Cubism is all to do with café life, even if you're reading newspapers about the Balkan war. This showed a way to get out of the confines of the inside onto the outside and make the street the subject.

But I think what is interesting with Dudek is that, instead of saying ›I want to be a performance artist‹; or ›I want to go on the street‹; or ›I want to be the Polish Petr Pavlensky‹, he actually wants to use the frame, which is a frame that invites contemplation as well. It's like the penchant for ›slow‹ in everything at the moment: slower contemplation, slower thought etc. He wants to use that gallery space to do something very powerful. Normally when you go into galleries you don't get the sense of being in an auratic space where everything is part of the same thought process, but that's what really struck me when I first saw his work.

Oddly enough, with Ewa Axelrad's Trafalgar Square lions up on top of the Peckham car park, what was strange was the transfer of auratic space and the messing-up of our feelings, including feelings of embarrassment at big, pompous British monuments from Trafalgar Square which is the traditional place of protest, and the transposing of that to a rooftop outside. So, there's an inside-outside element which I think is interesting, because just looking at the outside takes you away from the head. I think the gallery is a space where you can have a kind of enlarged head to think about things more contemplatively. I really love Ewa's work, I mean, she can do the monumental: we begin with the lions. She can do big, and she can do very, very small. And she can make criticisms about her position as a woman without the overused languages of ›feminism‹ in inverted commas.

Catrin Lorch

Have these two artists been displaying in Poland?

Marek Wasilewski

I don't know about Dudek but Ewa Axelrad definitely. She is a graduate of the University of Arts in Poznań where I teach and she exhibits her works in Poland

Catrin Lorch

I have one last question to Marek. You talked in a very interesting way about how justice and state in Poland now found new ways of censorship, and you talked about how they can, as long as you have two people who feel offended, can stir up some kind of media battle at least. But how does this affect the art institutions, because we are so much talking here about the media and the public and the arts. But can you just outline if that affects the institutions, and what kind of policy is behind this?

Marek Wasilewski

Yes, I think the whole picture is quite complicated. When you say censorship, I'm thinking about the times before 1989 when everything was very clear. There was an office of state censorship, and before any publication it was accepting or rejecting its content. So, you knew very well what you can do and what you cannot do, and if you want to publish or show something that is illegal then you have to go underground. Nowadays, the situation is more complex, because officially there is no censorship. But now you have to think twice before you engage in showing or discussing works that are critical towards religion for example, because people can feel offended. Also, there is growing pressure from the government, from the ministry of culture, on not showing certain things, and this is a pressure of money, they just refuse funding. In Poznan for example there is a very well-known Malta Theatre Festival. The Minister of Culture objected to the presence of well known director Oliver Frljic at the festival and withdrew the financial support that was previously granted to the festival. As a result the festival went to the court and the minister had to pay the money, but that was two years after, so it was already too late. So, we don't have clear censorship, but you can see that this field of freedom is getting smaller and smaller.

Catrin Lorch

I would now like to open the podium for questions.

Klara Kemp-Welch

My question is for Marek Wasilewski. I thought your analysis was very clear about the evolution of the strategy of populism in Poland, and you showed many examples of how very polarised everything has become. Obviously, this is something that is very much on our minds in England as well, the language of polarisation and the violence of that language which was something that was in the media last week, when Boris Johnson started using particular language to talk about a bill which had been passed through parliament.

So, I was struck by your use of the term ›the dark side‹ just now to talk about an artist having gone over to ›the dark side‹. I think that the analysis of these strategies is important, but I would be more interested to hear examples of artists and art works who have sought to build dialogue across these seemingly utterly polarised, impossible to reconcile groups. It made me think of Artur Żmijewski's very famous video work *Them*, in which he brought together representatives of different extreme groups in Polish society, very importantly, for a non-linguistic encounter where they were asked to use pictures and illustrations to show what they thought about the other group, and it led to violence. The examples Sarah gave were so powerful because both of them mobilised affect and touch and so on, rather than language. So, could you perhaps think of some examples of Polish contemporary works which have sought to foster dialogue?

Marek Wasilewski

Okay, this is a very interesting question. Perhaps it requires a different presentation, because obviously, the logic of this presentation was the analysis of the populist language. I think that the example of Artur Żmijewski is quite controversial because I think that the situation that we are facing right now in Poland is very binary. You can be on this side or you can be on the other side. If you're trying to build a bridge in the middle of the war then actually you're condemned by both sides. So, these voices, I think, are very weak right now. I am convinced that the art you're talking about has a very good future, but it's not very visible right now in Poland. As a quick example there is a young artist, Franciszek Orłowski for example, whose work is mostly about empathy, about reaching out to the other, about discovering the others in many different performances and visual works. He's doing exactly what you're talking about.

Frida Sandström

I'm from Stockholm. I have one question for each of you. First, Marek, I wanted to follow up on your exemplification and perhaps also look back on what the speakers talked about this morning in terms of singularities, and perhaps it's also important to think about examples that are not individual artworks but rather organisations in between fields as I think is one of the threads we've been following in this congress. I was thinking about the Warsaw Biennale that had its inaugural edition this summer, which explicitly, in

text and in practice, did present itself as a way to use the Biennale structure to mobilise, specifically in Poland, in relation to exactly what you were presenting. So, I'm curious if you could elaborate a little bit on that?

Then, for Sarah, I wanted to also ask you in relation to this artist that you brought up. In Kiev, two years ago, the artist David Chychkan made an exhibition that was explicitly critiquing the right-wing governance in his country, and this one was totally demolished by neo-Nazis that invaded the gallery and basically destroyed all his works, and also sprayed a lot of tags and wrote a lot of neo-Nazi symbols on the walls. This exhibition was taking place in the Visual Culture Research Center, that first was also hosted by the University of Kiev, the art school. But it was also due to political art being exhibited by the centre that it also had to move out from the university. When they had this thing happening in the gallery they decided to keep the exhibition exactly as it was. They continued to exhibit the works with all the violence that had entered the room. For me, there are big differences between the work that you presented and this event and that type of changed exhibition. I'm curious if you could comment a little bit on that.

Marek Wasilewski

Apart from Biennale Warszawa you mentioned there are many initiatives all over the country, like for example »The Antifascist Year« which was a coalition of many art institutions across Poland. In the cities such as Wrocław, Gdańsk, Poznań there are many independent non government art initiatives, art schools and municipal galleries and each of them is resisting this kind of populism in culture in its own way.

I'm thinking also about gallery Labyrinth in Lublin which organised two very interesting exhibitions, one of them called *Democracies*, and right now they have an exhibition that is called *Three Plagues*. On the occasion of both exhibitions, they organised big discussion panels involving artists from all over Poland, coming especially to this discussion to talk about the language of reconciliation with the so-called »other side«. But also, it was a discussion about how our audience is limited only to those who think in the same way as we are thinking. I think these were very interesting discussions. Unfortunately, we are still, you know, without good answers to these questions but I hope this is a work in progress.

Sarah Wilson

Thank you. I don't know the exhibition you're talking about in Kiev, it sounds very interesting, I'll look it up. But of course, all this is inscribed in an immensely long history of iconoclasm. Of course, there is a very interesting intersection between thinking about populism and, not just people burning down other people's flags or whatever but iconoclasm, and of course in the English civil war – if you think back to Hobbes, Cromwell's soldiers were ordered to put all their horses and stables and manure inside all the churches and then smash up all the Catholic saints on the front of the cathedral facades. So, there is a whole enormous tradition.

I'm fond of Sophie Calle's project, going back to Berlin, called *Die Entfernung*. So, when the two Germanys reunited all sorts of monuments were banished to the woods.

There were three categories, and there are the minutes in the back of the exhibition's catalogue, concerning whether things were to be displaced to a forest, smashed up and destroyed and the pieces thrown away, or smashed up and buried, or whatever. But that was an extremely bureaucratic process of people thinking what they liked, what they didn't like, and Calle's project was to record people's response to the absences.

So, one's not just simply talking about religion here but a long history of iconoclasm either done by individuals taking out their fury on something – which gets us back to this whole business of emotion and objects and desire to destruct – or state-ordered destruction. And of course, state orders can be, ›please smash this Madonna‹, or they can be ›please smash the city of Dresden‹. So, you know, we're kind of talking about scales and tipping here but there is the macro scale and there is the micro scale. It's interesting to think about iconoclasm and populism as being two sides of the same coin.

Catrin Lorch

Sadly enough we will have to end there with iconoclasm. Thank you very much for your contributions.