

# Art Criticism in Eastern Europe

## Panel 7

MODERATION  
LIAM KELLY

MAJA FOWKES  
REUBEN FOWKES  
MAŁGORZATA STĘPNIK



**Democracy on the Defensive: East European Art Criticism in the Era of Illiberal Globalisation*****Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes***

In this paper Maja and Reuben addressed the topic of art criticism as a reaction to populist tendencies in (cultural) politics' by examining the response of critics both to the spread of populist ideology in the cultural sphere and to art projects dealing with the rise of political populism in Eastern Europe.

**Vox populi – politicians as art critics*****Małgorzata Stępnik***

The main aim of Małgorzata's paper was »to analyse and compare the ›critical‹ statements of Polish politicians, accompanying the events of the memorable March 1968 (among others, politicians responsible for the censorship of Mickiewicz's drama *Dziady*, directed by Kazimierz Dejmek) and also today's political discourse over art in Poland – widely present in both traditional and social media and highly polarized along party lines«.



Fig. 18: Burial of the Mücsarnok, Budapest, 10 August 2013

## *Maja und Reuben Fowkes*

»People with integrity became speechless. Almost overnight it was possible to utter the most outrageous nonsense and spread lies without anyone raising his or her voice in opposition. Any distinction between truth and falsehood, genuine values and counterfeit ones, seemed suddenly to have vanished. How was this possible? How could this have happened? What made this possible?«

These statements may remind us of the polarised political and cultural atmosphere of the post-truth era, characterised by the alternative facts that internationally accompanied the rise of populist and neo-nationalist movements in the last decade. But in fact they were written by Czech art critic Jindřich Chalupecký in 1948, when communist parties consolidated their control over Eastern Europe. Entitled *The Intellectual under Socialism*, the initially unpublished essay captured the abrupt transformation of the conditions of artistic life and critical debate brought by the suppression of democracy in the political arena and imposition of the doctrine of Socialist Realism on cultural producers through political control of artist associations, exhibition venues, education and criticism.<sup>1</sup> Chalupecký's observations on the existential decision whether or not to collaborate with the authorities, as well as the unexpected reversals of fortune and suspension of criticality under dictatorship, resonate widely with experiences of cultural life in undemocratic climates.

Although in the interconnected world of capitalist economies it would be impossible to recreate the conditions of the closed socialist system of Eastern Europe in the 1950s, this has not stopped right-wing politicians from intervening in the autonomous structures of the artworld to counter what they view as the pernicious influence of globalist ideology and promote a unitary vision of national art. It should also be noted that while populism is considered a widespread response to the inequalities of economic globalisation, it has a particular resonance in Central Europe, where it marks the return of monopolistic, centralising, traditionalist and censorial tendencies that were assumed to have been overcome in the democratic revolutions of 1989. In this essay, the encroachment of populism into the artistic sphere is approached through the writings of Central European art critics who describe the mechanics of interference in local art scenes, while at the same time articulating and amplifying the acts of artistic solidarity, counter-institutional ingenuity and mobilisations of the intellect that have arisen in active response.

While in 1989, by opening its land border with Austria to East German refugees, Hungary hastened the collapse of dictatorships and the eruption of multi-party democracy across Eastern Europe, today the country finds itself in the vanguard of the spread of neo-national populism. The modus operandi of the mechanisms of bureaucratic control of

---

1 Jindřich Chalupecký, »The Intellectual Under Socialism«, in: Tomáš Pospiszl and Laura Hoptman, eds, *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*, New York 2002, p. 29–36.

the Hungarian artworld by the forces of illiberal democracy were spelled out by art critic Edit András in a 2013 article for the online journal *Art Margins*, in a tone that eerily echoes Chaluppecký:

»Already the field of art is being centralised, and comrades who are loyal to the regime and whose ideas are in total compliance with the vision promoted by the government are being placed in chief cultural positions. The advantage of such a practice is that an official who is selected to lead an institution is close and loyal to the ruling party. There is then no further need for official censorship since this process automatically guarantees the proper ideological content.«<sup>2</sup>

The specific cases mentioned in András's piece included the fusion of the Hungarian National Gallery with the Museum of Fine Arts and the imposition of a new director of the Ludwig Museum in Budapest. Opposition to what was identified as a politically motivated attempt to seize control of the leading contemporary art institution in the country, coalesced around two weeks of protests and occupations of the entrance and staircase of the museum, with artists of all generations, commercial gallerists, curators from the non-profit sector and even art collectors joining the campaign. Although the protesters were unsuccessful in pressuring the government to reverse its decision, the ›Ludwig Stairs‹ occupation created new solidarities and galvanised the artworld to develop creative forms of resistance to the right-wing takeover in the cultural field.

The promotion of the populist agenda in Hungarian culture has however gone beyond changing the directors of art institutions. Another instrument designed to exert influence over artistic life is the Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA), a newly formed organisation inscribed in the constitution and with a budget exceeding that of the ministry of culture, whose tentacles extend into artistic research and publishing. Imitating the structure of traditional academies, the MMA is divided into artistic branches, with privileged academicians in receipt of substantial monthly stipends. Amongst the 41 current members of the Fine Arts section there is not a single female artist, indicative of the spuriousness of their claim to »assist artists unfairly marginalised« in the history of Hungarian art.<sup>3</sup>

In her article, András also recounts the response of the artworld to the establishment of the MMA, including protests organised against the decision to arbitrarily transfer to it the ownership and control of another major space, the Budapest Kunsthalle or Múcsarnok. The focus of a performative action to mourn its loss to contemporary art was an obituary notice that read: »It is with profound grief that we regretfully inform you of the death of Múcsarnok, the Budapest Kunsthalle, which after a period of dignified suffering passed away at the age of 117. The cause of death was neglect and the irrespon-

---

2 Edit András, »Hungary in Focus: Conservative Politics and Its Impact on the Arts«, in: *Art Margins* (17.09.2013), visit at: <https://artmargins.com/hungary-in-focus-forum/>.

3 See the Fine Arts branch page of the website of the Hungarian Academy of Arts, visit at: [https://www.mma.hu/web/en/section\\_of\\_fine\\_arts](https://www.mma.hu/web/en/section_of_fine_arts).

sible behaviour of the institution that goes by the name of the Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA).«<sup>4</sup>

Although Hungary has been in the forefront of systematic attempts to impose a traditionalist, neo-nationalist paradigm on local art scenes through the control of arts appointments, funding, teaching and research, the model has also been adopted in other Central European countries. Characteristically a time lag of a few years can be observed between the coming to power of a populist movement and the decision to take on the internationalist bastions of the artworld. In Poland, three years after the Law and Justice Party won a parliamentary majority, art critic Adam Mazur was still able to maintain that: »[w]hen the populists took power in the autumn of 2015, contrary to expectations, it did not end with an earthquake. Not a single art gallery or museum director was removed from office, no director of an art academy was replaced, no control of arts funding was imposed.«<sup>5</sup>

Less than a year later, an article in the online magazine *Hyperallergic* drew attention to the mounting list of political interventions in the management of arts institutions, most recently the failure to renew the contract of director of the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art. As Berlin-based critic Dorian Batycka noted: »The move mimics tactics used by the ministry to silence other cultural workers and heads of institutions deemed outside the orbit of right-wing, ruling-party ideology.«<sup>6</sup>

The other similar cases mentioned in the article included government interference in the selection of the directors of the National Gallery in Warsaw, the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews and Bunkier Sztuki in Kraków. The fears of the contemporary artworld for the future direction of the CCA Ujazdowski Castle turned out to be well-founded, with the direct appointment of a controversial new director provoking widespread outrage amongst artists and curators in Poland.<sup>7</sup> The question remains whether the Polish artworld can learn from the experience of artists, critics and curators in Hungary since 2010 and mount a successful public campaign and effective defence of artistic independence against political interference.

---

4 For the full text of the obituary, see: András, op. cit. (see: note 2).

5 Adam Mazur, »Polish Art in the Period of Populism«, in: *East Art Mags* (12 November 2018), visit at: <https://artportal.hu/magazin/polish-art-in-the-period-of-populism/>.

6 Dorian Batycka, »Poland's Ministry of Culture Again Accused of Trying to Control Progressive Institution«, in: *Hyperallergic* (24 September 2019), visit at: <https://hyperallergic.com/518207/polands-ministry-of-culture-again-accused-of-trying-to-control-progressive-institution/>.

7 On opposition to the appointment of Piotr Bernatowicz, see for example the international petition to »Revoke the director appointment at Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw«, launched on Change.Org. [https://www.change.org/p/minister-of-culture-and-national-heritage-of-the-republic-of-poland-blockdecision-of-appointing-a-director-of-ujazdowski-castle-centre-for-contemporary-art-0608626ac5c8-48f7-8549-173c7831e55a/sign?original\\_footer\\_petition\\_id=14313431&algorithm=promoted&source\\_location=petition\\_footer&grid\\_position=9&pt=AVBldGI0aW9uAE35HQEAAAAAXcnAjKJEBuc2ZjBjZWI4Ng%3D%3D](https://www.change.org/p/minister-of-culture-and-national-heritage-of-the-republic-of-poland-blockdecision-of-appointing-a-director-of-ujazdowski-castle-centre-for-contemporary-art-0608626ac5c8-48f7-8549-173c7831e55a/sign?original_footer_petition_id=14313431&algorithm=promoted&source_location=petition_footer&grid_position=9&pt=AVBldGI0aW9uAE35HQEAAAAAXcnAjKJEBuc2ZjBjZWI4Ng%3D%3D) (14.11.2020).

The question whether the legacy of the communist past has made the art scenes of Central Europe more prone to political interference underpins Czech art critic Vít Havránek's discussion of the causes of the institutional crisis in the National Gallery Prague: »On the cultural level, it would be meaningful only if the prime minister (and all politicians) stopped approaching culture manipulatively, as the owner of cultural capital, and if they begin to respect the division of power allowing cultural autonomy and independence, one of the historical achievements of Europe.«<sup>8</sup> This argument can also be extended by considering the modalities of social and economic development during the post-communist transition where competition between neo-liberal elites and the prevalence of corruption have destabilised the institutional structures of Eastern European art.

In Slovakia, Bratislava Kunsthalle has found itself at the mercy of larger political and financial considerations, with the government seeking to amalgamate it within a creative centre in order to urgently make use of European Union regional funding and eyeing its centrally located building as a development site. Uncertainties over its future are also compounded by a reduction in funding from the Ministry of Culture whose electoral priorities lie in the promotion of folk culture. Art critic Kata Benedek has identified the risk that indifference towards contemporary art could switch over into populist hostility: »Smer, in power since 2012, does not pursue the type of open Kulturkampf that is detectable in Hungary, yet the measures associated with Culture Minister Ľubica Laššáková evoke a populist political logic, which does not put forth a cultural policy but rather appeals to gestures in which she sees short-term political benefits.«<sup>9</sup>

The response of Central European art scenes to the threat posed by the post-democratic turn has not stopped at the defense of artistic freedom but has also entailed attempts to turn the tables on populism using the analytical power of contemporary art. By investigating populism as a subject of enquiry, including through the format of research exhibitions, artists and curators have sought to historicise, defuse and reframe its political ascendancy. Organised as part of the 2018 Warsaw Biennial, the exhibition *Skip the Line! Populism and Contemporary Promise* set out to contest populism as a linguistic rather than a political phenomenon. Co-curator Jakub Gawkowski explained his approach to learning the lingua franca of populism in order to redirect its energies in more promising directions, as follows:

»I believe that to recognise populism as a language is a step towards reacting to it. Coming from Central Europe, we often associate populism with Kaczyński or Orbán, right-wing autocrats, right? But if you take a broader picture, you can see that what unites the

---

8 Vít Havránek, »Will Czech Republic ever be modern? Notes on the institutional crisis at the National Gallery in Prague«, in: *Blok* (21 June 2019), visit at: <https://blokmagazine.com/will-czech-republic-ever-be-modern/>.

9 Kata Benedek, »The Kunsthalle Paradigm: What is the Slovak Government's Aim with the Kunsthalle Bratislava?«, in: *East Art Mags* (29 September 2019), visit at: <https://artportal.hu/magazin/the-kunsthalle-paradigm-what-is-the-slovak-governments-aim-with-the-kunsthalle-bratislava/>.



populists is not being far-right, it's the way they talk and divide society. What I find really relevant, is whether we can think of »good« populism – not in the sense of dividing the society or harassing minorities but harnessing its emotional potential.«<sup>10</sup>

The capture of public institutions by traditionalist currents has also been a factor in the establishment of grassroots organisations to articulate and embody new forms of institutional critique. The Feminist Art Institution was set up as a loose network of like-minded institutions, which all signed up to a code of practice agreed upon at a meeting in tranzit.cz in Prague in 2017. Along with setting the goal of a 50% minimum representation of women in both annual programmes of exhibitions, festivals or conferences; and in managerial and creative positions, their shared code of practice includes proactive, anti-populist statements such as: »Feminist art institutions are steadfastly opposed to all manifestations of intolerance, e.g. racism, homophobia or sexism. They formulate strategies for dealing with such situations should they arise.«<sup>11</sup>

The Feminist Art Institution has also been involved in thinking through how art institutions should respond to ecological breakdown, such as by coordinating a joint statement signed by more than 80 cultural and artistic institutions in Prague to demand that the city council declare a climate emergency in February 2019.

Art critics have investigated the position of contemporary art at the interface between climate chaos and populist rhetoric, such as by exposing attempts to sanitise the financial gains of extractivism. Critic and theorist Václav Drozd drew attention to the sources of wealth of an influential Czech collector and philanthropist: »Petr Pudil's business has led to environmental devastation, leaving a huge carbon footprint, and to this day we all pay for it with every electricity bill. How will the North Bohemian lignite burnt in fossil fuel power plants become a private museum in the centre of Prague?«<sup>12</sup>

After being published on *Artyčok.tv* in the spring of 2019 the text was removed from the website under threat of a lawsuit but has now reappeared in a revised version that still precisely describes the genealogy of the business of the energy baron. Although there is as yet no consensus in the local art scene about the significance of the role of carbon wealth in the construction of the new Kunsthalle Prague, this case points to the importance of the existence of a free space for public discussion for the democratic functioning of the artworld.

The rise of populism and its attempt to interfere in artistic spheres has been met by the organising of protests and petitions, putting aside professional differences and

---

10 Jakub Gawkowski interviewed by Flóra Gadó for *East Art Mags* (17 April 2019), visit at: <https://artportal.hu/magazin/if-populism-became-the-lingua-franca-of-our-time-then-there-is-no-choice-but-to-learn-it/>.

11 Cp. Tereza Stejskalová, »Feminist Art Institution. A Code of Practice«, [https://www.academia.edu/35492650/Feminist\\_Art\\_Institution\\_A\\_Code\\_of\\_Practice/](https://www.academia.edu/35492650/Feminist_Art_Institution_A_Code_of_Practice/) (14.11.2020).

12 Václav Drozd, »Privatisation artist Petr Pudil«, published in Czech in: *Artycok.tv*, visit at: <https://artycok.tv/42947/privatizacni-umelec-petr-pudil-upravene-vydani>.

coming together to express artistic solidarity, and by devising strategies to sidestep the control of institutions by representatives of neo-official art. However, the limits to the inventiveness and resilience of the artworld in the face of an unremitting political reality have also been pointed out. As Hungarian art critic Gergely Nagy put it in a 2018 text for *Spike Magazine*: »The eight years of right-wing nationalist and isolationist government has fundamentally changed the cultural environment. The critical wing of culture is now completely marginalised and the artists in this scene struggle. Many of them have left the country: the current Hungarian art community in Berlin is as big as it was in the 1920s [...] When you can't find public funding and publicity for your work and you boycott the state institutions out of disgust, then you will eventually be silenced. Soft censorship is working.«<sup>13</sup>

It may turn out that this statement was written at the low point of the post-democratic turn in Central Europe when the energetic resources of the art scene were depleted, leading many to conclude that in light of the neo-nationalist takeover of the cultural sphere, the only option was to leave. Although artists, curators and critics have found ingenious ways to work and survive in the hostile environments of historical totalitarianism and contemporary populism, such as by withdrawing from state controlled art circuits and forming their own adaptable platforms, it appears that a basic degree of functioning democracy is necessary for art and criticism to flourish. In recent months however, a chink has emerged in the armour of neo-nationalist domination with a series of electoral reverses suggesting that Europe may have passed peak populism. After all, just as neo-national populists have reinvented the mechanisms of artistic control developed by communist states, Central European art scenes are also replenished by drawing on the source of the rebellious unofficial culture of the socialist era to empower contemporary strategies of artistic resistance.

---

13 Gergely Nagy, »Many of the artists have left the country«, in: *Spike Magazine* (12 September 2018), visit at: <https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/many-artists-have-left-country>.

## **Małgorzata Stępnik**

»Education to democracy is education to dignity,  
and that presupposes two things: a readiness to fight  
combined with freedom from hatred.«  
(Leszek Kołakowski)<sup>1</sup>

### **»Happiness pills«**

James Elkins in one of his latest articles, entitled characteristically, *Art Criticism is Too Easy* – being a sequel to a pamphlet published as early as 2003<sup>2</sup> – repeats the thesis that: »it continues to avoid judgement in favor of description«.<sup>3</sup> Hence we may state that striving after neutrality is an essential part of the critic's current *habitus*. It seems completely different in the case of populist politicians, who are far from any guardedness or sophistication and who willingly assume the role of *tribuni plebis*, fighting with any manifestations of elitism, and finally – imposing their own »aesthetic programme«. How willing they are to distribute the »mind-set altering drugs«.<sup>4</sup>

I am alluding here to two literary works, which are important not only within Polish culture, being parabolic visions of a more universal character. The first one is *Insatiability* (*Nienasylenie*, 1932), a novel by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (pen name Witkacy), an outstanding artist, philosopher and a »trickster« of his times, who committed suicide upon hearing that the Soviet Army invaded Poland on 17 September 1939 (Fig. 19). In this prophetic novel, a Sino-Mongolian army takes over the rule of Poland and the »happiness pills« prepared by a Mongolian philosopher, Murti-Bing, allow the citizens to get rid of the feeling of existential anxiety, philosophical »insatiability« and (natural) objection to the new authoritarian rule. (Let us notice that the motif of these »happiness pills« can be firmly associated with the picture by the Wachowskis: *Matrix* of 1999, which was inspired by the ground-breaking Jean Baudrillard's oeuvre, *Simulacres et Simulation*). Likewise, the artists subject to this »therapy« – to use a pop cultural connotation again – go to »the dark side of the Force«. Whereas in art and literary criticism, »a certain breed« begins to flourish, that is, »simplifiers«, individuals who are »capable of simplyfying, at will, any complex problem...«<sup>5</sup>

The second of these literary works is Czesław Miłosz's *The Captive Mind* (*Zniewolony umysł*), a collection of essays written in 1951 which was first published by the

---

1 L. Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, übers. v. W. Fries, S. Czerniawski und A. Kołakowska, Chicago and London, 1997, S. 260.

2 See: J. Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, Chicago 2003.

3 J. Elkins, »Art Criticism is Too Easy«, in: *New Art Examiner*, Vol. 33 No. 1/2018, p. 10.

4 D. Pawelec, »Zniewolony umysł jako parabola (Introduction)«, in: Cz. Miłosz, *Zniewolony umysł*, KAW, Kraków 1990, p. 8.

5 S. I. Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, transl. L. Iribarne, Evanston IL 1996, p. 108.

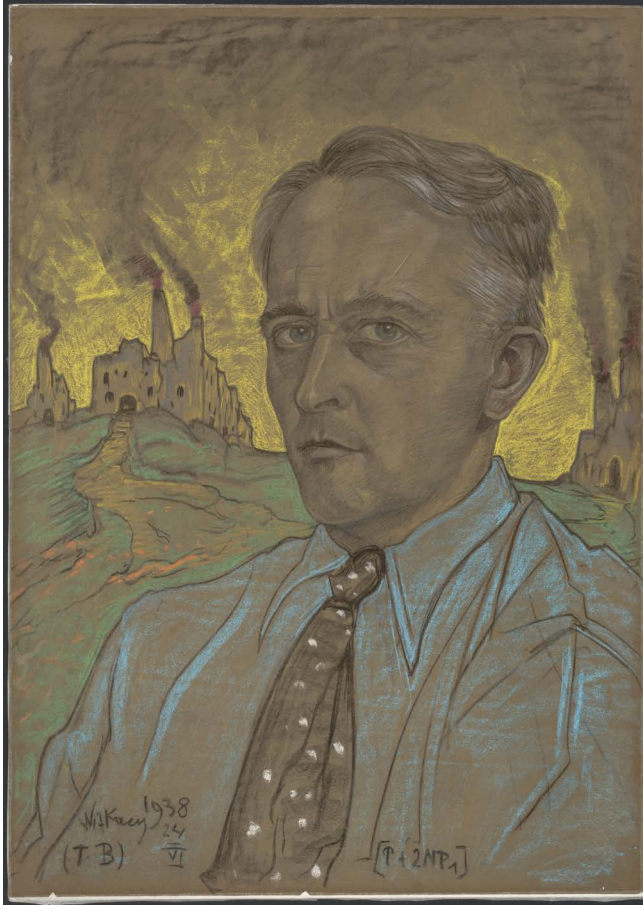


Fig. 19: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy), *Autoportret*, 1938

Literary Institute in Paris in 1953. In this parabolic narrative the writer reflects on the state of mentality in people's democracies; a mentality subject to the overpowering influence of Leninism-Stalinism, which, as emphasised by the writer himself, has little in common with the original system put forward by Karl Marx. First and foremost, Miłosz analyses the attitude of his colleagues, once sophisticated men of letters and critics, but also of artists who became outstanding figures of the New Faith,<sup>6</sup> disseminating »the only right« doctrine of social realism.

6 Cz. Miłosz, op. cit., p. IX and following.

That perverse, progressive realism »depicting reality in its revolutionary development«<sup>7</sup> – by teaching »proper attitudes« – realised the »interest of the dictatorship«. <sup>8</sup> As Miłosz writes, in the field of literature it meant breaking off with »what has in every age been the writer's essential task – to look at the world from his own independent viewpoint«. <sup>9</sup> In this way, the »individual« changed into »serving the public«. Subtle high-brows and artists, guarding (self) censorship from then on, transformed into – to quote Stalin's words (which were later used by Andrei Zhdanov) – the »engineers of human souls«. <sup>10</sup>

Of course, it was possible to adopt some other strategies in this altered reality. One could, for example, withdraw from the public life (which brought the spectre of famine), or try to outsmart the raging censorship by creating allusive works directed at two various audiences, as ambiguous as a *versus cancrini* phrase, which, when read backwards gains the opposite sense. In my opinion, the most outstanding examples of such works within the field of the Polish painting are »Figures« (*Postacie*, 1950) by Wojciech Fangor, and »Two Young Married Women« (*Dwie młode mężatki*, 1949) by Andrzej Wróblewski. On the basis of the works produced by these two exquisite artists, it is possible to discern something which makes one think of both Manuel Castells's concept of »inverting the terms of oppressive discourse«, expounded in *The Power of Identity* (1997); as well as Slavoj Žižek's notion of »subversion-through-identification« described in »The Plague of Fantasies«, which was published the very same year.

Sometimes it suffices to turn to the classics, which only presumably appear »neutral«. The most significant case was the staging of »Forefathers' Eve« (*Dziady*) by a great romantic poet, Adam Mickiewicz. I am referring to the stage adaptation directed by Kazimierz Dejmek, whose premiere in the The National Theatre in Warsaw (25 Nov. 1967) coincided with the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution outbreak. The last official staging of this play (30 Jan. 1968) – whose direct anti-Tsarist threads, as per the director's intention, were interpreted by the contemporary audience as anti-Soviet – caused a wave of student protests aimed mainly at censorship. Before the play was withdrawn from general release by the censors – even though, paradoxically, it was appreciated by the reviewers of the Russian »Pravda«<sup>11</sup> – Dejmek had attempted to explain his theatrical piece in a perverse way, with an attitude which could have satisfied social-realist gustoes. As he used to explain: »As a materialist I shifted the Christianity and mysticism of the author from the religious sphere to the realm of folk rituals,

7 Form Zhdanov speech, inserted in »Contributions to the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers«, 1934, (In:) *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, edited and transl. by J. E. Bowlt, New York 1976, p. 293.

8 Cz. Miłosz, op. cit., p. X.

9 Ibidem, p. IX.

10 A. Zhdanov, op. cit., p. 293.

11 See: Ł. Kamiński, *Dziady* (Forefathers' Eve), undated, n. p. <https://polskiemiesiace.ipn.gov.pl/mon/all-events/march-1968/history/5240,Dziady-Forefathers-Eve.html> [visit: 08.03.2021]

emphasising the revolutionary and patriotic character of the work.«<sup>12</sup> The stage adaptation of *Forefathers' Eve* became, to a large extent, a hotbed of protests of the memorable 1968 Polish political crisis (referred to as ›March 1968‹ in Poland). Meanwhile, the counterculture events of Paris May 1968 would commence and ›bloom‹ in the entire West soon afterwards.

Every authoritarian system uses the propaganda of fear and relies on an extremely simplified, dichotomous vision of the world, and it does so regardless of the fact of whether it is extremely leftist or rightist. Serge Tchakotine, who after all was a witness of the birth of Nazism, wrote about the omnipotent propaganda of fear and persuasive language appealing to rudimentary human instincts.<sup>13</sup> The easiness with which the citizens surrender to the power of authoritarian monsters was also the subject of Erich Fromm's interest and his personal observations in his famous ›Escape from Freedom‹ (1941). Of course, these are only two from among innumerable texts on totalitarian mechanisms.

Although similar mechanisms are used – even if not on such a big scale – in contemporary *democracies* wherever *populists* manifesting what is called a ›besieged fortress syndrome‹ gain popularity, all populist discourses being at the service of a given power are, by their nature, simple in a populist and vulgar way. In each of those there are some functional key-words, as a Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert, would put it: ›concepts [simple] like flails‹. These key words, legible slogans, partake in the process of social *conditioning* of the citizens, which we know from the gloomy dystopias by Aldous Huxley or George Orwell.

This conditioning has become particularly easy today, in the age of the significant hegemony of social media. An average user of the social media can easily falsely believe in their own power. However an easy access does not connote understanding. At this point, allow me to quote Miłosz, who says: ›Vulgarised knowledge characteristically gives birth to a feeling that everything is understandable and explained‹.<sup>14</sup> This may be the reason why the Dunning-Kruger effect can be observed so often.<sup>15</sup>

In our part of the world, anti-intellectualism is triumphing again. We could even talk about an *anti-intellectual turn*. As my friend, an outstanding English painter, Paul Collinson, says: ›We are living in the age of unreason‹. What is characteristic is the fact that this very phrase – the ›age of unreason‹ – has been recurring for many decades in the titles of treatises. It should suffice to refer to the work from the field of social psychology

---

12 After: Ibidem.

13 Sergeï Tschachotin, *Le viol des foules par la propagande politique*, Paris 1939.

14 Cz. Miłosz, op. cit., p. 191.

15 The ›Dunning-Kruger effect‹ describes the overestimation of one's own self by less competent people out of an inability to judge one's own knowledge and ability with a certain degree of objectivity – which often leads to more self-confidence on the part of the person concerned than can be the case with self-reflectively judging and thereby perhaps even more competent people.

by Franz Alexander (1942), the economic study by Charles Handy (1989), or the book directed at »populist nationalism« penned by a British politician, George Osborne (2019).

Clearly, »concepts like flails« is also used in the political discourse regarding art. Here, I will return to the figure, signalled in the title, of a politician (allegedly) responsive to the vox populi – the voice of the people, and I will refer to the Polish, most topical context.

### The »new« language

Instead of quoting specific statements – with only one exception – I decided to indicate the key-words which have prevailed in the utterances of the ruling party over the last few years and which constituted a propaganda triad, viz: »nihilism«, »postmodernism«, »cosmopolitanism« – notions generally used at variance with their true meaning, while functioning as »bugbears«. These days, the word »nihilism« can be heard from the top rostrums in Poland and it tends to be compared to the worst totalitarianisms in human history. (While, after all, the nihilistic attitude can result, as it was nicely put by Miłosz: »from an ethical passion, from disappointed love of the world and of humanity«<sup>16</sup>). Currently this word has caught on and can be heard in election speeches. Admittedly it is rarely encountered in comments referring to art, while it used to be commonly (over)used in the reviews and texts on cultural politics in the previous political system, viz: in the Polish People's Republic. »Nihilism«, linked with »cosmopolitanism« in one phrase, was supposed to form a negative antithesis of »healthy enthusiasm« of the builders of the new reality.

While artistic »postmodernism«, from the perspective of the contemporary *tribuni plebis*, is a synonym for what is not understandable (to them) – what is based on an experiment and transgression – even the local Law and Justice party activists (Lublin-based included), holding directorial posts in the cultural institutions, keep censoring the works of contemporary artists, labelling them as »postmodern« in their utterances, despite the fact that they are unfamiliar with the true meaning of this term. From their perspective, this slogan is an ultimate insult. Whereas, in a more general discourse referring to the substance of social issues – which are inherently ideological – the vision of the »corrupted«, »postmodern« – which is to say: western culture – is contrasted with the national tradition, just like the way philosophical »relativism« is contrasted with the ethical »values«. It is interesting that at times, the intellectuals, taking the posts at the other side of social barricades, assume a similar tone, claiming that e.g. »postmodernity is about a regime of doubt which has replaced the regime of truth«.<sup>17</sup> However, in my opinion, »a regime of doubt« is an oxymoronic expression. Anyone who doubts is never totalist indeed.

16 Cz. Miłosz, op. cit., p. 116. [underl. Cz. M.]

17 N. Witoszek-Fitzpatrick, [a voice in the discussion], in: *Captive Mind Revisited*, eds. K. Kopeć et al., Villa Decius Association/European Cultural Foundation, Cracow 2008, pages unnumbered.

Last but not least is, »cosmopolitanism«. In the Polish People's Republic the accusation of being a »cosmopolite« was formulated by the official columnists and censors against writers and artists idolising the »decadent West.«<sup>18</sup> Today this world is having its revival. Let me refer to only two, but very significant examples which support this thesis. The first is the protests of the right-wing politicians against the »cosmopolitan« character of the exhibition in the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. The second one is a fierce critique, of course, again by right-wing politicians, of the literary works by Olga Tokarczuk, the 2018 Nobel Prize winner in Literature (the prize achieved in 2019), and earlier the laureate of the Man Booker Prize 2018 for her novel »Flights« (*Bieguni*) in Jennifer Croft's translation. Piotr Gliński, the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, in an interview given at the beginning of August 2019, stated: »Yes, it is good that the Pole receives the prestigious award. It would be good [though], if she was a *reasonable* Polish writer, who understood Polish society and Polish community.«<sup>19</sup>

Beautiful, sublime and, on numerous occasions, experimental in their form, Tokarczuk's books – »constellation novels« as she calls them herself – do not fit into the registers of the right-wing gustoes. (Their »constellational« character, which is in essence Benjaminian, is an antithesis of stillness, an attitude of static affirmation.) For touching upon the threads of the multicultural (multiethnic) history of Poland (*The Books of Jacob* in particular), or for example ecologism (and vegetarianism) juxtaposed with the centuries-old hunting tradition (»Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead«), the writer puts herself in the role of »a psychotherapist of the past« (she is a psychologist by education). Tokarczuk can indeed be hailed, after Ruth Franklin, who dedicated the article in »The New Yorker« to her: »a challenger of orthodoxies.«<sup>20</sup> I think that the writer's cosmopolitanism – which I consider a positive value – bears some resemblance to Julia Kristeva's philosophy, with her tender compassion toward all that is strange, *abject*, and uncanny, (as well as with her belief in psychoanalytic ethics).

The power with authoritarian inclinations – and partially every power – cultivates social pedagogy by (re)producing obedient citizens, naming them carefully, as Pierre Bourdieu would have said – *habitus*, equipping them in a ready-made »schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action.«<sup>21</sup> »All pedagogic action« – as we read in the pages of *Reproduction* – »is, objectively *symbolic violence* insofar as it is the imposition

---

18 Cz. Miłosz, op. cit., p. 46.

19 An interview given by P. Gliński to M. Olech and Ł. Mężyk, the journalists of 300Polityka.pl portal, published on 11.08.2019; <http://300polityka.pl/news/2019/08/11/kiedys-nie-bylo-w-polsce-demokracji-a-teraz-jest-zywa-demokracja-300polityka-u-piotra-glinskiego/> [visit: 12.09.2019].

20 R. Franklin, »Olga Tokarczuk's Novels Against Nationalism«, in: *The New Yorker* (August 5–12 Issue, 2019); <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/08/05/olga-tokarczucs-novels-against-nationalism> (07.09.2019).

21 P. Bourdieu and J.-C. Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, transl. Richard Nice, SAGE Publications Ltd., London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi 1990, p. 196.



of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power«. <sup>22</sup> This exquisite study, written in cooperation with Jean-Claude Passeron, deals, however, with the »symbolic violence« which is committed constantly, via *the language*, duplicating and preserving the hierarchy (*la distinction*) of the *underprivileged* classes. This »reproduction« is guarded by a »homo academicus«, a »pious minister of genius«, <sup>23</sup> creating »a respectful distance« with his »theatrical monologue«. <sup>24</sup> While it is completely the reverse, the social pedagogy cultivated by the populists acts against the complexity of the scholarly discourse, against the sublime of the literary phrase, just like any other manifestations of elitism. »Homo academicus« is in deep water today.

The populist power propagates, as I have said before, the language of literalism in which »a simple man« can easily move and, first and foremost, with which they can *identify*. In principle, it can be described with the same notions which have been contrasted by Abraham Moles in his »Théorie de l'information« with the concepts belonging to the sphere of aesthetics. So, on the one hand, we have an aesthetic (literary) »disorder«, an »unpredictable«, »original«, and »complex« work. On the other hand, there is political, discursive »order«, a language, which is »predictable«, »banal«, and as »simple« as possible. <sup>25</sup>

The programmatic pauperisation of the language is inscribed in the wider context of the contemporary anti-elite turn, or »anti-elite rage«, (additionally supported by »demographic fears«, in central and eastern parts of Europe in particular). <sup>26</sup> »Democratic elites are more meritocratic than ever« – as Ivan Krastev says – »but they are more hated than ever«. »Managing mistrust« – he adds – »is what democracies are about today«. <sup>27</sup> This paradox, as the Bulgarian political scientist points out, results from an equally paradoxical character of democracy per se.

While, as Tom Nichols indicates in a recently published, interesting study entitled characteristically, »The Death of Expertise« (2017), we live in an age of peculiar »worship of ignorance« – to paraphrase his words slightly. <sup>28</sup> A problem greater than lack of knowledge »is that we are *proud* of not knowing things«. <sup>29</sup> Even though the statements of the scholar have their origins in the observations of American society, they remain as universal as possible. As Nichols confesses: »I fear we are witnessing the death of the ideal of

---

22 Ibidem, p. 5. [underl. M. S.]

23 Ibidem, p. 129.

24 Ibidem, p. 109.

25 A. Moles, »Information Theory and Perception«, transl. Joel E. Cohen, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and London 1968, p. 208.

26 I. Krastev, »The Age of Populism: Reflections on the Self-enmity of Democracy«, in: *European View*, Vol. 10, issue 1, p. 12.

27 Ibidem, p. 13.

28 T. Nichols, »The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters«, Oxford University Press USA, New York 2017, p. ix.

29 Ibidem, p. x. [underl. M. S.]

expertise itself, a Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laypeople, students and teachers, knowers and wonderers (...).<sup>30</sup> (At this point, it is also worth making a note that »ignorance«, being a cradle of the greatest crimes in modern history, is one of the »lessons« in a widely-read book penned by Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, 2018).

Recently, I participated in a debate on possible methods of fighting against political populism organised by one of the local art galleries. One of the participants, a young man, stated that we should »strive at a more *global* communication« via social media. This statement is symptomatic for the times when communication (and its scope) is valued more than information (knowledge). Perhaps it is me who is a »dinosaur« in this way of thinking? »I am an art critic, a scold, a snob, a paid hack intent on punishing artists and spoiling the fun of the public«, »a dinosaur« – this is what a film critic, Anthony Oliver Scott, with a substantial dose of sarcastic humour, writes in *The New York Times*.<sup>31</sup> »On the Internet, everyone is a critic« – he continues – »an Amazon scholar, a cheerleader empowered by social media to Like and to Share.« In this regard it is hard not to agree with him. For it is the social media, so commonly used by populist politicians, that produces »*the thrilling, confusing effect* of making the conversation literal«. <sup>32</sup>

This »thrilling effect« becomes even stronger every time we realise the great presence of surveillance technologies in shaping our »individual« preferences, decisions and actions namely intelligent, digital machines creating a contemporary Panopticon. For, by taking part in mediating our notion of »self«, they produce a new kind of *die Unheimlichkeit*, about which Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli writes in his brilliant book, »The Digital Uncanny« (2019). »With data aggregators«, as the scholar notices, »we are no longer treated as *subjects* or addressees, but as sources of information collected, analysed, and sorted by algorithms«. <sup>33</sup>

So, maybe, against all odds, it is worth staying an analogue »dinosaur«? Fortunately – as Olga Tokarczuk said – »the world is made of words.« <sup>34</sup> *Still* made of words.

---

30 Ibidem, p. 3.

31 A. O. Scott, »Everybody's a Critic. And That's How it Should Be«, in: *The New York Times*, published online 30.01.2016; <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/sunday-review/everybodys-a-critic-and-thats-how-it-should-be.html> [visitit: 12.09.2019].

32 Ibidem. [underl. M. S.]

33 K. Ravetto-Biagioli, *Digital Uncanny*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2019, p. 21.

34 A fragment of Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel Speech delivered at the Swedish Academy in Stockholm. Translated into English by Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones. Olga Tokarczuk – Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2019. Mon. 9 Dec 2019. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/104871-lecture-english/>> © The Nobel Foundation 2019

*Moderator Liam Kelly*

**Liam Kelly**

Good afternoon everyone. At the outset let me thank all three of you for your provocative and informative presentations. The first thing I would like to say is that I will make a few brief introductory comments and then I will open up discussion to the floor because the session time is short.

As you are all aware, in zones of conflict or in regimes of suppression or authoritarianism, questions of language invariably seem to come to the fore. Tom Paulin, who is an Irish literary critic, many years ago reminded us that the history of a language is often a story of possession and dispossession, territorial struggle and the establishment or the imposition of a culture.

In Maja and Reuben's presentation, they consider that the recognition of populism as a language is perhaps a step towards reacting to it. They also speculate a little bit that perhaps art critics themselves have been unwittingly drawn into reinforcing anti-globalist and conspiracy theory narratives about the post-communist transition – hence the effectiveness of the silence of words in that particular case.

In considering strategies deployed by artists under oppression Małgorzata in her paper makes reference to Manuel Castells' concept of ›inverting the terms of oppressive discourse‹ as expounded by him in his book »The Power of Identity« and the notion of ›subversion through identification‹ by Slavoj Žižek which is described by him in the book »The Plague of Fantasies«.

Such identified strategies of inversion or subversion reminded me of V.S. Naipaul who has written, particularly in »The Mimic Men«, about the way the colonised or former colonised seem to have an identification with the English coloniser, appearing to become more ›English than the English‹. However that apparent identification with Englishness has a mocking, subversive element to it in that there is a subtle interrogation of the language at work.

I am also reminded about the situation in Northern Ireland where I am from. In the UK, there are three devolved governments – one in Wales, one in Scotland and one in Northern Ireland. The Northern Irish Assembly is suspended at the moment and has been for two and a half years. A substantial issue that has contributed to that suspension is that the nationalist population want to see a language act for the Irish language which was initially suppressed under the British colonialist project. But the Democratic Unionist Party, who cherish the link with Britain and their association with the Conservative Party in England, and who are heavily involved in Brexit, are denying the establishment of that language act. Why? Because they feel it will undermine their Britishness, which in the first place undermined the Irish language. So you can appreciate the ramifications of language. Let me then turn that into a question. Can clever words as used by art critics contribute somehow to the effectiveness and purposefulness of subversion in either of the two countries that you referred to – Poland and Hungary? It is an open question to all three of you or any one of you.

***Małgorzata Stepnik***

I hesitate to start because I will be pessimistic. I think that wise words are always left to people like us. But, our struggles, transgressions, subversions, and so on, are useless in the context of the power of stupidity. Sooner or later, every political power changes, indeed – every power comes to its ruination in time. One thing we have to do is to wait. Perhaps I'm too pessimistic in that respect. Of course, we may think that education is significant, but I'm not sure to what extent, taking into consideration the example of Martin Heidegger, just to name one instance. No, I don't think we can do anything about it.

***Reuben Fowkes***

Let me pick up on the issue of language and to respond also to what you said Liam about the curators and critics that we mentioned in our paper who are dealing with language, and especially the exhibition that we showed that took language as its basis rather than the structures of populism. I think there seems to be two possible ways of using language in that context. One, which is maybe going a bit further, which is trying to somehow appropriate or turn and make some of the ploys of populism useful and subversive in a way. As you said – to find a subversive, useful populist language. This does seem to be somewhat of a dangerous route to go down. The other is a way of trying to be more neutral and simply deploying the language of populism as a starting point, as a kind of structural starting point for an exhibition.

***Maja Fowkes***

I think that the question of language is very important. It is also important who is speaking. Like others who moved to London after many, many years living in Hungary, we decided not to speak ourselves. We considered that the best way was to speak through the voices from the region who are expressing and vocalising the struggles which are going on there. They all are colleagues, friends or former students. It is really important to give them a voice. What is good about it is that they do still have a voice. So they're not speechless.

***Liam Kelly***

So I guess the only thing we can do then with these populist politicians who masquerade as art critics is to refuse them membership of AICA. That's the very least we can do. Okay, I am now going to open up the discussion to the audience.

***Brane Kovic, AICA Slovenia***

My first remark would be that it is very easy, not to say cheap, to always evoke political interference into the cultural scene in the former communist or now post-communist countries, while on the other hand, the so-called free world is quite far from being free. The politics or power, if you want, which in the West means money, interferes in the cultural sphere. You have perfect analyses of this since the 1970s and in particular from Noam Chomsky. My question therefore is: 'Are the monopolies less dangerous than censorship or political interference?' By monopolies I also mean that some people are leading cultural institutions for decades, and they don't change. They have a very specific orientation or

political programmes. Indeed sometimes, they are not even on their own, but they become some kind of puppets on a string, manipulated by someone from outside. Thank you.

### ***Maja Fowkes***

Maybe I could respond first to your question. The first thought regarding ›Why do we always talk about politics?‹ Actually, we did not; when Reuben and I started to work together in the 1990's and early 2000s, we thought that ecology was the only problem left in the world after 1989. We thought then that everything else was sorted out and we could just focus on what was left to be sorted out in the world. Unfortunately, over this last decade, we have had to come back to political interference. What is different to the communist time is that we also subtly address this neoliberal leadership where there are questions related to institutional working, such as the role of private benefactors and privatisation.

There are some serious analyses in art works now, dealing with what went wrong with the transition from communism to post-communism and how did that perhaps lead to the populism we have now. So in that sense there is a need to address the connections. Indeed some art critics are doing precisely that – trying to see what went wrong and how did it come around to this situation again.

### ***Reuben Fowkes***

Maybe on the topic of language, just at the end of your question, you said that a director maybe is a puppet on a string. I mean, for me, that's a little bit of a populist trope of invoking that somebody is actually hiding their interest from behind someone else.

But let me say a little bit about this question of globalisation and neoliberal globalisation. How do we negotiate this problem? It seems, from the point of view of the economic effects of globalisation, that there are so many negative things that people can point to that happened from the 1990s onwards across the world. Maybe in this context we're talking about Eastern Europe and how not to swing back completely to the other side and reject all the possible benefits that could be derived from those processes in terms of transnational solidarities and all kinds of communication between cultures across the world. That is why we picked out a quotation from Igor Zabel at the end of our paper where he really highlights that, already in the 2000s, the fact that people shouldn't display a knee-jerk reaction against the bad things of neoliberal globalisation just to switch to some kind of very insular patriotic position.

Perhaps one other idea that could be used when thinking about that is to somehow pluralise this notion of globalisation. That is why in our original title we had this idea of illiberal globalisation. Therefore maybe there are different types of globalisation, neoliberal globalisation, illiberal globalisation. If you think of the moment around 1989, around those changes, this was a different kind of globalism as well. So maybe we can also introduce the word ›globalism‹ as a way of thinking about connections between countries on a global level which are not just based on economics and the domination of one particular system over all other systems.

**Małgorzata Stepnik**

In the last question from the floor, the divisions between the East and West were mentioned. I agree that today they actually seem artificial. Politics and art, art and criticism, politics and literature or philosophy – they are always intertwined. It's quite natural. I don't like Jacques Rancière's writings very much, but there is one line I really love. In the »Politics of Aesthetics«, he writes that a work of art that isn't ultimately intended to be politically *engagé* may paradoxically have the greatest political potential. I think that paradoxes, as Oscar Wilde wrote in his famous »Picture of Dorian Gray«, are what give us some essential information about truth.

**Liam Kelly**

Marek, did you want to come in?

**Marek Wasilewski, AICA Poland**

Thank you. I'd like just to refer to your question about »wise words« because it comes to mind that the populist revolution was engineered by words. So I think it's a matter of who owns the more convincing narration at the moment. So instead of being pessimistic and saying that, »well, there are no tools for stupidity and that we have to wait«, I think that instead of waiting, we have to come up with a more convincing, a better narration. We actually need wise words that would win over the words of populists. Thank you.

**Małgorzata Stepnik**

I totally agree with you, Marek. We prize wisdom, and that's why we are here. I think, that's obvious. What I really wanted to say is that – if you speak in a wise manner, if you use sophisticated narrative, if you genuinely want to communicate something – there'll always be a tension of being either an »insider« or an »outsider«. It is important and noble not to programme other people's minds, not to force them to believe what you believe, to discuss controversies and »differences«. But, when one turns into an insider of the artworld – be it an artist, a critic, or a literary writer – he or she may simply not be »heard«, not be understood by the social majority anymore. Such were the cases I referred to in my speech. But substantially, I agree: we need wise words.

**Liam Kelly**

Sarah do you have a comment?

**Sarah Wilson, AICA UK**

This is a little bit more of the same. I was very interested when you dared to say that you felt powerless in the context of the power of stupidity. In relation to this I just wanted to juxtapose two terms. One is to evoke for everybody Lenin's phrase »useful idiots« (at least a phrase ascribed to Lenin). One isn't simply talking about the masses who read *AIZ* magazine or whatever, but the writers and intellectuals that sustained the Comintern (Communist International Propaganda Operations). Its agenda was aimed at intellectuals who were »useful idiots«. And just to remind everyone that many »useful idiots«

in Britain in the 1950s were the intellectual elite who were, on the contrary, writing for anti-Communist CIA-run *Encounter* magazine.

I was very, very impressed last year when one of my Polish students, Dorota Michalska, wrote a fabulous thesis about three chronological chunks of Polish history in art from 1944 onwards which was based on her engagement with a kind of second generation of very young intellectuals who were just starting to have teaching posts. They were taught by the generation who wrote about capitalism coming to Poland and Coca-Cola signs on Warsaw's Palace of Culture. But she was using the equivalent of thinking in Polish about the state of ›those who were left behind‹.<sup>1</sup> Her work was extremely poignant, I can't remember the names of course of the young anthropologists and the young political theorists she mentioned, but there is a very interesting kind of non-dialouge, one could say, between the conception of idiots and ›useful idiots‹. And the actual pathos and tragedy of ›those (quasi-›idiots‹) who were left behind‹ as well as the inarticulateness of those who were driven to violence. So I just wanted to add those two terms to the discussion.

---

1 Dorota Michalska, »On the edge of history: three generations of artists confront socio-economic trauma in Poland«, (Tadeusz Kantor, Gerard Kwiatkowski, Roman Stańczak), MA, Courtauld Institute, London, 2017. She refers to philosopher Andrzej Leder (b.1960), Marxist philosopher Michał Pospiszyl (1987), anthropologist Tomasz Rakwoski (b. 1967), theatre historian Dorota Sajewski (b. 1968), cultural theorist Jan Sowa (b. 1976) and historian Marcin Zaremba (b. 1966).